

Rachel Xu, Age: 15, Grade: 10

The Role of the First Amendment in Defending our Republic

From the Gupta Dynasty to the Ottoman Turks, it's no secret that world history has been littered with the remnants of once-great empires, all of which ended up succumbing to the strains of societal, economic, and bureaucratic decline. Although there are a number of sociopolitical and geographic factors informing these collapses, one underlying pattern seems to emerge as the root catalyst for such national upheaval time and time again – that is, a country's consistent campaign to censor and suppress the free will and expression of its citizens. Our founders recognized this, and, in order to effect social happiness and democratic practices in their newly-independent colonies, they urged the ratification of the Bill of Rights – a document insuring indispensable civil liberties and the maintenance of equitable relations between the state and free man. In doing so, they would set in motion wave after wave of humanitarian progress and cultural reckoning, as America debated, discussed, and ultimately rebounded in the wake of each movement stronger and more just than before.

Initially ratified in 1791 after being introduced by one James Madison, the First Amendment was drafted with the sole intent of securing certain natural and unalienable individual rights, which included but were not limited to: freedom of religion, assembly, press, petition, and speech (RAPPS). These clauses implicitly and explicitly delineated a citizen's inviolable prerogative to worship and attend religious congregations, participate in community activism, publish conflicting perspectives, file legislative grievances, and speak their mind without federal or state interference. Judicial verdicts have since added nuance to the official law, but, irrespective, Supreme Court rulings still endorse the principal interpretation, such as in *Tinker v. Des Moines*, marked by its defense of pure speech in American classrooms, and more

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recently in *Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta*, which upheld the constitutional freedom to independent association.

The establishment of the Bill of Rights is what allows Americans to have consistently been able to unite and engender structural social change to influence the enactment of progressive legislation and amend existing policies. Just within this last century, grassroots movements and civic organizations such as the NAACP, SNCC, United Farm Workers, JACL, and more have engendered and effected historic social change towards racial equality and labor reform. It's thanks to the courage, sacrifice, and unbridled patriotism of these activists that all Americans today, regardless of class or creed, enjoy their due civic privileges through statutes like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed public segregation and discrimination on the basis of color, gender, or identity, and Amendment XXVI, responsible for extending voter enfranchisement to citizens 18 and older.

On the flip side, history has no shortage of bloody insurrections resulting from collective dissatisfaction under illegitimate regimes, of the most famous being the French Revolution, which represented the denouement of systemic economic inequality, lack of representation, and undue taxation. Mounting rural and urban discontent in the summer of 1789 saw farmers begin to gather in worker coalitions to petition and address their grievances to the exclusionary, unresponsive bourgeoisie parliament, only to be continuously rebuffed by the National Assembly. These tensions would boil over on July 14 in the Storming of the Bastille and the nationwide pandemonium that ensued, eventually resulting in the 10-month *Reign of Terror* that massacred over 17,000 suspected of antagonizing revolutionary efforts. Similarly, the 1917 Russian Revolution oversaw a series of antiestablishment military occupations as a result of century-long worker suppression and unacknowledged legislative authority under the tsarist

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autocracy. Fermenting peasant opposition and internal conflicts culminated in the Bloody Sunday massacre; as strikes and mass protests abounded, protesters with no legal protections to congregate or demonstrate peaceably were shot indiscriminately by Nicholas II's troops.

In all of these violent dissolutions of power, the common denominator continually resurfaces as a nation's abuse of the governed by refusing to observe a social contract through institutional support or public approval. Instead, dictators suppress all forms of free thought or independent journalism, persecute religious minorities, inhibit civic engagement, and vigorously squash the formation of private interest groups and unions. By doing so, they nurse the flames of social unrest and institutional disequilibrium, inevitably inciting mobilization of the underrepresented fueled by a sense of political alienation and impelled towards a more autonomous, republican administration.

Therefore, by sidestepping the lure of abject media censorship and promoting every American's fundamental right to open, peaceful expression of our faith, values, and ideology, the First Amendment safeguards personal discretion in a way that failed democracies have historically neglected to remotely defend. Infringement on these essential civil liberties only works to fan the flames of excessive regulation, elitist rule, and imperial tyranny, as can be seen repeatedly in the aftermath of mass movements, from the Iranian Revolution to the coup d'état in Myanmar just this past February.

However, with the advent of widespread digital censorship and free speech restrictions across various platforms, one can't help but ponder at the contemporary state of the First Amendment in a new "politically-correct" America. To counteract this growing culture of civic apathy and polarizing dogmatism, we must bolster civil discourse, repudiate Big Tech's unchecked blackout privileges, champion unrestricted practice of personal faith, and once again

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uphold the gold standard of a transparent, impartial news media. As Nelson Mandela once said, “A critical, independent and investigative press is the lifeblood of any democracy . . . It must enjoy the protection of the constitution, so that it can protect our rights as citizens.”

In times like these, where a raging pandemic and resurgence of global terrorism threatens to tear apart the very social fabric of self-governing democracies around the world, it has become more vital than ever that we take action as patriots to once again prioritize the protection of our First Amendment liberties, reinstitute the value of the Constitution upon our younger generations, and fight for the right of all individuals, regardless of religion, political affiliation, age, ethnicity, or otherwise, to assemble, associate, and announce their views without fear of partisan retribution.

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