Free Speech

by

*Eyes Right*

**Annapolis, MD –** As an author of seven books, I regard the right of free speech guaranteed to all Americans by the First Amendment to be sacrosanct. In general, all adults should be free to read or say pretty much whatever they want. I do make exceptions for children being exposed to pornography, but otherwise there should be very few restrictions on anything else.

Recent actions by the Trump administration in this regard are troubling. Although I fully understand concerns about what some regard as an “over the top” emphasis on DEI (Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion) programs under the previous Biden administration, removing certain books perceived to be inappropriate from military libraries is troubling, but complicated.

The United States has a long, and proud, history of tolerating public dissent so long as violence is not involved. Communist parties, for example, have been in existence throughout America for decades. I would also argue that our nation has generally benefited from tolerance of dissent. It was widespread protests against the Vietnam War which ultimately led President Nixon to negotiate with the North Vietnamese to end that tragic loss of lives, both Vietnamese and American.

On the other hand, what cannot be tolerated is open dissent within our military concerning decisions made by military commanders or civilian leadership. When told to charge an enemy position, Marines should not be allowed to vote on the wisdom of doing so. In my former role as Commanding Officer of a ballistic missile submarine, I was constantly aware of my responsibility to launch missiles loaded with nuclear warheads if we were to receive an authenticated message directing a launch. Even though I knew that my actions (and that of my crew) would kill millions of innocent victims, it was my duty to carry out the order.

Back to the books….once military leadership made the decision to remove certain books (which I disagree with based on my understanding of the books involved), leadership at military libraries had no choice but to do so. In the case of my own alma mater, the U.S. Naval Academy, the Superintendent correctly carried out the order.

Subsequently, a speaker who had been invited to give a lecture to the midshipmen (the term applied to students at the Academy) was suddenly disinvited to speak when it was learned from one of his slides prepared for the lecture that he was going to disagree with the decision to remove books. This decision by Academy leadership was met with mostly negative reaction claiming that the right to free speech was being denied. I disagree with this assessment. Although the speaker had the right to openly express his disagreement in a newspaper article or an interview, the Superintendent, the Commanding Officer of the Academy, also has the right to deny anyone an opportunity to openly criticize her decision in a speech *within her command*. It would be comparable to me allowing someone to come aboard my ship to tell my crew of officers and enlisted personnel that their Captain had made a bad decision. I would also be comfortable removing a book from our ship library which argued against either my policies or those of our government. Those same books would be fine in any public library, but not on my ship.

I certainly have no problem with midshipmen reading any of the “banned” books however they obtain them. It is my understanding that no one in military leadership has suggested that there is any ban on such reading.

In summary, the military is indeed different from the general population. There are different rules, different life styles, and different objectives. And it should remain that way.

I thought you might like to know.

E-R