

American Hemlock

By [Myron Gananian](#) (January 2023)



Discussion in a Cafe, William Roberts, 1929

It is fashionable to regard the amazing inspiration of our Founding Fathers in a far less admirable light, using their slaveholding as one of their most egregious shortcomings. What, however, was one of their greatest creations may now be a far greater threat than that criticism, not only to their reputation but to the future of our society. The First Amendment, guaranteeing the Freedom of Speech, may turn from being their most brilliant contribution for democracy to having the potential of leading to consequences that may explain the turmoil in which our nation finds itself.

Unfettered freedom of speech cannot long endure. It may lead to sequels that may be so destructive that these, rather than external threats to our nation or failure of our government, may dismantle our precious democracy. For the first time in history, the long-term consequences of the freedom to speak one's mind may have come to pass. It may be the cause of our diminishing human capital.

Why this gloomy outlook? The unending battle throughout human history has been between the people and the rulers. Forever the scales have favored the rulers, whether kings, generals, or whatever else. The genius of our Founders codified in our constitution a balance of those scales somewhat favoring the ruled rather than the ruling class, the government. That balance is always extremely sensitive to an untold myriad of winds, be they famine, pestilence, the strength or weakness of rulers, and as we shall see, societal changes, and on and on. When the compact between the ruler and ruled is equitable the political conditions appear stable but are subject to the minutest change, as if set on a hair trigger. When under autocracy, the populace, becoming restive against the hand of the rulers, might revolt *en masse*, as in a revolution. But the possibility that a people would splinter apart for reasons not

due to their conflict with the government has never previously existed. Past civilizations have disintegrated from conquest, revolution, governmental failure, or changing geopolitical conditions, but not from the fracturing of their society, as is occurring in the US.

The consequences of our First Amendment, as well as the rest of the Bill of Rights, were so profound and consequential, the balance between our populace and government so nicely modulated, that it seemed impossible that the Freedom to Speak might lead if not to our downfall then at least to dramatic, totally unanticipated ruinous and pernicious disruptive forces. This unbridled freedom did not so much upset the balance of power between the citizens and the government as it has between virtually every other component of our society. These consequences were to lead to the destruction of the equilibrium between individuals in violation of their pact with society, not with the government. The nation, or society, this ill-defined entity, depends on its existence for its components, in this case, every last individual, to fulfill an unwritten contract. This covenant creates a bond between every citizen to obey the tenets of and to behave in the best interest of society. This understanding is apart from the need to follow laws and regulations formally created to enhance the process of governing. There exists a painful reality that society can exist without an individual or many of them, but the survival of the individual is inexorably dependent on the integrity and perpetuity of the society in which the individual expects to have himself defined and protected. If Geography is Destiny, then the society in which we exist is no less our geography than the terrain on which we live. The individual, in turn, has as his primal role, the requirement to live a life of peace and cooperation with every other member of his society. This prerequisite was expressed by a character in William Faulkner's *Light in August*, "...all that any man can hope for is to be permitted to live quietly among his fellows." Society can tolerate a certain level of discord

between its members, but above a difficult-to-define level of disharmony, a very real threat to the existence of society will occur, not necessarily involving the government, but which may unavoidably be embroiled in this turmoil. This condition of acrimony is not unlike a kindergarten class wherein the teacher is obliged to tolerate some disruptiveness, but if overly lax she runs the risk of losing all control by allowing it to amplify. This rowdiness is among the students and is not caused by their relation to the teacher, but rather is created by the students. The teacher's role is analogous to society's and not the government's.

The assertion that this nebulous entity, society or nation, holds ultimate sway over the behavior of its citizens may seem at odds with the idea of a democracy, but that is not so. The dominion held by society over its subjects serves as a perfect helpmate in the realization of democracy. To explain, it may be best to contrast the government's relation to its subjects with that of society's. A government has to exert control and have power over its people. Society's requirement that its subjects behave with equanimity is based on benevolence, not control. Every society's only tools throughout the ages have been condemnation and shame. In the US these concepts are no longer acceptable as punitive or sanctionary forces. All of society's requirements are consequences of precedent, history, religion, and at heart whatever it is that motivates the majority of humanity to deal with each other with love and respect for the common good. All intangible and unwritten. The government has nothing to do with this aspect of the interaction of its citizens. The condemnatory power of society, previously much stronger through its churches, schools, and family, has lost its preeminence. Without these influences there is nothing left to protect and support society. Society has no designated protector save for the individual, who fulfills his role properly by doing the right thing without even considering the greater good in most cases. Our government plays a peripheral role in this regard, such as

in civil rights, universal voting, etc., but is often intrusive and distorting. As just one example, our judicial system further compounds the problem by failing to protect the greater good by not distinguishing clearly enough between personal crimes and crimes against society. A murderer of a spouse, while deserving severe punishment, is not a threat to the greater society, while a drunk driver is a threat to the entire community. Everyone is a potential victim of a drunk driver so his punishment should exceed that of the "personal killer".

