

examples of censorship in american history

Examples of Censorship in American History

The story of America is intertwined with a complex and often contentious relationship with free expression. Throughout its existence, the United States has grappled with what speech and ideas should be permitted, leading to numerous examples of censorship in American history. From government suppression of dissent during wartime to societal efforts to control morality and public discourse, censorship has manifested in various forms, impacting literature, art, journalism, and political activism. Understanding these historical instances is crucial for appreciating the ongoing debates surrounding free speech, national security, and the role of government in shaping public opinion. This article will delve into significant examples of censorship in American history, exploring their contexts, motivations, and lasting consequences.

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The Sedition Act of 1798 and Early Restrictions on American Speech

The very foundation of American freedom of speech was tested early in the nation's history with the passage of the Sedition Act of 1798. This controversial piece of legislation, signed into law by President John Adams, was a direct response to the escalating tensions with France during the Quasi-War. The act made it a crime to "write, print, utter, or publish any false, scandalous, and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, or either house of Congress, or the President of the United States." This was a significant departure from the spirit of the First Amendment, which had been ratified just seven

years earlier. The primary motivation behind the Sedition Act was to silence the growing criticism of the Federalist Party and President Adams from the Democratic-Republican opposition and their partisan press. Federalists feared that criticism would undermine national unity and aid their French adversaries. Consequently, numerous newspaper editors, politicians, and ordinary citizens were prosecuted and convicted under the act for expressing views critical of the government. The Sedition Act of 1798 serves as one of the earliest and most prominent examples of censorship in American history, highlighting the fragility of newly established liberties in the face of political pressure and national anxiety.

The Federalist vs. Republican Divide and the Sedition Act

The political climate of the late 1790s was highly polarized. The Federalist Party, led by figures like Adams and Alexander Hamilton, favored a strong central government and close ties with Great Britain. In contrast, the Democratic-Republican Party, with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison at its forefront, championed states' rights and admired revolutionary France. This ideological chasm fueled intense partisan journalism, with newspapers fiercely attacking the opposing party and its leaders. The Sedition Act was perceived by many as a partisan weapon designed to cripple the Republican press and silence dissent. The law's vague wording allowed for broad interpretation, making it easy to prosecute individuals for even moderate criticism. This period demonstrated how political disagreements could directly lead to attempts to control the flow of information and suppress opposing viewpoints, establishing a precedent for future debates on the limits of free speech during times of political turmoil.

The Impact and Repeal of the Sedition Act

The Sedition Act had a chilling effect on free expression, forcing many journalists and publishers to self-censor for fear of prosecution. While the Act was set to expire in 1801, its impact was profound. Many who were convicted under the act were fined and imprisoned. However, the backlash against the law was significant. Thomas Jefferson, upon winning the presidency in 1800, pardoned all those convicted under the Sedition Act, and the Act was allowed to expire, never to be renewed. The Supreme Court, in *Schenck v. United States* (1919), would later address the limits of free speech during wartime, but the legacy of the Sedition Act of 1798 remains a potent reminder of the vulnerability of free speech in the nascent years of the American republic. It stands as a stark reminder that even in the pursuit of national security, the suppression of political dissent can erode fundamental liberties.

Censorship During Wartime: WWI, WWII, and Beyond

Throughout American history, periods of armed conflict have consistently brought about increased government scrutiny and attempts to control public discourse, leading to significant examples of censorship in American history. The rationale typically cited is the need to protect national security, maintain public morale, and prevent the dissemination of information that could aid the enemy. While some measures are

aimed at restricting actionable intelligence, others often extend to suppressing anti-war sentiment, criticism of government policy, or ideas deemed unpatriotic. These wartime censorship efforts have ranged from direct government control of media to the encouragement of self-censorship and the prosecution of individuals for seditious speech.

