

Ella Minnow Pea Connection: Freedom of Speech

Read the following selections and answer the questions at the end.

Selection 1: Ms. Heaphy

Nationally syndicated newspaper columnist Nat Hentoff published a piece titled "Is free speech un-American?" Read the commentary, or the following summary:

The focus of Hentoff's commentary was an incident Dec. 15, 2001 at California State University, where the university's commencement speaker, Janis Besler Heaphy, president of the Sacramento Bee, was "booed off the stage after five minutes of her eight-minute speech." Ms. Heaphy began her speech expressing her support of the war on terrorism, calling the Sept. 11 attack an "assault on everything American." She went on, supporting efforts to protect the United States from further attack, but began to be heckled when she asked, "To what degree are we willing to compromise our civil liberties in the name of security?" Expressing concern about expanded governmental powers, racial profiling in the questioning of 5,000 Middle Eastern men in the United States on temporary visas, and the use of military tribunals. According to the article, "She said, 'I absolutely agree with President Bush. Our liberty will not be assured until terrorism is wiped out. But ... we should question what the long-term effect of the administration's recent policies will have on our values.' With three minutes left of her speech, she could no longer be heard, and left the stage. The majority of the letters and e-mails to her newspaper, The Sacramento Bee, attacked her -- not those who suppressed her First Amendment right to speak." After reviewing the letters written to Heaphy and the columns written on her behalf, Hentoff notes that Heaphy would have finished her speech with the following words: "America was founded on the belief that the freedom to think as you will and speak as you think are essential to democracy. Only by exercising those rights can you ensure their continued existence." and asks, "Just who is the enemy of these American values? Heaphy, or those who exercised what is called, in law, 'the heckler's veto.'" Heckling is protected speech -- until the speaker cannot continue. Does John Ashcroft have anything to say to the patriots who forced Heaphy and the First Amendment off the stage?"

Situation 2: Ted Turner

While speaking at National Family Planning and Reproductive Center in Washington, DC in 1999, Ted Turner, founder of CNN, Vice-Chairman of AOL time-Warner, and former owner of the Atlanta Braves and Atlanta Hawks, made a number of comments to the audience, including:

"If you're going to have 10 rules, I don't know if [banning] adultery should be one of them"

"The Pope should get with it. Welcome to the 20th century."

When asked what he would say to the Pope, who is Polish, if he ever met him, Turner kicked his foot into the air and asked, "Ever see a Polish (land) mine detector?"

Christianity is a "religion for losers."

Pro-life people are "bozos."

At another speaking engagement at CNN on Ash Wednesday, 2001, Turner reportedly said to the Catholic employees who had received ashes, "I realized you're just Jesus-freaks. Should you guys be working for [rival network] FOX?"

Situation 3: John Rocker

During an interview with Sports Illustrated magazine in December 1999, John Rocker, a relief pitcher for the Atlanta Braves was quoted as saying:

"Imagine having to take the 7 train to the ballpark, looking like you're riding through Beirut next to some kid with purple hair next to some queer with AIDS right next to some dude who just got out of jail for the fourth time right next to some 20-year-old mom with four kids. It's depressing."

"The biggest thing I don't like about New York are the foreigners. I'm not a very big fan of foreigners. you can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English. Asians and Korean and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How the h*** did they get in this country?"

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After reading these situations, consider your opinions on whether each individual should have been allowed to say the things he/she did. What exactly does it mean, in your mind, that we have freedom of speech in this country?

Read the final passage here and answer the questions at the end, on your own sheet of paper. While you read, consider how all these stories could relate to the events of Ella Minnow Pea and their new national law.

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The Price, Power, and Responsibility of Free Speech

"Whether I am or am not a Communist is irrelevant. The question is whether American citizens, regardless of their political beliefs or sympathies, may enjoy their constitutional rights."

--Paul Robeson, actor, singer, and activist, 1947.

Born in New Jersey in 1898, the son of a freed slave, Paul Robeson decided early on to make the most of every opportunity. He excelled on the football field and in the classroom. He earned both an academic scholarship and a position on the football team at Rutgers University. By the time he graduated, Robeson was named All-American twice, earned fifteen varsity letters, received the Phi Beta Kappa key and finished first in his class. Robeson went on to Columbia Law School, and upon graduation in 1923, did the expected—he joined a law firm. It was there that his life took an unexpected turn. When a white secretary refused to work with him, the young black attorney quit.

Robeson decided to pursue a professional career in the arts. There, however, he was still unable to escape segregation and racial tension. His first lead role, in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, cast him as the husband of a white woman; the play opened amid media frenzy and protests. As his acting and singing received critical acclaim—his rendition of "Ol' Man River" in the Broadway show *Showboat* became his most noted performance—he became increasingly concerned with the treatment of blacks in America. It was not until he traveled to London, England that he received social, as well as theatrical, acceptance.

