

Free to speak?

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Many respectable Americans sadly are allowing fear of ridicule and bullying to silence their voices in this land of the free and home of the brave. Visualize Third World nations.

The right of free speech is under politicized assault from those who want only their voices and views heard in this presidential election year. A Cato Institute/YouGov survey this summer revealed that 62 percent of those polled believe "the political climate these days prevents them from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive."

It's sad, no, downright pathetic, that millions of Americans find themselves too frightened to express their feelings because other humans with a different view (and a complicit national media megaphone) stoop to intimidate, shame, or worse.

Fearful Americans who choose to self-censor are "doomed to succumb to the will of those who bully the hardest and shout the loudest," warns scholar Judith Bergman, a senior fellow with the Gatestone Institute, a controversial conservative think tank in New York.

Certainly none among us particularly enjoys being "canceled" by the current "woke" culture that dismisses anyone who sees life and politics differently than they. Only their opinion counts in their juvenile approach to reason. But such tactics also provide a serious wake-up call to every American who values their constitutional right to free speech.

Writing three opinion columns weekly for 20 years has opened my door to public responses and criticism. It goes with the territory anytime anyone puts their thoughts and opinions out for judgment. If I were cowed by criticism, I shouldn't be doing this for a living.

Bergman writes that the average number of Americans who self-censor is slowly beginning to approximate that of Germany, where nearly two-thirds of citizens "are convinced that 'today one has to be very careful on which topics one expresses oneself,' because there are many unwritten laws about what opinions are acceptable and admissible." The Cato/YouGov survey found 62 percent of Americans agreed, up from three years ago, when 58 percent agreed.

The higher one's education level, the more fear there was of expressing viewpoints, according to the study's findings: "Those with the highest levels of education are most concerned. Almost half (44 percent) of Americans with post-graduate degrees say they are worried their careers could be harmed if others discovered their political opinions, compared to 34 percent of college graduates, 28 percent of those with some college experience, and 25 percent of high school graduates." The survey found younger people especially are afraid to speak their minds.

Bergman writes that "cancel culture" has metastasized from campuses into American society, which means a growing number of topics no longer acceptable as subjects of free and open public debate, such as race, gender, Western history and civilization and climate change.

"In addition, there are uncountable words and concepts that are no longer considered legitimate, even names of food products. Those who publicly offer dissenting views on any of these issues risk immediate 'cancellation,' especially since the killing of George Floyd and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter protests," she wrote.

I'd definitely include politics atop this growing list of censored material. I've come to believe that millions who quietly support President Trump are choosing to remain silent, waiting to express their disgust with such tyrannical tactics on their ballots come Nov. 3.

Any way you cut this, valued readers, personal attacks assailing free speech by the radical left are a dangerous cultural shift in our nation that only reveals just how corrupt politics, and our disregard for other views, has become. I never thought I'd see the day when this sort of disrespectful approach toward one another could happen in our country that has sacrificed so many lives to preserve it.

Bergman's comparison with Germans brings to mind what happens when a fearful majority population is intimidated from speaking against what they know is wrong as happened there in the early 1930s.

At this point, I'd suggest everyone ask themselves why they're even on this planet and what they believe is worth overcoming fear to stand for. Freedoms? Family? Faith? Fostering hate and division?

Bergman's wise warning: "When citizens stop voicing their concerns in public about current events, policies and ideas out of fear that they will lose their livelihoods and social standing, it is--or should be--a huge problem in a democracy. The free exchange of opinions and ideas is the bedrock of free and healthy democracies worthy of their name. How much speech can you shut down--and how many people can you 'cancel'--before public discourse is destroyed altogether?"

Even better, what would it take for the overwhelming majority among us to unite and insist on enough with such a junior high approach to political theater and nastiness?

Now go out into the world and treat everyone you meet exactly like you want them to treat you.