World War I and the Espionage and Sedition Acts

The United States' entry into World War I in 1917 ushered in an era of intense nationalistic fervor and, consequently, significant censorship. The Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 were enacted to suppress opposition to the war effort. The Espionage Act prohibited "false reports or statements likely to interfere with the operation or success of the armed forces of the United States" and also made it illegal to cause insubordination, disloyalty, or refusal of duty in the military. The Sedition Act broadened these prohibitions, criminalizing "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the U.S. government, flag, or armed forces. These acts led to the prosecution of thousands of individuals, including prominent figures like socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, who was imprisoned for an anti-war speech. The Supreme Court, in landmark cases like *Schenck v. United States* (1919), established the "clear and present danger" test, suggesting that speech could be suppressed if it posed an immediate threat to national security. This period represents a critical juncture in understanding the legal framework for wartime censorship, even as it led to widespread suppression of dissenting voices and a chilling effect on public debate.

World War II and the Office of Censorship

During World War II, the U.S. government implemented a more centralized and sophisticated censorship apparatus. The Office of Censorship, established in 1941, oversaw the review of all outgoing international mail and cable traffic, as well as the content of domestic media, particularly radio broadcasts and newspapers. The primary goal was to prevent information from reaching enemy hands, such as details about troop movements, industrial production, or morale-boosting messages that could be twisted by propaganda. While this was largely focused on operational security, there were instances where broader political speech was scrutinized. The government also engaged in "voluntary cooperation" with newspapers and broadcasters, encouraging them to self-censor sensitive information. The internment of Japanese Americans, a policy driven by racial prejudice and fear rather than concrete evidence of disloyalty, also involved a form of informational control, limiting their ability to communicate and organize.

Post-WWII Conflicts and the Cold War Era

The Cold War brought its own unique forms of censorship and speech suppression, often fueled by anti-communist anxieties. While not always codified in specific legislation in the same way as during the World Wars, the atmosphere of fear and suspicion led to widespread blacklisting in Hollywood, the arts, and academia. Individuals suspected of communist sympathies or who refused to cooperate with government investigations, such as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), found their careers and

opportunities severely curtailed. This period saw the suppression of political ideas, artistic expressions, and even personal associations deemed "subversive." The fear of being labeled a communist could lead to ostracism and professional ruin, effectively censoring individuals and limiting the range of acceptable discourse.

The Hays Code and the Censorship of Hollywood

The golden age of Hollywood was, ironically, a period marked by significant self-censorship, largely dictated by the Motion Picture Production Code, commonly known as the Hays Code. Established in 1934 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), this code served as a rigid set of guidelines for what could and could not be depicted on screen. Its primary goal was to preempt government censorship by imposing industry-wide moral standards, ostensibly to protect audiences, particularly children, from "immoral" content. The Hays Code profoundly shaped the narratives and visual language of American cinema for decades, leading to some of the most notable examples of censorship in American history.

The Genesis of the Hays Code and Moral Purity

The rise of cinema in the early 20th century brought with it increasing public concern over the perceived moral laxity of some films. Sensationalism, depictions of crime, and challenges to traditional social norms in early movies led to calls for regulation. In response, Hollywood studios created the MPPDA and, under the leadership of Will H. Hays, developed the Production Code. The Code was meticulously detailed, dictating what could be shown or implied regarding crime, sex, religion, and social issues. For instance, it prohibited explicit depictions of sexual acts, romantic relationships outside marriage, and the glorification of crime. Even words like "damn" or "hell" were often forbidden. This created a climate where filmmakers had to be incredibly inventive in suggesting rather than showing, and many potentially controversial themes were simply avoided altogether.

Impact on Filmmaking and Creative Expression

The Hays Code had a profound and often stifling effect on creative expression in Hollywood. Filmmakers were forced to navigate a labyrinth of prohibitions, leading to indirect storytelling and allegorical representations of sensitive topics. For example, extramarital affairs were often depicted as having dire consequences for the characters involved, reinforcing traditional moral values. The Code also influenced the way social issues were portrayed, often sanitizing them or presenting them within a framework that reaffirmed prevailing social norms. While the Code did not always succeed in eliminating all controversial content, it certainly shaped the landscape of American cinema, leading to a period where certain themes and perspectives were effectively excluded from mainstream film production. The eventual demise of the Hays Code in the late 1960s, replaced by the modern MPA rating system, marked a significant shift in

Hollywood's approach to censorship and content regulation.

