

Speech, Power, and Censorship in American History

CRITICAL THINKING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- The First Amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”
 - Why do you think the Founders chose *these* 5 Freedoms to protect in the First Amendment? What makes them so important?
- Why is it important to respect the speech rights of other people who disagree with us?
- In the 1950s and 1960s, Communists, Civil Rights advocates, and Vietnam War protesters were targeted for suppression. What types of views are being targeted today, and who is doing the targeting?
- What would happen if ideas we disliked or disagreed with were not allowed?
- Does the First Amendment allow us the right to shout down people whose ideas they dislike? Do you believe that it should?
- Consider the following quote by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr: “If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment it is the principle of free thought—not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate.” Why would Justice Holmes think that thoughts we hate deserve “freedom?”

QUESTIONS RELATED TO “A PLEA FOR FREE SPEECH IN BOSTON, 1860” BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS:

- According to Frederick Douglass, when a meeting in Boston to discuss “How Shall Slavery Be Abolished?” was “invaded, insulted, captured by a mob of gentlemen,” the mayor “refused to protect it, though called upon to do so.”
 - In your opinion, how should authorities deal with those who interfere with citizens’ free speech rights?
- Frederick Douglass describes “two voices” in response to this disruptive event: “one denouncing the mob that broke up our meeting” and the other saying that “the meeting was ill-timed, and the parties to it unwise.”
 - Which voice do you agree with? Is it ever the wrong idea to hold a discussion if a particular topic is highly charged or otherwise controversial?