

From COVID-19 to Campus Protests: How the Police State Muzzles Free Speech

By [John W. Whitehead](#) and [Nisha Whitehead](#)
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"Politicians of both parties want to use the power of government to silence their foes. Some in the university community seek to drive it from their campuses. And an entire generation of Americans is being taught that free speech should be curtailed as soon as it makes someone else feel uncomfortable."—William Ruger, "[Free Speech Is Central to Our Dignity as Humans](#)"

The police state does not want citizens who know their rights.

Nor does the police state want citizens prepared to exercise those rights.

This year's graduates are a prime example of this master class in compliance. Their time in college has been set against a backdrop of crackdowns, lockdowns and permacrises ranging from the government's authoritarian COVID-19 tactics to its more recent militant response to campus protests.

Born in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, these young people have been raised without any expectation of privacy in a technologically-driven, mass surveillance state; educated in schools that teach conformity and compliance; saddled with a debt-ridden economy on the brink of implosion; made vulnerable by the blowback from a [military empire constantly waging war against shadowy enemies](#); policed by government agents armed to the teeth ready and able to lock down the country at a moment's notice; and forced to march in lockstep with a government that no longer exists to serve the people but which demands they be obedient slaves or suffer the consequences.

And now, when they should be empowered to take their rightful place in society as citizens who fully understand and exercise their right to speak truth to power, they are being

censored, silenced and shut down.

Consider what happened recently in Charlottesville, Va., when [riot police were called in to shut down campus protests](#) at the University of Virginia staged by students and members of the community to express their opposition to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Palestine.

As the local newspaper reported,

“State police sporting tactical gear and riot shields moved in on the demonstrators, using pepper spray and sheer force to disperse the group and arrest the roughly 15 or so at the camp, where for days [students, faculty and community members had sang songs, read poetry and painted signs](#) in protest of Israel’s ongoing war in the Palestinian territory of Gaza.”

What a sad turn-about for an institution which was [founded as an experiment in cultivating an informed citizenry by Thomas Jefferson](#), the author of the Declaration of Independence, champion of the Bill of Rights, and the nation’s third president.

Unfortunately, the University of Virginia is not unique in its heavy-handed response to what have been largely peaceful anti-war protests. According to the *Washington Post*, [more than 2300 people have been arrested for taking part in similar campus protests](#) across the country.

These lessons in compliance, while expected, are what comes of challenging the police state.



Universities in the United States with Israel-Hamas war protests in April 2024. Columbia University is marked in red. Other colleges that had encampments are marked in green, and non-encampment protests are marked in blue. [Click here to see the map](#). (Licensed under CC/Wikimedia)

What was unexpected were the campus protests themselves.

For those of us who came of age in the 1960s, college campuses were once the bastion of free speech, awash with student protests, sit-ins, marches, pamphleteering, and other expressive acts showing our displeasure with war, the Establishment and the status quo.

Contrast that with college campuses today, which have become breeding grounds for compliant citizens and bastions of censorship, [trigger warnings](#), [microaggressions](#), and [“red light” speech policies](#) targeting anything that might cause someone to feel uncomfortable, unsafe or offended.

Free speech can certainly not be considered “free” when expressive activities across the nation are being increasingly limited, restricted to so-called free speech zones, or altogether blocked.

Remember, the First Amendment gives every American the right to “petition his government for a redress of grievances.”

There was a time in this country, back when the British were running things, that if you

spoke your mind and it ticked off the wrong people, you'd soon find yourself in jail for offending the king.

Reacting to this injustice, when it was time to write the Constitution, America's founders argued for a Bill of Rights, of which the First Amendment protects the right to free speech. James Madison, the father of the Constitution, was very clear about the fact that he wrote the First Amendment [to protect the minority against the majority](#).

What Madison meant by minority is "offensive speech."

Unfortunately, we don't honor that principle as much as we should today. In fact, we seem to be witnessing a politically correct philosophy at play, one shared by both the extreme left and the extreme right, which aims to stifle all expression that doesn't fit within their parameters of what they consider to be "acceptable" speech.

There are [all kinds of labels put on such speech](#)—it's been called politically incorrect speech, hate speech, offensive speech, and so on—but really, the message being conveyed is that you don't have a right to express yourself if certain people or groups don't like or agree with what you are saying.

Hence, we have seen the caging of free speech in recent years, through the use of so-called "free speech zones" on college campuses and at political events, the requirement of speech permits in parks and community gatherings, and the policing of online forums.

Clearly, this elitist, monolithic mindset is at odds with everything America is supposed to stand for.

Indeed, we should be encouraging people to debate issues and air their views. Instead, by muzzling free speech, we are contributing to a growing underclass of Americans—many of whom have been labeled racists, rednecks and religious bigots—who are being told that they can't take part in American public life unless they "fit in."