What mayhem resulted from the freedom to say most anything our citizens wish to say, virtually without any limit, and why does it have the potential to disrupt the joint hegemony of government and society in maintaining peace and tranquility? A society must be coherent. We cannot have a Congress of over 300 million. We not only have to deal with our government but even more importantly we all must deal with each other. We are coming to see that this is far more challenging than our relationship with our government. We lack the means to "vote out" those members of society with whom we disagree or wish eliminated, or those who present a threat to the rest of us. Society lacks a written constitution. The inability to deal with each other and to tolerate one another is a centrifugal element that must lead to chaos which cannot be counteracted by any unifying force. Nothing can subdue mass mayhem. While the current disorder in the US is attributed to lax morals, indifferent law enforcement, governmental policies, drug use, gun proliferation, and social media, no amount of improvement of these influences will significantly rectify the social scene in the US. Nevertheless, we must have an appreciation of the underlying cause and therefore the hope for amelioration. Would that this not be a vain one.

How did we come to the current social tumult, bedlam, and mayhem, a perception held by a huge majority of our populace who feel the US is headed in the wrong direction? This feeling

is incorrectly directed against our government. It is rather engendered by unease within our society.

Let us consider the path from the First Amendment to the current conditions under which we no longer can leave our doors unlocked, are killed at random, children are not free to play in their front yards, a meeting of the eyes is enough to have one shot, infanticide whether at birth or later, political invective so hateful as to murder someone of an opposing viewpoint, a president has no compunction in calling a reporter a "stupid son-of-a-bitch", and people laugh, their response a telling insight into the current state of our ethics and mores. Eleven-year-olds car-jack, burglarize and kill their parents and strangers alike, Asians and Jews are particular focuses for harm, no respect for property, and we are pushed onto train tracks seemingly for the pleasure of it. What happened, what is going on? It was not always so in the US and we all feel it. Decorum, civic pride, the concepts of citizenship, patriotism, neighborliness, all belittled, all diminished. It seems that restraint and custom no longer are in force. Something has caused the unleashing of a turbulent, fractious influence.

What is the path from Freedom of Speech to social suicide? Speech comes out as a result of thought. Allowing people to speak freely is a certain way to ensure that they will be encouraged to do more thinking, leading to more introspection. And this leads to greater literacy and intelligence. Inevitably the individual assumes greater self-importance. This sense of self-importance is central to the reason for our splintering society. The feeling of self-importance, once established has no limit on its expansion. The individual now has a tool or weapon by which to demonstrate not only his equality to others but as well his superiority, unfortunately, a propensity bred into the soul of humanity. What better way to achieve this than to encourage unrestrained self-expression?

The centrality of each individual may be implicated as the underlying reason for the majority of the disruption we feel and see in every fiber of our social scene. The individual is now the center of the universe, meaning that the rest of society, that is, everyone else, revolves around him. Society, heretofore our dominant protective entity, now exists to bask in the light emitted by each individual and to function as a bulletin board, mirror, or psychotherapist. It is a painful reality that the survival of society takes precedence over the self-centered desires of the individual. When the social fabric or contract is torn asunder there is no superior force, such as government, that can mend it. We cannot have a universe of only suns and no planets. Everyone is now given permission to not only say what they want but in doing so feel that their words are sacrosanct and unassailable. Our words are our identity. Nothing defines us as do the words that come from our mouth. They are now beyond criticism. One's words are as good as anyone else's. Democracy at last. No qualification necessary to hold forth on any subject, in any manner. IQ no longer relevant in public discourse. Say what you want without fear of criticism. Everyone's words of equal value. Accuracy, thoughtfulness, validity, truth, precedent, value to anyone else or society immaterial. Criticism of the source of expression no longer allowed. But if one offends a protected class, then woe be to the offender.