Realizing that black people were treated differently outside of America, Robeson began speaking against racial and ethnic oppression. In 1934, the accomplished performer made a trip that would change his life forever. He toured Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. Afterward he said, "Here, for the first time in my life, I walk in full human dignity." It seemed to him that, in the Stalinist Soviet Union, all races were treated equally under Communist rule.

Inspired, Robeson used his increased publicity to promote his political views. In 1937, he spoke against Spanish fascism and the Nazi's treatment of Jews. The actor-turned-activist made several political appearances, despite warnings that they might negatively affect his career. In addition to his public efforts, Robeson spent more time in the Stalinist Russia. In 1939, he was awarded the Order of Lenin, the most prestigious award given by the USSR to military or civilian people.

It was not long until the American government began to suspect that Robeson had joined the Communist Party. Because the Communist Party's stated goal was to overthrow the government of the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) decided to place Robeson under surveillance. In 1942, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) added his name to a list of presumed Communists. The FBI issued a custodial detention card for Robeson, which would authorize his immediate arrest at any time deemed necessary to national security. The action did nothing to suppress Robeson's views. The FBI would continue to monitor him until 1955.

During the Cold War era, the government continued to scrutinize Robeson's actions. He testified before the HUAC a number of times. In 1947, when asked if he was a Communist, he claimed he was "an anti-fascist and an independent." In 1956, despite a battle with illness, he accused the committee of being "the true un-Americans" and admonished them: "[Y]ou should be ashamed of yourselves." In the intervening years, the State Department used the new Internal Security Act to force Robeson to swear he was not a Communist or relinquish his passport. Robeson refused and his lawsuit against the State Department would be denied review by the Supreme Court until 1958.

Robeson had not escaped the scrutiny of the American public either. In 1949, over eighty of his U.S. concerts were canceled. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) disassociated itself from Robeson, and other black leaders condemned him as disloyal and un-American after he announced at the World Peace Congress: "It is unthinkable that American Negroes will go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations... against a country [Stalin's Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind."

Nevertheless, Robeson held to his beliefs and increased his involvement with the Soviet Union. In 1952, he was awarded the Stalin Peace Prize—the same year that Stalin sent Yiddish writers to their deaths. Itzak Feffer, a friend who had warned Robeson about Stalin's progressive subordination of the Jews, was one of the men killed. Later, Robeson justified his support of Stalin when he claimed, "the coach tells you what to do and you do it."

After the Supreme Court finally reviewed his case and reinstated his passport in 1958, public perception of Robeson began to change. The socialist government in India declared a "Paul Robeson Day" in honor of his 60th birthday. His United States concert tour enjoyed warm receptions across the country. He released his autobiography, *Here I Stand*. He toured London and Moscow, and received an overwhelmingly positive response. For the next five years, Robeson divided his time between Europe and the Soviet Union, working in England only upon swearing that he was not a member of the Communist Party. More than a decade later, after his return to the United States, the FBI closed its file on Robeson. He died two years later, in January 1976.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did the students from the first situation have the right to boo and heckle?
2. What, besides heckling, could the students have done to respectfully voice their opinions?
3. From the second situation, did Turner have the constitutional right to say these things about religions and Polish people?
4. If the government cannot restrict this type of verbal expression, are there any consequences for making such statements?
5. Did John Rocker, from the third situation, have a First Amendment right to say what he did?
6. What do you think were the consequences Rocker experienced from his comments?
7. Did the United States respect Paul Robeson's right to free speech?
8. Was the FBI's surveillance and subsequent actions (detention card, revocation of passport) an encroachment on Robeson's right to freedom of speech? Explain.
9. Did non-government organizations/individuals respect Robeson's freedom of speech? Explain.
10. Does the U.S. government have the power to curtail the rights of citizens who endorse foreign governments that are sworn enemies of the United States? Explain.
11. Does the U.S. government have the responsibility to protect citizens from persons who associate and support governments working to overthrow the American democratic system? Explain.
12. Should Robeson have shown more respect for the United States' concern for national security? Explain.
13. What does it mean to you to have "freedom of speech"? Do you feel U.S. citizens today have that freedom described in the constitution as you understand it?
14. How is the U.S. government similar/different to the fictional government in *Ella Minnow Pea*?
15. What would you do if you were a Nollopian, forced to not use certain letters of the alphabet? Would you obey the law? Would you revolt, even with risk of death?
16. Write a 2-3 paragraph letter to the government of Nollop. You are a U.S. citizen hearing about the new law in Nollop, and you have decided to write their government to share your thoughts. Show specific evidence of your understanding of the story as we've read so far in the book, including characters' names or plot events that we've read. (100-150 words)