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The Fear of Ideas

Selections from an address by Julian Parks Boyd, 12 June 1951

“To be afraid of ideas, any idea,” wrote Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn in his book, *Free Speech*, “is to be unfit for self government.” On this occasion and in this library, itself a repository of ideas, I do not need to remind this audience of the roots of historical experience that underlie Dr. Meiklejohn’s assertion. For this commonwealth was the unquestioned leader in the establishment of the first republic in the world to be dedicated to the proposition that the ideas and opinions of man are beyond the reach of government.

Revolution in itself is not necessarily a glorious thing; it may indeed serve an ignoble part. It becomes glorious when it is governed by a transcendent ideal. The American Revolution possessed such an ideal and its leaders were possessed by it. That ideal was in essence a total repudiation of the fear of ideas. It rejected with the passion and indignation of youth the concept that some ideas were so reprehensible that the civil authorities could legitimately suppress them.

The one idea that Mason, Jefferson, and their compatriots permitted themselves to fear was the idea that some ideas should be repressed because repugnant or abhorrent. They chose instead the noble belief that man was capable of distinguishing the good from the bad, that he was endowed with reason and was, if left free to choose, capable of choosing with justice and fairness; that improvement in his condition could only come about in this way; that, in short, he was capable of self-government. Freedom to think, freedom to examine and discuss any proposition, freedom in the interchange of ideas, freedom of utterance, this is the heart of a declaration of rights as it is the basis of government in a republic.

We must not lose sight of this today as we meet to perform an act of devotion to first principles. While we salute their greatness we stand simply aware of our responsibility. This, indeed, is the primary object of our meeting today. We do not honor the founding fathers by worshipping a mere piece of paper. That document itself, handed to us at no one knows what cost of blood and treasure, is meaningless unless we ask this question in all humility and with the same high purpose that animated those who promulgated it in 1776. For we are ourselves founding fathers. We, too, must reassert the great declaration of rights, find what is in it most valued and in turn recommend it to our posterity as the basis and foundation of their government. We must be worthy before we can praise.

Who is qualified to interpret our rights? Who is

authorized to assess the conflict of ideas that these rights inevitably entail? In different times and places varying rights have been asserted with varying emphasis. Virginia in 1776 set forth sixteen propositions; Massachusetts in 1780, thirty; the United States in 1790, ten. “Who,” asked James Wilson in the federal convention of 1787, “will be bold enough to enumerate the rights of the people?” And who, we must ask ourselves today, is qualified to interpret the rights of the people, enumerated or not?

Many times the fear of ideas has alarmed the timid, swayed public policy, driven us from the steady course dictated by allegiance to a faith. That which arose in 1798 with the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts was not the first or the last, but it exhibited characteristics that may help us arrive at the answer to the question as to who is qualified to interpret the people’s rights.

As a nation we were then confronted with the specter of tyranny in Europe. Many, frightened by the passions of revolution and by the unguided and uncontrolled tyranny of the mob, sought to protect the American institutions by repressive laws. We need not doubt the sincerity of their motives. We may still, however, question the quality of their courage and the extent of their understanding of the nature of the American people and of American institutions. Lacking in faith, they failed to grasp the sense of destiny of the American nation. They were afraid of ideas and snatched at the force of government as the first weapon with which to combat the new threat of tyranny. In so doing they might have done irreparable injury to these infant institutions. They might have strangled at birth this new nation, the earth’s best hope.

Fortunately there was at hand as Virginia’s gift to the world the greatest of all spokesmen for freedom, though in reality it was he rather than foreign ideas that was the object of the fear of those who sought to alleviate fear by suppressing ideas. The people in 1800 elected him to the office of chief magistrate, vindicating his faith in their judgment and repudiating the lack of faith of those who could not trust the people. In his inaugural address Thomas Jefferson spoke, as no one else could have, for a people who grounded their government on faith rather than fear, who trusted each other to decide wisely what course the nation should pursue, who repudiated the concept that some ultimate decisions could not be safely entrusted to the people but must be decided by the rulers. Jefferson, more clearly than any other, perceived that America’s survival and her capacity to meet her destiny

depended not on armies or navies or material things, but on faith. She could lose her soul by trying to defend it with repressive laws. So at bottom his faith rested on that greatest of all weapons, a bill of rights. Not fear but faith, not timidity but confidence in the justice and good sense of his fellowmen, led him to uphold the sacred principle that, though the will of the majority in all cases is to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights. That minority might entertain hateful ideas. It might possess abhorrent beliefs. It might claim the benefit of liberties in order to curb liberties. It might aim, indeed, at the overthrow of government. But it possessed equal rights under equal laws. "Therefore," declared Jefferson, "if there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." Here was the most exalted expression of confidence in the people that ever fell from the lips of a chief magistrate.