If all this assault on the holiness of mankind's highest achievement, speaking in words, were not enough, we now have a new embellishment to make words and speech less precise, more muddled, and subjective-disinformation, which differs from misinformation, which lacks intent to deceive. The use of both has been enhanced by the current climate of uncontrolled verbiage. Disinformation is akin to agnostic, neither one nor the other, neither truth nor a lie. It is whatever the hearer wishes it to be, an accusation without a retort. Unbelievably we now are confronted with the use of the First Amendment in order to destroy it as evidenced by literal book burning,

publishers refusing to publish books because they are controversial, books banned by libraries and school boards, the State of California threatening doctors for making comments contrary to presumed medical orthodoxy, and the most heinous, banning users from social media sites. The Founders would be in disbelief to see that while the Constitution forbids the Federal Government from restricting free speech the private sector has no qualms about doing so. Seemingly the government, in proxy, supports this assault on the First Amendment.

But what is even more malicious than all the above is the inability to tolerate the least infringement on the individual's sense of self-importance, self-worth, and perfection. "I'm as good as everyone else, just as good-looking and just as smart, and if anyone does not think so then they should be silenced or even removed from the scene. What comes from my mouth is profound and from my heart, so you must respect it. I now have voice!". It is clear we cannot long sustain a society populated by folks so highly tuned to offense. This is not unlike the gain concept in electronics in which a received signal is amplified by a power source contained in the receiver. In current society even a well-intentioned interaction, be it words or looks, is amplified far beyond its originating intent, to such a degree that it becomes distorted, just as does a sound made overly loud on a phone.

The result of all this self-expression is that the person assumes greater importance than the words emitted from his mouth. Words have become irrelevant. The person matters, not the words. The death of the First Amendment.

There may be less obvious consequences from these conditions. Once a person is stroked by the notoriety brought to them by this attention and fame, the cessation of the stroking leaves open wounds in their concept of self. If one is not constantly confirmed in their status of importance then a likely result

is a sense of abandonment and isolation. Few folks are able to tolerate isolation, which results in feelings of rejection. And fewer still can avoid feeling loneliness as a result of being left alone. An intact psyche does not experience loneliness as a consequence of being alone. They are unable to provide the internal integrity required since they depend so heavily on external influences for their confirmation and gratification. All of this leads to a fragility, a sensitivity of their person, a precariousness of their self-identification which ill-prepares them for the constant onslaught of the world around them. If so, then might all this be the partial explanation for some disturbing occurrences in the US? To focus on just two. Why do we so often hear that a shining high school athlete and scholar died of a drug overdose purportedly due to the stress of striving? Stress of striving, really? And why the shocking military suicide rate of those who have not been overseas or experienced combat? Even the possibility that those in combat may have a lower suicide rate. The military suicide rate is 5 times greater since WWII. Is there a better explanation than that we are breeding a generation of fragiles, delicates, brittles, and sensitives? And why the recent report that 42% of Generation Z's have mental health disorders and 57% of those are on medicines? Why now a shortage of Adderall?

The freedom to speak destroyed the unity of our nation by changing yet another essential requirement for societal harmony, the need for individuals to keep their feelings to themselves, and if not, then to be judicious in expressing them. Not solely to restrain those feelings but to not encumber everyone else with them. What a strange, offensive concept. We should not assume that we are not offended and actually driven apart by being obliged to be the recipient of others' emotions. This further contributes to the splintering of society by increasing the distance between us. We live in an age of Intestinal Expostulation. Pour your guts out. Sit next to a stranger anywhere and within moments one is privy or

prey to his physical and psychiatric burdens. We have been long told about the supposed deleterious effects of suppressed feelings; ulcers, high blood pressure, diminished self-esteem, and even acne, ingrown toenails, and so on. It is not to the benefit of society for the unrestricted outpouring of every individual's emotional sensation of the moment. It appears that the psychology profession is not able to provide any evidence that expressing one's feeling is of any benefit to anyone other than the source of the outpouring of self. On the contrary, they are capable of listing thirty-six effects from unrequited feelings and have no concern to investigate the consequences to the recipients of those feelings, individuals or society. For everyone to voice their feelings results in becoming a public proclamation that "Here I am, look at me, do not disregard what I am feeling and saying, it is so critical to my integrity, my sense of worth. Do not turn me off".

The more certain the conviction that an individual possesses of his special status in society the nearer he comes to ratifying Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr's wise observation: "Certitude leads to violence". There exists a short, straight path from the privilege to speak without restriction to the assumption that one may act out in any manner one wishes. It is for good reason that all societies attempt to discourage the outward expression of humanity's innate sinister and depraved penchants, such as rape, murder, and pederasty, now in the ascendancy.

