

# Freedom of Expression

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In 1939 Joseph Kennedy, Ambassador to England, offered Columbia Pictures \$2 million not to release "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," a movie by Frank Capra. Ambassador Kennedy insisted that the portrayal of venal U.S. politics would help the Nazi cause. Apparently he believed that the fiction of one author—if expressed—would unduly further fascism and thus subvert democracy. He was so convinced of the rightness of his belief that he was willing to pay a large sum to suppress the expression of fictional wrong doing in our nation's capital<sup>1</sup>.

## Suppression Is Failure

No matter how fervently someone believes in the justice of his cause, suppression of the free exchange of ideas is almost always failure or wrong. The power or might behind an idea does not make the idea right. Many powerful people throughout history have been wrong. Few people, if any, would judge "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" to be subversive or wrong. In 1939 Ambassador Kennedy was so caught up in the fears of the times that he was willing to use the power of his money to protect the world against a film. When people are caught up in the movements of their time, all people must be extra zealous to guard and encourage freedom of expression. Otherwise, a mob mentality reigns, and people rush to do things that are not thought out and often regretted later.

The founders of our country knew from experience how important free expression of ideas is. Many of them, along with popular demand, insisted that the Constitution immediately be amended by the Bill of Rights. The first article of the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of expression. Without freedom of expression, no people are truly free. Article One of the Bill of Rights states:

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.

Suppression of ideas occurs when expression is outright denied or delayed, when pertinent information is withheld or hidden, or when details are slanted to obscure the truth. We must always strive to encourage free expression at all times and in all situations. Any freedom has inherent responsibility. Free speech carries the dual obligation of zealously guarding it and of exercising it responsibly.

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<sup>1</sup>Miriam Horn, "Capra Scorn," U.S. News & World Report, September 16, 1991: 17.

# Ensuring Freedom

Ensuring freedom of expression is like tending a garden. After a person has carefully tilled a garden and planted flowers, he must continually be vigilant, or weeds will ruin his efforts. When a person plans a garden, he has a vision of a small, verdant paradise brightened by a rainbow-array of saturated colors giving momentary bliss, tastes of beauty, and respite from the ugliness of life. If the vision is to be more than a fleeting dream, the gardener must constantly tend the flowers and guard against weeds. When the gardener is diligent, he will appreciate the beauty he has conserved more than anyone. If he falters, weeds will soon choke the flowers, overrun the garden, and proclaim the result of negligence.

The founders of our nation planned and started the garden of freedom of expression which still grows and inspires the peoples of the world by its beauty and splendor. The weeds of suppression are always near, finding root in the garden, but for two centuries people have been vigilant enough to keep our freedom alive and to root out suppression. The job of gardener now belongs to our generation and we, the police, are the head gardeners. We took the oath to uphold the Constitution as the supreme law of the land with freedom of expression being its most important provision.

Of all people—even more than journalists, police officers should be the most zealous to guard and exercise freedom of expression in all forms. We understand that only a free community freely sharing information will keep us free and eventually allow us to free ourselves from the tyranny of crime. We, the police, simply can't control crime by ourselves. We must cooperate with citizens in our battle, and citizens must have accurate information to contribute. In all our contacts with the community and the news media, we need to help the flow of information and only hinder it for the most compelling reasons such as protecting the life of a witness. Police commanders should never instruct a subordinate to change a report or recommendation to fit the commander's wishes. Valid decisions up the chain of command must be based on open and honest reports and recommendations at all levels. No police officer should ever feel pressured not to express the truth in reports of any kind. When any person insists that free expression be hindered or feels that his own expression must be altered, then true freedom has momentarily been lost. A weed has taken root. These examples are only a few among a multitude. There are many ways in which we abridge freedom of expression and allow our freedom to be abridged, and we must be ever diligent for the cause of freedom.

# Responsible Expression

All freedoms have inherent responsibilities, and free expression is not an exception. We must always express the whole truth, being as open as circumstances allow. Free expression of ideas and facts must always have growth and encouragement for ourselves, people, and our community as its goal. Malicious destruc-

tion is never acceptable. We all agree with laws against slander and libel. We must never hide our maliciousness behind the guise of frankness. If we share openly and honestly with others, there is no goal that a free people cannot attain by free, earnest cooperation. The police department as a community is no exception.

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