

Is free speech consequence-free?

From Lev Tsitrin

Anti-Israel protesters at American campuses who are indignant at being arrested seem to think so.

I am not so sure. In fact, we see evidence against this assumption all around us.



Consider, for instance, the way those students' colleges operate. Part of getting admitted is writing an essay that is a free-speech articulation of an applicant's aspirations – and if one is to take a position that "free speech" means "anything goes," everyone who applies would be admitted – which, as we all know, is not the case: the admissions office will reject an applicant whose essay rubs it the wrong way. Clearly, free speech is no defense when one's college admission got denied.

The same goes for grades. Students submit papers in the course of a semester, and take finals at the end of it. Naturally, those take the form of speech – free speech. Yet while all answers are free, not all are equal – some are graded A, others, F. It is not the freedom of a student's answer that gets graded, but its contents. An answer of $2+2=4$ would get a

higher grade than $2+2=5$ – even though both answers are equally “free,” insofar as free speech goes.

And so it is for everything in life. Every collective action – be it military, corporate, sports, or in any other field of endeavor, is coordinated by words. Humans are word-exchanging and word-coordinated animals. Because speech is every bit as indispensable for us as air, food, and water, oppressive governments focus on controlling it, by silencing those whose speech they dislike. For the same reason of its importance, speech in the US is much less regulated – and yet, different kind of speech produces different outcomes. Some speech results in As, business and political success stories, and Nobel prizes, while other speech falls flat, or even gets the speaker into trouble. A student with straight As has a much better chance in life than the one with straight Fs – though both grades resulted from free speech, the only difference being its contents. We all know that there are no wrong questions – but there certainly are wrong answers!

This naturally judgemental approach to admittedly free-speech expression greatly limits the impact of speech’s free nature: it turns out that, after all, not anything goes. Not just college professors, but everyone else is constantly grading each other’s speech. Some speech gets an A from us, some, the F, with corresponding reaction – approval, or disapproval.

For some reason, anti-Israel protestors on campuses feel that free speech laws entitle them to the former, and exempt them from the latter – a strangely self-centered and self-righteous position that ignores the simple reality of others having a right to grade any free-speech expression. If that grade is an F, ejection of a speaker from the approved circle is all but guaranteed – which is exactly what we see happening to the campus protestors who in their self-righteousness grade their speech at A while it deserves no more than the F, and make life miserable for those around them by obnoxiously yelling their hateful drivel at high decibel.

So, the arrests on campuses are not about free speech – they are about evaluation of the contents of a freely-expressed opinion. If sentiments shouted at anti-Israel campus encampments would have been articulated in admission essays, the occupiers of encampments wouldn’t have gotten admitted in the first place. So now that their ignorant and hateful

mindsets have been exposed, it is not too late for colleges to do what they should have done at admission time had they known who they were dealing with – and boot those students from their colleges.

After all, the reason the big mouths/small minds are now in college is because they did not freely express their views at the onset, during admissions. They declined to use free speech then – so of what use is their appeal to freedom of speech now? It is hypocrisy, pure and simple, and it deserves zero sympathy.

After getting arrested, some students are getting suspended, some, dismissed. While I know I should feel sorry for them, somehow I don't – it is hard to feel sorry for those for whom free speech is of mere transactional value, to be used or not used according to circumstances – not used in order to get into the college, but yelled out at the highest decibel when facing the threat of dismissal. It is only right that their belated appeals to free speech should fall on our deaf ears.