Furthermore, this proclivity for attention to self has emboldened every level of our society. No one is unqualified to be an oracle. From those unknowns and trivials on TikTok to Hollywood, to CEOs. Hold forth on any topic, no qualification necessary, only a pulpit. An eight-year-old Scandinavian girl becomes depressed purportedly about climate change, loses twenty pounds because of her distress, and with no more qualification than her emotional response to the problem leads the world's youth in her Pied Piper-like movement. How dare

anyone question the purity of her motives? To raise the likelihood that she is motivated by her own demons is forbidden. How often have we been told what to think and to change our feelings to align with those of a handsome or beautiful actor or actress or a late-night comedian? Good intentions aside, intended or not, this sort of emotion and feeling-inspired expression cannot help but lead to tumult and increase friction among society's components, be they individuals or organizations. At least it is all irritating and annoying, and at most a source of disengagement between individuals. If this were not enough, the fear of failing, a dependable stimulus for success, has been replaced by the fear of being called a failure, so dependent have we become for the benediction and endorsement of others' words. We are allowing the words of others to poison us.

Emotion in the public arena serves only to distort. Was it this mindlessness that Wadsworth implied in his poem, the first line of which is, "I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth, I know not where"? How can a society long endure and survive the inevitable conflict that arises from such an intolerable demand on every member? A cacophony not from a common source but from everyone's mouth.

The contributors to this babel are many. The most notorious, the social media, the heart and soul of which is to unleash a torrent of banal thoughtlessness. The self-help movement, encouraging the destruction of self-restraint. The churches, now predominantly community centers, focusing on salvation without contrition. God's words drowned out by an ungodly, godless caterwauling from every mouth. The women's movement, sacrificing the silent strength of matriarchy in order to stridently mimic men. This untethering from our social glue has allowed even the mentally ill to be absolved from restraint. The resort to the use of White Supremacy and the inevitable woke movement in violation of the First Amendment, allowing greater voice to its favored groups. America's

version of Glasnost, the root of which is "voice". Politicians are now celebrities due to their use of words to enhance identity over policy. Striving for fame takes precedence over policy. Encouraging and defining someone or a group as victims permits boasting and basking in their enviable status. Victimhood is a wonderful salve for the overly sensitive, wounded soul.

Feelings, emotions, sentiments, and prejudices need to be kept on the inside and allowed exit very, very carefully. No greater affront to the recipient of such expressions than to obligate them to accept one's utterances uncritically. When emotions are worn on the outside they should be given the same concern lavished on our morning toilette; hair, lipstick, coat, tie, and shoes. If the speaker is thoughtless then it is beyond any standard to expect the listener to be thoughtful and accepting. Introspection, thought, and speech, humanity's noblest accomplishments, are now dumbed down into blathering, bleating, and bloviating, resulting in ignorance rather than contributing to greater knowledge, understanding, and tolerance. This cannot be achieved as long as words, used as barbs and poison, continue to separate us. Words used as self-affirmation drive others away.

Lastly, and likely the most disruptive consequence of the overcrowding of our verbose environment, anger and hate, sibling progeny of unbounded, unleashed self-restraint. Where has anger not invaded? It has poisoned marriages, classrooms, academia, subways, streets, and the political and international scene. Anger, as much as any other emotion, serves to force people to avoid others. Keeping away from others then is a major cause of the centrifugal propensity mentioned earlier. But what generates the anger? An elegant explanation was provided by John B. Calhoun some 60 years ago in his famous rat and mouse colony experiments, which showed that simply by overcrowding, despite ideal conditions otherwise, the colonies deteriorated, with declining

fertility, abortions, cannibalism, homosexuality, and tellingly, isolation. What a familiar ring. At present we are being overcrowded not only by physical proximity but by the incessant sensory overload of noise, be they from everyone's mouth, headphones, TV, or computer. There is no surcease. The Information Age is ill-suited for the megaphone. The ways that an individual can react to this din and racket are limited; hands over ears, isolation, or responding in kind with one's own clatter. Shouting down someone to quiet them is not done with gentleness but with anger. Hate is the inevitable result of trying to increase the distance between ourselves. Hate will utilize any means to grow the space with the hated. For this, we have the extreme example of genocide.

And now, the unanswerable question; how to save the First Amendment not from itself but from its abusers?

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