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## Freedom of Speech: The Foundation of Democracy

Post-World War 2 America. Late 1940s. The United States was demilitarizing. Millions of former servicemen and women were returning home from the deadly war searching for employment. American consumers were eagerly spending cash they'd been preserving from war-time rationing. Unions and corporations were on the rise. United States citizens wanted to settle down after the brutal six-year conflict. Against what should've been an idyllic return to American values of freedom and justice, arose an unexpected and divisive specter of doom. The Red Scare had planted its roots in America. Hysteria regarding "Soviet-Union sympathizers" and "cold-blooded communists" flowed rampantly throughout our American shores. Federal employees were fired from their jobs, scholars lost positions in academia, protestors were persecuted, and famous Hollywood stars were "blacklisted" – simply for their political beliefs, or even worse: a misconstrued perception of their political beliefs. Hearings on Capitol Hill played up the threat. Senator Joseph McCarthy frequently monopolized the Senate floor with ranting tirads about "communists in the state department, communists in the military, and communists under your bed." Across the nation, citizens were horrified by the government-sponsored infractions on their civil liberties.

The Red Scare undoubtedly contradicted the essential ideals of peace and freedom; its emphasis on exaggerating the threat of communism in the United States caused federal invasion of privacy, heightened political tensions, and nearly irrevocable damages to our democracy. It was a time of great panic in America. Thankfully, the McCarthyism era lost influence in 1954 after the United States Senate formally voted to censure Senator Joseph McCarthy, ending his reign as the ring-leader of Cold War hysteria. However, it seems as though the lessons America

learned from the Red Scare epoch have gradually become a distant memory. It has become increasingly apparent that America is unfortunately revisiting the old days of fear, tension, and terror. A refurbished Red Scare is upon us. We cannot let our American society – predicated on the ideals of justice and liberty – be polarized today as it was in the 1940s. We must remember the tenants of the United States Constitution providing for the peaceable expression of divergent views and attitudes. It is abhorrent that our own elected representatives would exploit the natural political differences of our culture to turn neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend, and nation against nation.

In our contemporary digital society, where large corporate media companies profit from clicks and eyeballs, exploiting political differences and silencing free speech among citizens is profitable; it is a moneymaker. As our means of communication evolve, we must do everything in our power to ensure that another age of deafening American voices for political gain will never again take place in our country. Freedom of speech is an incredibly important right for all Americans; in particular, students. During the Cold War era, students were a driving force in anti-war campaigns and freedom of speech pursuits. Exercising their right to free expression, students would: march on their campuses, write letters to editors, stage “sit-ins,” and even boycott their college classes. Notable student activist groups included University of Michigan's “Students for a Democratic Society,” which consisted of college students who desired to protect the right to free speech in America. Another iconic student group dedicated to fighting for free speech was Harvard University’s “Green Feather Club,” which fought particularly against McCarthyism. The Green Feather Club was outraged by United States schools that banned the story of Robin Hood; the schools asserted that the tale promoted socialist values. The Green Feather Club would hold demonstrations in which green feathers were placed around campus,

following up with a march featuring pupils dressed up as Robin Hood and his Merry Men. These protests gained support from a plethora of Harvard students and professors, and successfully stopped the censorship of Robin Hood.

Regardless of your political affiliations and beliefs, it is undeniable that the right to speak freely without fear of legal punishment is vital to American society. Freedom of speech serves a key purpose in maintaining the livelihood of both citizens and our democracy. An essential right for all people, the right to free speech fosters democracy, promotes intellectualism, and enables progressive social change.

The United States prides itself in being a representative democracy; meaning, average citizens have the opportunity to participate in their government by electing officials who formulate and refine public policy. The ultimate goal of a democracy is to develop a society in which people are able to express their beliefs freely; to accomplish this, citizens must have the freedom of speech. Citizens can speak freely about ideas they favor, which motivates elected officials to listen and act in accordance. Moreover, freedom of expression furthers our democracy by preventing government corruption and tyrannical practices. In Federalist Paper 51, founding father James Madison outlined the systems of checks and balances that now exist in the American government among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. This unique system prevents one singular branch of government from gaining too much power. For instance, the executive branch has the ability to veto a law passed by the legislative branch. The judicial branch can also evaluate the legality of a law approved by the legislative and executive branch through Supreme Court rulings. Apart from these official checks and balances, the citizens' right to freedom of speech acts as a "check" upon all three branches of the federal government. By freely exchanging ideas, people become well-informed and educated on current political affairs.

