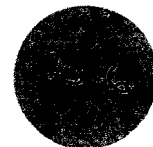


What Freedom of Speech Means to Me



Freedom of speech is the liberty to speak and write without fear of government restraint. In the United States, this right is guaranteed by the First Amendment, which states, “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech.” However I believe that with this freedom comes responsibility; these are two sides of the same coin. The right to speak publicly must be accompanied by a personal duty to be honest, informed, and thoughtful.

A thriving democracy depends on knowledgeable citizens and it is through the free exchange of words that issues are debated, falsehoods are exposed, consensus is formed, and public officials are held accountable. Open dialogue means that ill-constructed policies, hidden agendas, and social injustices are challenged, which ultimately serves to strengthen our society.

Free speech is a powerful tool, but it must be used prudently. While our legal system recognizes certain limits, particularly when freedom of expression conflicts with other rights, it is not possible to legislate common sense. Consequently, the First Amendment also protects malevolent acts such as a bigot blogging racist comments or a protestor disrespecting the American flag.

We must not attempt to censor all communication that may be considered offensive because important issues are often controversial. However, along with the right to free public expression comes the personal obligation to be sensible. For example, disrespecting the American flag is deeply offensive to many citizens, especially to those in our military community, some of whom have lost loved ones protecting the very freedom our flag symbolizes. Rather than dishonor the American flag in protest, which provokes outrage and division, a more responsible and effective approach is to utilize shrewdly chosen words to identify the relevant issue and to propose a solution. It is better to make a point with facts and reason than with loathsome displays of insolence.

The First Amendment protects our right to speak freely. When exercised judiciously, this liberty promotes the flow of information and open debate that are the lifeblood of our thriving democracy. To me, freedom of speech is a tremendous privilege as well as a formidable responsibility.