Notable Cases of Hays Code Enforcement

Numerous films faced significant alterations or outright rejection due to the Hays Code. Films that tackled themes of sexuality, race, or social inequality often ran into trouble with the censors. For example, the film *The Outlaw* (1943), famous for its depiction of Jane Russell's cleavage, faced considerable difficulty in its release due to violations of the Hays Code's strictures on suggestive content. Films dealing with interracial relationships were also highly problematic. Over time, the Code's strictness became increasingly out of step with evolving societal norms and the artistic ambitions of filmmakers, leading to its gradual erosion and eventual replacement. The Hays Code remains a significant chapter in the history of American media censorship, demonstrating the power of industry self-regulation and its impact on cultural output.

McCarthyism and the Red Scare: Suppressing Dissent

The post-World War II era in the United States was marked by a pervasive fear of communism, a period often referred to as the Red Scare, which fueled significant instances of political censorship and suppression of dissent. Senator Joseph McCarthy became the most prominent figure associated with this era, spearheading highly publicized investigations into alleged communist infiltration of the U.S. government and various sectors of society. McCarthyism, as the phenomenon came to be known, created an atmosphere of suspicion, accusation, and fear that led to the blacklisting and persecution of countless individuals, many of whom had no connection to communist activities. These actions represent some of the most egregious examples of censorship in American history, directly targeting individuals' freedom of association, speech, and belief.

The Rise of Anti-Communism and Fear of Subversion

Following World War II, the geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically with the emergence of the Soviet Union as a global superpower and the ideological divide of the Cold War. This led to a heightened sense of anxiety within the United States about the potential for communist subversion and espionage. Fueled by actual Soviet espionage activities and heightened by propaganda and political opportunism, the fear of communism permeated American society. This fear manifested in government investigations, loyalty oaths, and a general suspicion of anyone expressing dissenting political views or associating with organizations perceived as left-leaning. The widespread belief that communists were actively working to undermine American institutions created fertile ground for censorship and repression.

Joseph McCarthy and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations

Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to national prominence in the early 1950s with his unsubstantiated claims of widespread communist infiltration within the U.S. State Department and other government agencies. He employed aggressive tactics, often making accusations with little to no evidence, and wielded significant influence through his chairmanship of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. McCarthy's hearings became spectacles of public accusation, where individuals were often forced to defend themselves against vague allegations of disloyalty or communist sympathies. The pressure to "name names" of alleged communists or sympathizers was immense, leading to ruined careers and lives. This period saw the suppression of not only actual communist activities but also any form of dissent or criticism that could be construed as sympathetic to the Soviet Union or communism.

Blacklisting in Hollywood and Other Industries

One of the most notorious consequences of McCarthyism was the widespread blacklisting that took place in Hollywood and other industries. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) conducted investigations into alleged communist influence in the film industry, leading to the infamous Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters and directors who refused to testify and were subsequently blacklisted. This blacklisting extended to actors, musicians, writers, and academics, effectively barring them from employment in their fields. Individuals were often placed on lists based on tenuous associations, past affiliations, or even accusations from former friends or colleagues. This created a climate of fear and conformity, where creative expression was stifled, and individuals were afraid to express any ideas that might be deemed politically suspect. The suppression of talent and the chilling effect on artistic and intellectual freedom are profound examples of censorship in American history resulting from political paranoia.

The Fight Against Obscenity: From Ulysses to 2 Live Crew

The concept of obscenity and its regulation has been a persistent battleground in the American struggle for free expression, leading to numerous landmark legal cases and significant examples of censorship in American history. The definition of what constitutes obscenity has evolved over time, often reflecting changing societal norms and values. From the early 20th century attempts to ban controversial literature to later debates over graphic music and art, the courts have repeatedly grappled with balancing the protection of free speech against the perceived need to protect the public from "offensive" material.

