

Rights and Responsibilities

“Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom, and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech, which is the right of every man as far as by it does not hurt or control the right of another; and this is the only check it ought to suffer, and the only bounds it ought to know”.

Benjamin Franklin wrote these words in a time when freedom of speech was a highly revered commodity, for speaking ill of the government was deemed unacceptable by said government and punishable by law. Centuries have passed however, and Western society has begun to take the rights of free speech and thought for granted. How does one prove the applicability of this quotation conceived centuries ago, to a society that Tweets, blogs and shares thoughts in an instant? Simply imagine society without these rights.

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With the fervor and anger displayed in current demonstrations across the country, the right to freedom of speech has been pushed, almost as if in search of a breaking point. The people have right to be disquieted and slightly disturbed by the fact that armed protestors are rallying outside Presidential speeches with signs that say “The time has come to water the Tree of Liberty!” (An allusion to Thomas Jefferson's quotation that “the Tree of Liberty must be refreshed by the blood of patriots and tyrants”) Many wonder why the government does not “crack down” on the increasingly angry and potentially violent protestors, in order to preserve peace and unity within a great nation. Yet without freedom of speech and thought, there would be no great nation; nothing but an empty shell would remain. Whenever restrictions are placed on the public's right to speak freely, so too are there restrictions put on what they may think. For the inability to voice one's opinion, as George Orwell writes to great effect in his book 1984, is tantamount to being disallowed to hold that belief. And a country that defends itself to such a degree that it dictates what its constituents may think, is hardly worth defending in the first place.

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President Obama's healthcare proposal has sparked controversy and anger, particularly in the town hall setting, where the many opponents to health-care continually shout over government representatives and proponents of the legislation. Claiming that their voices and opinions have a right to be heard, many furious citizens shout “Liar! Cheat! Communist!” over the explanations and opinions of those with whom they do not agree. These outbursts of indignation are only perpetuating the very injustice they outcry against. The freedom to voice one's opinions comes with the responsibility to listen to those of other people. By interrupting and yelling over others that their first amendment rights are being violated, these protestors are denying other citizens their right to voice their opinion about health care reform. In order for there to be true freedom of speech in a country, every citizen must have that right, including those whose opinions one may not agree with.

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Franklin's words find their basis in the fact that one whose framework of thinking is smaller than others has less potential for wisdom; for one whose thoughts are free from self imposed constraints, has a greater amount of information and routes of thinking to draw upon. It is easy to attack political, religious and other institutions for trying to immure people's thoughts, but it is oneself that submits to their constraints. In short, no establishment can strip one of the right to think freely, however those individuals who submit, willingly or unconsciously, to the confines of these institutions will never know true wisdom.

Freedom of thought and speech are great gifts that come with even greater responsibilities. Franklin's words still hold true today, in a society that has enjoyed these rights so long that it may need to glance back to appreciate them fully.