Subsequently, they're more likely to take action that can influence governmental actions, such as voting, petitioning, and speaking with elected officials. This gives citizens a voice in their government – instead of leaving the decision-making processes to representatives – which is the epitome of a democracy.

The Scientific Revolution took place from the 16th to 18th century in Europe. Scientists challenged traditional ideas about nature and the universe as a whole. They began to use purely mathematical reasoning to comprehend the world around them, rejecting the Greek and Roman theories upheld for many years. However, the Catholic Church did not share the excitement of these new discoveries; the majority of findings from the Scientific Revolution negated many proposals made in biblical passages. As a result, the Catholic Church attempted to suppress the scientific pursuit of knowledge. In a famous case, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei was put on trial and coerced to “confess” that his new hypothesis regarding earth’s revolution was false. The censorship of science by the Catholic Church stunted intellectual growth. Restricting the advancement of knowledge isn’t beneficial; new discoveries can effectively address humanity’s issues by spreading awareness or provoking innovation. Therefore, freedom of speech proves itself to be a necessary force in our culture. To attain knowledge and search for the truth, we must be willing to consider all perspectives. An idea that may reject the status quo or antiqued principles isn’t inherently wrong, and shouldn’t be treated as such in a democratic society. Ironically, freedom of speech is oftentimes infringed upon in areas that claim to be institutions of knowledge and education. In 2017, several Louisiana schools threatened to punish students who knelt for the national anthem in protest of racial inequality. In 2016, Texas College told a student holding a protest sign that she would need “special permission” to express herself on campus. At universities all across the United States, guest speakers are tormented and uninvited to events

because they subscribe to opposing political beliefs. Schools exist to advance the knowledge of their students, which cannot occur if young scholars feel they cannot express themselves. Freedom of speech is an important tool for encouraging intellectualism, and thus must be preserved as a right for all citizens – especially in centers of learning.

The United States upholds many of the original systems and practices created by our Founding Fathers. Some founding customs – such as ones deemed oppressive or redundant – we have thankfully abandoned. The positive social change Americans have created throughout history were made possible through one specific right: freedom of speech. For example, the 19th amendment was ratified on August 18th, 1920. This decision wasn't spontaneous; it was the result of nearly a century of protest by women all over the United States. Women organized conventions to advocate for suffrage – perhaps the most famous one being at Seneca Falls in New York. Additionally, women also protested outside the White House and began changing the way they were viewed in society. Women asserted themselves as competent, independent individuals who are equally deserving of the right to participate in elections; in the end, they were successful. Society was able to evolve forward because women had the right to freely express their criticism of the voting system in America. The right to free speech allows for social progress to occur, even on a smaller scale. Namely, it can be tempting to avoid conversation with someone who we deem to have harmful or even bigoted views. However, the best way to persuade minds and to push for social change is to challenge those who hold these opposing views. Participating in good-natured discourse with someone while using references to sound reasoning, logic, and ethics is the way we can advance political progress. Misguided beliefs are best countered through debate and introduction to new ideas, not censorship. Thus, the freedom of speech is an absolute necessity to change attitudes and continue evolving our society.

Despite its unparalleled contributions to humankind, many people still take issue with the right to free speech. Critics and skeptics assert that complete freedom of speech can pose a threat to the security or lawful order of our nation. It is crucial to understand that freedom of speech as outlined in the Constitution isn't absolute. Therefore, we must find a balance between free expression and competing elements such as public order. A respectable exception to the Constitution's promise to freedom of speech is the crime of libel and slander. Libel is the publication of false statements that damage a person's reputation, and slander is verbal defamation. Neither of these are protected by the First Amendment's free speech clause, as upheld by several court rulings. Although freedom of speech is important, it is equally important that individuals are not subjected to false narratives that have the potential to ruin their relationships, career, and general reputation. It is imperative to weigh and balance the implications of all rights, and to not make absolute blanket statements.

Freedom of expression is undeniably critical to the preservation of our democracy. As citizens, we must take on an active role of ensuring that we do not revisit the horrors of the Red Scare era, where this right was the most trampled upon. Although we are headed on this path, there are still many initiatives we can take to retain our rights. For students in particular, as it currently stands, nearly half of all American colleges maintain policies that violate our right to free speech. Research these troublesome restrictions on free speech in your campus, and speak out against them. In addition, we can all encourage the right to free speech by exercising it ourselves. Write for your student newspaper. Submit an op-ed to a local or professional newspaper. Organize a protest and let your voice be heard. Attend public hearings and make an official comment. The next time you feel compelled to shy away from a controversial subject,

don't. Stimulate healthy conversation and embrace your right to free speech – before Joseph McCarthy rises from the dead and instills a new wave of distress in our world.