

**Statement of Chairman Bob Goodlatte
to The Media Institute Annual Friends
and Benefactors Awards Banquet
Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Washington, D.C.
October 21, 2015**

Thanks to The Media Institute for inviting me to speak tonight in honor of this year's award recipients, and the foundational principle of free speech itself.

Eighty years after the founding of our country, the great English philosopher John Stuart Mill summarized his defense of free expression this way, in four brief points. He wrote: "First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied." I might add that in those ways, freedom of speech is essential to progress, insofar as progress follows the discovery of more and more truths.

Then Mill continued: "Thirdly," he wrote, "even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession ... preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience."

Here I might add that the freedom of expression is essential to confidence, because confidence can only follow from the understanding that one's convictions are subject to constant challenge.

As a federal legislator, I understand particularly that these principles are essential to our democracy. It is often said the right to vote is the most fundamental right in our democracy. And that is true in a sense. But it is only part of the truth, because without the right to free expression, we can have no confidence in our democracy. After all, in a democracy, a bad idea, if left untested, can become enshrined in law.

The Founders of our country understood this clearly.

George Washington and Thomas Jefferson wrote of the importance of knowledge in a democracy. Washington wrote: "Knowledge is, in every country, the surest basis of public happiness.... In proportion as the structure of a government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion should be enlightened." And as Thomas Jefferson reminded us: "Knowledge is power.... If a nation expects to be ignorant – and free – in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

James Madison wrote of the inherent connection between free speech, learning, and liberty, writing: “What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of Liberty and Learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual and surest support.... A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both.... And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

John Adams wrote specifically of his concern for young people in a democracy, writing that “It should be your care, therefore, and mine, to elevate the minds of our children and exalt their courage.... If we suffer their minds to grovel and creep in infancy, they will grovel all their lives.”

Yet today, there is mounting evidence that the young are being taught in environments that aren't conducive to free expression, and that this will have profoundly negative practical effects for the future of democracy and progress.

An analysis of the results from the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, published in the Creativity Research Journal in 2011, found that American kindergarteners through 12th graders' creativity scores have declined steadily across the past decade or more. The researchers concluded that since 1990, children have become “less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate ... and less likely to see things from a different angle.”

Regarding those of university age, in 2010 the American Association of Colleges and Universities conducted a survey of 24,000 college students. In results that shocked many, it found that only 36 percent strongly agreed with the statement “it is safe to hold unpopular views on campus.” Of 9,000 campus professionals, only 19 percent strongly agreed with the same statement. And the survey found that as students progressed toward their senior year, they became even more doubtful that it is safe to hold unpopular views on campus. Let that sink in for a moment. According to the American Association of Colleges and Universities' own survey, an overwhelming majority of students and faculty were not confident that it was safe to hold unpopular views on campus.

According to the 2015 report published by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 55 percent of the 437 colleges and universities they examined “maintain policies that seriously infringe upon the free speech rights of students.”

As more and more young people go to college, they will be exposed to, and shaped by, campus policies, including policies regulating speech. But what effect will that have? Research shows that young adults are less tolerant of free speech than older generations. That comes as little surprise when there is so little diversity of opinion on campuses today.

Perhaps because college graduates are less comfortable with opposing ideas to which they have had little exposure at their university, the Pew Research Center found that millennials who shared the ideological views of the vast majority of their professors use social networking sites to

block, unfriend, or hide those with opposing views more often than others do.

This summer, as a start toward a more meaningful discussion of free speech on college campuses, the House Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Justice held a hearing regarding the state of freedom of speech at our public institutions of higher learning, which, after all, are government entities bound directly by the First Amendment. I followed up that hearing by sending a letter to 160 public colleges and universities with potentially unconstitutional speech codes, asking them how they planned to bring their speech policies into accordance with the First Amendment. We are in the process of compiling responses to those letters as they come in.

Earlier, I mentioned that without freedom of expression, there cannot be progress, or confidence in our democracy. I would add that without a strong ethos of freedom of expression, there will be less hope as well. That's because – regardless of our ideological positions – hope is only present when those with better ideas are free to express them.

Hope is often associated with children. Yet in recent years, fewer and fewer people have been having children. It's a phenomenon that has often been referred to as the "Baby Bust." As Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker has pointed out, low fertility rates also reduce the rate of future innovations, as researchers have shown that people have tended to produce the most innovations in their mid-30's, not later in life. Yet we face a future in America in which greater and greater proportions of Americans are older, not younger. And so it is especially important that those relatively fewer, younger members of the next generation consist of free-thinking individuals who have the confidence to explore arguments and innovations wherever they might lead.

Thanks to The Media Institute, and its award recipients today, for all their efforts in fostering a culture of free thinkers among young and old alike.