Challenging Literary Censorship: Ulysses and Lady Chatterley's Lover

In the early 20th century, many literary works that challenged prevailing moral standards were subject to censorship. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) was famously banned in the United States for its frank depiction of sexuality and stream-of-consciousness interior monologues, which were deemed obscene. It wasn't until 1933 that a U.S. court ruled in *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses"* that the novel was not obscene and could be imported and sold. Similarly, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* faced numerous bans and legal challenges before its widespread acceptance. These cases highlight the historical struggle against censorship in literature and the gradual expansion of First Amendment protections to artistic expression, even when it pushed societal boundaries.

The Miller Test and Defining Obscenity

The Supreme Court's decision in *Miller v. California* (1973) established a three-pronged test for determining whether material is obscene and therefore not protected by the First Amendment. This test, known as the Miller Test, states that for material to be considered obscene, it must:

- Appeal to the prurient interest of the average person, applying contemporary community standards.
- Depict or describe sexual conduct in a patently offensive way, as specifically defined by the applicable state law.
- Lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

The Miller Test has been the standard for obscenity cases ever since, though its application has remained a subject of considerable debate and legal interpretation, particularly regarding the "contemporary community standards" and "serious value" prongs.

Modern Debates: Music, Art, and the Internet

The struggle against obscenity continued into the late 20th and early 21st centuries, extending to other forms of media. The 1980s and 1990s saw significant controversy surrounding explicit lyrics in popular music, particularly with groups like 2 Live Crew, whose album *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* led to obscenity charges in Florida. This case highlighted the tension between artistic expression and public indecency laws. Similarly, artistic exhibitions, such as the controversies surrounding photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's work, have faced challenges based on obscenity claims. The advent of the internet has introduced new complexities to obscenity debates, with questions arising about the regulation of online content, child pornography, and the challenges of applying community standards in a global digital space. These ongoing debates underscore the enduring relevance of obscenity as a focal point for censorship discussions in American society.

Student Speech and Campus Censorship

The realm of education, particularly at the university level, has also been a site of significant debates and examples of censorship in American history. While educational institutions are often seen as bastions of free inquiry and open discourse, they have also faced pressures to restrict certain types of speech, often justified by concerns about protecting students from offensive material, maintaining an orderly learning environment, or adhering to institutional values. The legal framework for student speech is complex, balancing the First Amendment rights of students with the legitimate interests of educational institutions.

Landmark Cases Protecting Student Speech Rights

Several Supreme Court cases have shaped the understanding of student speech rights in public schools and universities. In *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), the Court famously ruled that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." The case involved students wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. The Court held that student speech could only be regulated if it substantially disrupted the educational environment or infringed upon the rights of others. Other cases, like *Bethel School District v. Fraser* (1986), have allowed schools to regulate speech that is lewd or offensive, while *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier* (1988) permitted school officials to censor student newspapers if they have "legitimate pedagogical concerns." These decisions reflect a nuanced approach to student speech, recognizing both students' rights and the unique responsibilities of educational institutions.

Speech Codes and Academic Freedom

Many universities have implemented speech codes, policies designed to regulate student conduct and expression on campus. While often intended to promote civility and prevent harassment, these codes have frequently been criticized for being overly broad and infringing upon academic freedom and free speech principles. Critics argue that such codes can stifle open debate, discourage the exploration of controversial ideas, and lead to self-censorship among students and faculty. The legal challenges to speech codes have often centered on whether they violate the First Amendment by prohibiting speech that does not meet the legal definition of unprotected speech, such as incitement or true threats. The ongoing debate surrounding speech codes highlights the tension between fostering an inclusive and respectful campus environment and upholding the principles of free expression essential to academic inquiry.

The Internet's Role in Campus Speech Debates

The proliferation of the internet and social media has introduced new dimensions to the discussion of student speech and campus censorship. Online platforms provide students with unprecedented opportunities to express themselves, but they also create new challenges. Issues such as cyberbullying, the

spread of misinformation, and the potential for online speech to disrupt campus life have led to calls for greater regulation. Universities are increasingly grappling with how to address student conduct online that may violate campus policies or ethical standards. This has led to complex questions about the extent to which universities can regulate off-campus online speech and the balance between student privacy and institutional oversight. These evolving digital landscapes continue to shape the ongoing dialogue about censorship and free expression in educational settings.