Remember, the First Amendment acts as a steam valve. It allows people to speak their minds, air their grievances and contribute to a larger dialogue that hopefully results in a more just world. When there is no steam valve to release the pressure, frustration builds, anger grows and people become more volatile and desperate to force a conversation.

The attempt to stifle certain forms of speech is where we go wrong.

In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court has held that it is "a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment...[that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea offensive](#) or disagreeable." For example, it is not a question of whether the Confederate flag represents racism but whether banning it leads to even greater problems, namely, the loss of freedom in general.

Along with the constitutional right to peacefully (and that means non-violently) assemble, the right to free speech allows us to challenge the government through protests and demonstrations and to attempt to change the world around us—for the better or the worse—through protests and counterprotests.

If citizens cannot stand out in the open and voice their disapproval of their government, its representatives and its policies without fearing prosecution, then the First Amendment with

all its robust protections for free speech, assembly and the right to petition one's government for a redress of grievances is little more than window-dressing on a store window—pretty to look at but serving little real purpose.

After all, living in a representative republic means that each person has the right to take a stand for what they think is right, whether that means marching outside the halls of government, wearing clothing with provocative statements, or simply holding up a sign.

That's what the First Amendment is supposed to be about: it assures the citizenry of the right to express their concerns about their government to their government, in a time, place and manner best suited to ensuring that those concerns are heard.

Unfortunately, through a series of carefully crafted legislative steps and politically expedient court rulings, government officials have managed to disembowel this fundamental freedom, rendering it with little more meaning than the right to file a lawsuit against government officials.

In more and more cases, the government is declaring war on what should be protected political speech whenever it challenges the government's power, reveals the government's corruption, exposes the government's lies, and encourages the citizenry to push back against the government's many injustices.

Indeed, there is a long and growing list of the kinds of speech that the government considers dangerous enough to red flag and subject to censorship, surveillance, investigation and prosecution: hate speech, conspiratorial speech, treasonous speech, threatening speech, inflammatory speech, radical speech, anti-government speech, extremist speech, etc.

Clearly, the government has no interest in hearing what "we the people" have to say.

Yet if Americans are not able to peacefully assemble for expressive activity outside of the halls of government or on public roads on which government officials must pass, or on college campuses, the First Amendment has lost all meaning.

If we cannot stand peacefully outside of the Supreme Court or the Capitol or the White House, our ability to hold the government accountable for its actions is threatened, and so are the rights and liberties that we cherish as Americans.

And if we cannot proclaim our feelings about the government, no matter how controversial, on our clothing, or to passersby, or to the users of the world wide web, then the First Amendment really has become an exercise in futility.

The source of the protest shouldn't matter. The politics of the protesters are immaterial.

To play politics with the First Amendment encourages a double standard that will see us all muzzled in the end.

You don't have to agree with someone to defend their freedoms.

Responsible citizenship means being outraged at the loss of others' freedoms, even when our own are not directly threatened. It means remembering that the prime function of any free government is to protect the weak against the strong. And it means speaking up for

those with whom you might disagree.

The Framers of the Constitution knew very well that whenever and wherever democratic governments had failed, it was because the people had abdicated their responsibility as guardians of freedom. They also knew that whenever in history the people rejected this responsibility, an authoritarian regime arose which eventually denied the people the right to govern themselves.

The demons of our age—some of whom disguise themselves as politicians—delight in fomenting violence, sowing distrust and prejudice, and persuading the public to support tyranny disguised as patriotism.

Overcoming the evils of our age will require us to stop marching in lockstep with the police state and start thinking—and speaking—for ourselves.

It doesn't matter how old you are or what your political ideology is: it's our civic duty to make the government hear us—and heed us—using every nonviolent means available to us: picket, protest, march, boycott, speak up, sound off and reclaim control over the narrative about what is really going on in this country.

The power elite has made their intentions clear: they will pursue and prosecute any and all words, thoughts and expressions that challenge their authority.

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), this is the final link in the police state chain.

If ever there were a time for us to stand up for the right to speak freely, even if it's freedom for speech we hate, the time is now.

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Constitutional attorney and author John W. Whitehead is founder and president of [The Rutherford Institute](#). His most recent books are the best-selling [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), the award-winning [A Government of Wolves: The Emerging American Police State](#), and a debut dystopian fiction novel, [The Erik Blair Diaries](#). Whitehead can be contacted at staff@rutherford.org.

Nisha Whitehead is the Executive Director of The Rutherford Institute. Information about The Rutherford Institute is available at www.rutherford.org.

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Featured image: Scenes of the reinstated Gaza Solidarity Encampment at Columbia University on its fourth day. (Licensed under CC0)

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