

## The Right of Dissent

*Excerpted from an essay by Henry Steele Commager  
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**I**t is the fundamental error of security-minded zealots that they put their trust in such things as secrecy, or weapons or numbers. But none of these things can be relied on unless the spirit of the people be stout. The prodigious contest between Nazi Germany and Britain should have taught us that it is the free mind and the free spirit that triumphs over all the weapons of secrecy, of hatred and of fear. . . .

What is evident is that the whole body of security regulations and activities does serious damage to scientific progress. First-rate minds will not and cannot work under constant surveillance. They will not work on projects selected for them by the military and hedged in by security regulations. They cannot work well if their families, their associations, their very thoughts are to be scrutinized by men who understand nothing of science and are themselves bound by arbitrary regulations. The first requisite for effective scientific work is knowledge and the second is freedom. . . .

Congressional committees draw up lists of dangerous books, and one deluded congressman has called for the labelling of all the books in the Library of Congress. There is censorship of libraries by local patriotic or veterans' organizations; censorship of overseas libraries at the behest of a McCarthy. . . .

Freedom of the press must be maintained not out of indulgence to authors, but because it is the only way we have to discover truth and expose error, and a country that does not do this is not secure. Without a constant flow of criticism, a constant agitation of controversial questions, a constant expression of new and unfamiliar ideas, we are sure to make mistakes. We take this for granted in the realm of medicine or physics, and we should take it equally for granted in the realms of politics and economics. If we do not we will destroy not only liberty but security.

There are two forms of censorship that deserve separate consideration. One of these is what might be called internal as contrasted with external censorship—that is, censorship by government departments, bureaus or agencies, of what the public is allowed to know. Such censorship was almost unknown a generation ago, and rare even a decade ago, but flourishes now, in the name of security. That there is some advantage in not giving to the press information on work in progress will not be denied, or that there may be scientific or military or diplomatic information that should not be made public.

But the danger that the plea of security will be used to cover up incompetence is greater than any danger that might flow from premature disclosure. It is probable that if all our China policy were to be conveyed to Peiping tomorrow, only confusion would result, not peril. Those governments that take their public into their confidence are stronger and

more secure than those that exclude the public, and those that confess their mistakes will remedy them more speedily than those that conceal them.

Another and quite different form of censorship—again in the name of security—operates in the large field of the movies, the radio, television and the theater; even now a Congressional Committee is solemnly investigating past sins of association and membership of entertainers. For years now Hollywood has been conducting a sort of pogrom against actors whose sentiments or associations were presumed to be Leftish, and in this, needless to say, it has been supported by Congress and by the passport division of the State Department. That we are more secure with Charlie Chaplin in Switzerland rather than in California is not wholly certain, especially as we are still allowed to delight in his films. For years, too, some of the radio networks have been maintaining their own black-list of persons who might have incurred the disapproval of the “Red Networks” or of one of the many State un-American Activities Committees, and from time to time we hear that this or that entertainer or commentator is no longer permitted to contaminate the air.

No one has yet detected subversive propaganda in what these luckless entertainers or commentators say or sing or act; what is at issue is not their conduct but their beliefs, or their alleged beliefs. Does it in fact strengthen our security to eliminate from the films, or the air, or the theater, individuals who might have supported the Spanish Loyalists . . . or joined allegedly Leftwing organizations? Obviously it does not, for none of these things can have the faintest effect on our security. Does it impair our security to be confined to films, radio and theater that carefully avoid controversial subjects or controversial characters, that shift away from ideas because ideas may be dangerous, that require of their participants acts of submission or of penance unbecoming to free men? Just as obviously it does. Perhaps one reason why British and French films seem so much livelier than American, why the BBC programs are so much better than those most Americans are able to hear, why so much of television is beneath contempt, is that for a decade now we have been energetically eliminating from these fields ideas, and men and women with ideas.

In no field have the failures of security been more ostentatious than in education. The effort here has been prodigious; the results wholly negative. Local, state and national governments joined hands with filiopietistic and veteran organizations to root subversives out of education. The assumption that there were, in fact, subversives in the schools was never subjected to any proper tests, nor the assumption that the transmission to the young of radical ideas was in itself dangerous. A tremendous security apparatus was brought to bear on public schools, colleges and universities, on libraries and scientific institutions and foundations: the apparatus of loyalty oaths, investigations of ideas, associations and conduct, supervision of curriculum, textbooks and research projects. . . .

That national security depends upon an intelligent, enlightened, open-minded and critical electorate is self-evident. That such an electorate can be created only where there is universal education, that is free in the sense that it is uncontrolled and unintimidated, was an article of faith with the Fathers of the Republic. “Error of opinion,” said Jefferson, “may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” But where reason is not free, error will grow and flourish—as in Nazi Germany, for example, or in

Communist Russia. The first essential of safety and security, and needless to say of wisdom and of happiness—is freedom of communication. Anything, therefore, which qualifies that freedom, anything which intimidates the teacher, the scientist, the scholar, discourages first rate minds from entering the realms of scholarship, denies to the young the full benefit of the clash of ideas or training in independent thinking, closes off areas of interest or activity from the inquiring mind—anything of this character strikes not only at freedom, but at security itself. ■