The Internet Age: New Frontiers in Censorship Debates

The digital revolution has profoundly reshaped the landscape of information dissemination and communication, ushering in a new era of examples of censorship in American history that are distinct from those of previous generations. The internet, with its vast reach and capacity for rapid information exchange, presents both unprecedented opportunities for free expression and novel challenges for those seeking to control or moderate content. Debates over online censorship touch upon issues of government surveillance, platform accountability, the spread of misinformation, and the balance between free speech and online safety.

Government Surveillance and Information Control

Government surveillance programs, often justified by national security concerns, have raised significant questions about privacy and the potential for censorship. Revelations about programs like those conducted by the National Security Agency (NSA) have highlighted how governments can collect vast amounts of digital data on citizens. While not always direct censorship, the knowledge that communications are being monitored can lead to self-censorship and a chilling effect on free expression. Furthermore, governments have sought to compel technology companies to provide access to user data or to remove content deemed illegal or harmful, creating complex legal and ethical dilemmas regarding the control of information online.

Platform Accountability and Content Moderation

Social media platforms and other internet service providers have become the de facto gatekeepers of much online discourse. These private companies grapple with the immense challenge of content moderation, deciding what speech is permissible on their platforms. Issues such as hate speech, harassment, incitement to violence, and the spread of misinformation have led to intense scrutiny and debate over platform accountability. Companies often employ algorithms and human moderators to enforce their terms of service, which can lead to the removal of content or the suspension of user accounts. These decisions, while made by private entities, have a profound impact on public discourse and raise questions about censorship, bias, and the concentration of power in the digital sphere.

The Spread of Misinformation and Disinformation

The ease with which misinformation and disinformation can spread online is a major concern in the digital age. False or misleading information can influence public opinion, undermine democratic processes, and even pose risks to public health. Efforts to combat this spread often involve fact-checking initiatives, content labeling, and, in some cases, the removal of demonstrably false or harmful content. However, these efforts can be perceived as censorship, particularly when the lines between opinion, misinformation, and verifiable fact become blurred. The ongoing debate centers on how to address the negative impacts of misinformation without unduly restricting legitimate speech or creating a system that favors certain viewpoints over others. This remains one of the most complex and evolving challenges in the ongoing history of censorship in America.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the impact of the Alien and Sedition Acts on freedom of speech and the press in early American history?

The Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, passed by the Federalist-controlled Congress, were highly controversial. The Sedition Act, in particular, criminalized making false or malicious statements against the U.S. government, its officials, or its institutions. This led to the prosecution and conviction of several journalists and political opponents of the Adams administration, effectively chilling dissent and limiting criticism of the government during a time of national tension.

How did the Hays Code influence what was permissible in American films during its reign?

The Hays Code, formally known as the Motion Picture Production Code, was a set of industry guidelines that governed the content of American films from the 1930s to the late 1960s. It imposed strict moral limitations, prohibiting depictions of nudity, suggestive dialogue, illegal activities (like drug use), and even certain kinds of violence. The goal was to maintain a 'clean' and morally upright image for Hollywood and avoid government censorship, but it significantly restricted creative expression and often led to euphemistic or indirect portrayals of sensitive topics.

What role did the McCarthy era play in the censorship of individuals and ideas in post-World War II America?

The McCarthy era, particularly the early 1950s, was a period of intense anti-communist suspicion in the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy and others spearheaded campaigns to root out alleged communists and 'sympathizers' from government, Hollywood, and other institutions. This led to blacklisting, public accusations, and the suppression of individuals whose political views or associations were deemed

subversive, resulting in significant damage to careers and reputations, and a climate of fear that discouraged open political discourse.

How did the Supreme Court's interpretation of the First Amendment evolve regarding obscenity and censorship over time?