Today we are faced with a tyranny blacker than any feared by Jefferson. We know that there are traitors in our midst. We know that there are some who would overthrow this government and who are working furtively and despicably to achieve that end. Can we now extend to these enemies the protection of equal rights and equal laws? We have met a destiny that was far beyond the wildest aspirations of the founding fathers. Can we, in our strength, extend the Bill of Rights to the protection of those whose ideas we hate, when the founding fathers in the day of our infancy dared to do so? "Let history," as Jefferson reminded his hearers in 1801, "answer this question." Who now remembers the public leaders in 1798 who resorted to force in order to thwart a hateful idea? Who now venerates the legislator who voted for the Alien and Sedition Acts? Who now praises the judge who imprisoned those who were found guilty under those acts which Jefferson declared to be "as palpably unconstitutional as if Congress had ordered the citizens to fall down and worship a golden calf." We remember and praise instead those great statesmen, Mason, Jefferson, Wythe, and others from Virginia, who preferred faith to force, who believed that the bill of rights extended to the ideas hated as well as to those revered, who were ready to defend with their lives the idea that equal rights, protected by equal laws, were possessed by the misguided minority as well as by the enlightened majority.

In the past few years we have been told that we can no longer rely upon the beliefs of the eighteenth century to resolve the appalling problems and conflicts of the twentieth. If this is so, why, may we ask, are we gathered here today? Of what consequence is a bill of rights if it does not extend equally to those whom we hate and whose ideas we abhor? What does freedom mean if it does not include the right to argue against freedom? A bill of rights

so conceived is only another name for tyranny. We are not met today to venerate the concept and the fears that lay back of the Alien and Sedition Acts. We are met instead to venerate those founding fathers who were not afraid to permit the people a right of choice among ideas freely expressed, freely accessible. We shall praise them wisely and with understanding if we share their faith and are able to recommend the principles of the Declaration of Rights to our posterity as unsullied as those principles were handed down by them to us.

But can we today say that we are doing so? We have been seized in a mounting wave of hysteria. Test oaths of increasing severity are being required of public servants, teachers, librarians, and others, and are being proposed even as a condition precedent for those about to enter professions or trades. Books are being banned or suppressed, not because they contravene laws but because of the ideas they contain. American citizens may be deprived of livelihood or even of their liberties by *ex parte* proceedings based upon accusations made by anonymous persons. Arraigned at the bar of public opinion, innocent persons may now be required to prove themselves not guilty. In many other respects we are in danger of doing violence to the letter and the spirit of the Bill of Rights.

The issue that is joined here is a never-ending one. It was faced by Pendleton, Lee, Jefferson, Mason and others of the founding fathers who set in motion the great events of May, June, and July 1776. It was faced by those who opposed the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. It cannot be evaded by us. Each of us, bound by the overriding duties of the citizen, must weigh, balance, and determine what for us is the wise and just policy when the mighty opposites of national survival and the civil rights of the individual clash. Never in our history have they come into such violent conflict as in our day, and the dreadful climax seems still to be ahead of us. We cannot apply an easy formula to obtain an answer. We cannot resort to doctrinaire solutions. For neither the right of national self-preservation nor the right of free speech is an absolute; both are conditioned by constitutional limitations. Survival without individual liberty is not worth having. Individual liberty purchased at cost of national existence would be meaningless. There must be a weighing and assessment of the values, constantly, unremittingly, now and in the long future.

We as citizens possessing ultimate sovereignty must decide the issue in our individual consciences on the high level of wisdom and public policy and use reason and justice, courage and faith, as our guides. We shall decide in our several ways. Ignorance, passion, and hatred will sometimes cloud our judgment. We shall be swept along by waves of hysteria and at times blown from our course by erratic storms and enthusiasms. But if we have faith we can in calmer moments perceive that history offers no hope of reward for those who fear ideas. Theirs is the losing side.