

NATIONAL REVIEW

In No Safe Spaces, an Odd Couple Teams Up to Fight Free-Speech Bans

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The pro-free-speech documentary *No Safe Spaces* doesn't have its nationwide debut until November 15, but it's already breaking box-office records in Phoenix and San Diego, where it rolled out early.

That's because many Americans realize that efforts to muzzle free speech are spreading from college campuses into the wider world. In 2017, a national poll of 2,300 U.S. adults, conducted for the Cato Institute, found that 71 percent of Americans think political correctness has silenced important discussions our country needs to have. And an astonishing 58 percent of Americans say that the political climate prevents them from sharing their own political beliefs.

"Colleges don't protect students from 90 percent of the professors who teach them the following: Your past was terrible, and your future is terrible. You are victims," commentator Dennis Prager, who teamed up with comedian Adam Carolla to make the film, told me. The two make a bit of an odd couple. Prager is a highly trained Jewish religious scholar, and Carolla is a college dropout and atheist who was raised by a single mom on welfare. "Where we agree is that more debate is better, more diversity of opinion is helpful, and our First Amendment is a unique gift to America," says Carolla.

Americans aren't blind to the hurt that genuine "hate speech" can cause. The Cato survey found that eight out of ten Americans say it's "morally unacceptable" to say hateful things about racial or religious groups. But a greater number than before want to go further. Cato found that 40 percent of adults believe that government should prevent hate speech in public.

The problem, of course, is that what the organized Left means by "hate speech" is a constantly moving target. NRO's Katherine Timpf has documented the ever-expanding examples of language that must be curbed: Saying "God bless you" is declared an aggression against Islam, a sign honoring Union Civil War general Joseph Hooker is deemed offensive to women, and a school district removes the word "chief" from job titles because it might offend indigenous peoples.

It used to be that arguments advocating free speech would win out over demands for political correctness. But Noah Berlatsky, a progressive author and blogger, recently claimed on CNN that “if you truly care about free speech, it’s important to acknowledge the ways in which free-speech arguments can be leveraged to protect the powerful while others are silenced.”

No doubt Berlatsky will view *No Safe Spaces* as another attempt to justify the existing power structure. But while the film was certainly made by conservatives, it goes out of its way to appeal to people across the political spectrum and demonstrate to them that the First Amendment needs defending. Among the people interviewed in the film are Princeton professor Cornel West, civil-libertarian lawyer Alan Dershowitz, and former Obama-administration czar Van Jones. Jones, host of his own show on CNN, pungently asserts in the film: “I want every student on campus to be physically safe. But if you mean emotionally safe? I don’t know why you’re in college.”

The film is replete with examples of anti-free-speech zealotry. After riots protesting a previous speaker’s appearance on campus, columnist Ben Shapiro was able to speak at the University of California, Berkeley, only after the campus spent \$600,000 on extra security. Prager and Carolla themselves were disinvited from a speech at another California public university because they wanted to talk about the lack of intellectual diversity on campuses. They were finally allowed to speak only after their lawyers threatened legal action.

But perhaps the most chilling of the film’s examples is that of Bret Weinstein, a biology professor at Evergreen State University in Washington State, who regards himself as a progressive but one skeptical of identity politics. Weinstein became a hated figure on campus in 2017 when he criticized a “Day of Absence” during which white people were supposed to stay away from campus, per an official request from college administrators. He and his wife, a fellow professor and also a leftist, were forced to resign because of the hostile work environment they faced. Evergreen settled a lawsuit filed by the two professors for \$500,000, though the college insisted that the Day of Absence was not discriminatory,

Although he still regards himself as a liberal, Weinstein warns in the film: “Evergreen is a preview of what is coming. The fact it is happening on so many campuses means it will spread into every quadrant of society. And things are going to get worse elsewhere. Evergreen is describing a future that is rapidly approaching.”

But the film ends on a more optimistic note. Carolla says that comics like himself are fighting back against free-speech restrictions. He notes that Jerry Seinfeld has recently spoken out against the “creepy culture” on campuses. Comics such as Dave Chappelle and Bill Burr have used their recent Netflix specials to mock political correctness.

Such figures can help reassert free-speech rights and “be part a societal correction,” Carolla told the *Washington Times*. “We’ve reached a tipping point, and maybe comedians can lead the way back to sanity.”

But it won’t just be comics who help in that battle. Films like *No Safe Spaces* are invaluable weapons in helping to preserve open debate and dialogue in this county.