The Supreme Court's stance on obscenity and censorship has evolved considerably. Initially, there was a broader allowance for censorship. However, landmark cases like *Roth v. United States* (1957) established the 'three-pronged test' for obscenity, requiring material to be deemed utterly without redeeming social value to be unprotected by the First Amendment. Subsequent rulings have further refined this, emphasizing community standards and the need for explicit sexual content to be considered in a patently offensive way, making it harder to ban material based solely on perceived indecency.

What were some of the key targets and methods of censorship during the Civil Rights Movement?

During the Civil Rights Movement, censorship was often employed by authorities and segregationist groups to suppress the message and activities of activists. Key targets included televised and photographic documentation of police brutality against peaceful protesters, which authorities sometimes tried to restrict or downplay. Methods involved preventing media access to certain events, harassing journalists, and sometimes confiscating film or photographs. Furthermore, the spread of dissenting literature and the staging of boycotts or demonstrations were often met with legal restrictions and attempts to silence organizers through arrests and intimidation.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles starting with , related to examples of censorship in American history:

1. The McCarthy Era and its Shadow

This book delves into the pervasive atmosphere of fear and suspicion that characterized the McCarthy era. It examines how accusations of communism led to blacklisting and the silencing of artists, writers, and academics. The narrative explores the long-lasting impact of these campaigns on American intellectual and cultural life, highlighting instances where free expression was curtailed for political gain.

2. Obscenity, Morality, and the Law: The Battle for the Comstock Act

This title investigates the influential role of Anthony Comstock and the laws enacted in his name to suppress "obscene" materials. It traces the historical context of Victorian morality and its clash with evolving social norms and artistic expression. The book details key legal battles and their consequences for literature, public discourse, and personal freedoms in America.

3. Freedom of the Press in Wartime: From the Civil War to the Digital Age

This work explores how the pressures of national security and wartime propaganda have historically led to restrictions on the American press. It examines specific instances where journalists faced government oversight, censorship, or even imprisonment during conflicts. The book analyzes the ongoing tension between the public's right to know and the government's desire to control information in times of crisis.

4. The Suppression of Dissent: Voices Silenced in American History

This volume focuses on various movements and individuals who have faced censorship and suppression throughout American history for their political or social beliefs. It highlights how dominant ideologies have attempted to silence radical or minority viewpoints, from abolitionist pamphlets to anti-war protests. The book underscores the importance of protecting dissenting voices for a healthy democracy.

5. Banned Books: The American Experience of Literary Censorship

This comprehensive study examines the history of book banning in the United States, from early attempts to restrict religious or political texts to more recent controversies over content in schools and libraries. It identifies recurring themes in censorship efforts, often targeting works that challenge societal norms or authority. The book provides a detailed account of the legal and cultural battles fought over the freedom to read.

6. The Hollywood Blacklist: Its Rise and Fall

This book chronicles the creation and impact of the Hollywood Blacklist during the Red Scare. It details how the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) targeted screenwriters, actors, and directors suspected of communist sympathies. The narrative illustrates the devastating personal and professional consequences for those blacklisted and the broader implications for artistic freedom in the film industry.

7. The Civil Rights Movement and the Struggle for Free Speech

This title explores the significant role censorship played in hindering the progress of the Civil Rights Movement. It documents how authorities used various means to suppress the voices of activists, from banning protest marches to controlling media coverage of racial injustice. The book highlights the bravery of those who spoke out and the crucial legal battles fought to secure free speech for all Americans.

8. School Libraries and the Censorship Wars: Protecting Young Minds or Limiting Knowledge?

This book investigates the persistent issue of censorship in American schools and public libraries, particularly concerning materials available to young people. It examines the arguments for and against restricting access to certain books and the role of parental concerns versus intellectual freedom. The work delves into the history of these debates and their impact on educational policies and student access to diverse ideas.

9. Digital Frontiers and the New Censorship: Navigating the Online Information Landscape

This contemporary title addresses the evolving challenges of censorship in the digital age, exploring issues like internet content moderation, platform bans, and the spread of misinformation. It examines how governments and private entities are attempting to control online discourse and the implications for freedom of expression. The book analyzes the complexities of balancing security, public order, and unfettered online communication in the 21st century.

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