

Political Leaders Discuss the Importance of Freedom of Speech

VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN ON FREE SPEECH

Question from audience member:

“How would you encourage people to be more accepting of opposing viewpoints?”

Joe Biden’s response:

“When I was coming up through college and graduate school, free speech was the big issue, but it was the opposite: it was liberals who were shouted down when they spoke, and liberals have very short memories. I mean it sincerely, as a demonstration of what’s been lost, here. The First Amendment means what it says. You’re not allowed to stand up and yell ‘Fire!’ in this auditorium, but you are allowed to stand up and say, ‘Biden, I think you’re an absolute jerk and I think, whatever, and by the way, I think we should do away with or I believe race is the problem in America...’ I mean, look: we hurt ourselves, badly, when we don’t allow the speech to take place. Now, speech can move to the point of incitement. Inciting riots, but the truth of the matter is, the incitement that occurs before the person even speaks — *THAT* falls on those who are engaged in that violence, not on the speaker. And so I got in trouble because when that first effort at Berkeley I went public and said I thought they were absolutely wrong denying the ability of the various people [Ann Coulter, Milo Yiannopolous] to go out and speak. I mean, look: if your idea is big enough, it should be able to compete, and you should be able to listen to another point of view, as virulent as it may be, and reject it, expose it. The best thing to do is let this stuff be exposed. Don’t be like these other people; don’t give the Trumps of the world the ability to compare you to the Nazis, or you to the racists, because you are doing the same thing: you’re silencing. We mean what we say. I taught constitutional law at Widener Law School for 22 years. The First Amendment is one of the defining features of who we are in the Bill of Rights. And to shut it down in the name of what is ‘appropriate,’ is simply wrong. It’s wrong.”

Discussion Question:

Is it okay to deny people with views you dislike or disagree with the ability to speak at a school or college?

BARACK OBAMA TO STUDENTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE SPEECH IN COLLEGE:

“Look, the purpose of college is not just to transmit skills. It’s also to widen your horizons, to make you a better citizen, to help you evaluate information, to help you make your way through the world, to help you be more creative. The way to do that is to create a space where a lot of ideas are presented and collide and people are having arguments and people are testing each other’s theories, and over time, people learn from each other because they’re getting out of

their own narrow point of view and having a broader point of view. When I went to college, suddenly there were some folks who didn't think at all like me. And if I had an opinion about something, they'd look at me and say: 'Well, that's stupid.' And then they'd describe how they saw the world. And they might have had a different sense of politics. Or they might have a different view about poverty. Or they might have a different perspective on race. And sometimes their views would be infuriating to me. But it was because there was this space where you could interact with people who didn't agree with you, and had different backgrounds than you that I then started testing my own assumptions. And sometimes I changed my mind. Sometimes, I realized: You know what? Maybe I've been too narrow-minded. Maybe I didn't take this into account. Maybe I should see this person's perspective. So that's what college in part is all about."

Discussion Questions:

Can you remember a time when you changed someone else's mind in a discussion? How did you convince them?

Can you think of an instance when anyone ever changed your mind after a discussion?

PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE BEN CARSON IN 2015 PROPOSED THE IDEA OF CUTTING FEDERAL FUNDING TO COLLEGES THAT DEMONSTRATE POLITICAL BIAS. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA RESPONDED:

"The idea that you'd have somebody in government making a decision about what you should think ahead of time or what you should be taught, and if it's not the right thought, or idea, or perspective or philosophy, that person would be — they wouldn't get funding, runs contrary to everything we believe about education. That might work in the Soviet Union, but that doesn't work here. That's not who we are...It's not just sometimes folks who are mad that colleges are too liberal that have a problem. Sometimes there are folks on college campuses who are liberal, and maybe even agree with me on a bunch of issues, who sometimes aren't listening to the other side, and that's a problem too. I've heard some college campuses where they don't want to have a guest speaker who is too conservative or they don't want to read a book if it has language that is offensive to African-Americans or somehow sends a demeaning signal towards women. I gotta tell you, I don't agree with that either. I don't agree that you, when you become students at colleges, have to be coddled and protected from different points of view. I think you should be able to — anybody who comes to speak to you and you disagree with, you should have an argument with 'em. But you shouldn't silence them by saying, 'You can't come because I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say.' That's not the way we learn either."

Discussion Question:

What does the Constitution say about the government's role in deciding, in Obama's words, "what you should think ahead of time or what you should be taught?"

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA TO STUDENTS ON “DISINVITING” SPEAKERS WITH UNPOPULAR IDEAS:

“You know, there’s been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or to disrupt a politician’s rally. Don’t do that. No matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths, because, as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they are just advertising their own ignorance. Let them talk. If you don’t, you just make them a victim, and then they can avoid accountability. That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t challenge them. Have the confidence to challenge them - confidence in the rightness of your position - there will be times when you shouldn’t compromise your core values, your integrity. And you will have the responsibility to speak up in the face of injustice. But listen. Engage. If the other side has a point, learn from them. If they’re wrong, rebut them. Teach them. Beat them on the battlefield of ideas.”

Discussion Question:

What can you learn from listening to what a person you disagree with says?