

English 10

14 May 2010

Censorship

Censorship: It's a word that stains the pages of history and has tainted governments for centuries. Whether it's in a desultory country in Europe during the 18th century or right here in America in the 1900s, censorship has been both widely used and widely opposed by millions. In fact, its effect on history has made it quite the candidate for discussion, as we will see in this paper.

The word censorship, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means "to prevent the public distribution of a work" (Censorship. Merriam Webster). The English term censor can be traced back to the Roman office of censor in 443 BC. Just like the ancient Greeks, the Romans held that shaping the character of the citizens was ideal to good governance (beaconforfreedom.org). With that in mind, censorship was considered an honorable task. One of the first examples of censorship took place in Greece in 399 BC. Following charges of corruption of youth and blasphemy, Socrates was executed under Plato's republic. Subsequently, Socrates' publications were banned from the public, setting philosophy back one hundred years (angelfire.com). This is a perfect example of the destructive power of censorship.

There are plenty of examples of censorship here in America as well. Although the first amendment to the United States constitution protects most, if not all forms of censorship, the government has proven again and again that it will try to get away with quieting opposition. In 1798, John Adams signed a law making any statement that would go against the president illegal unless they were able to show evidence proving their position on the matter

(civilliberty.about.com). This came just 7 years after the ratification of the very amendment meant to protect citizens from this type of abuse (firstamendmentcenter.org)! Twenty-five people were arrested before the bill was repealed by President Jefferson in the 1800 election (civilliberty.about.com).

If you want to see an indubitable villain in United States censorship, look no further than Anthony Comstock. Mastermind behind the 1873 Comstock Act, he started his crusade as an anti obscenity advocate in the 1870s. He assaulted Manhattan booksellers specializing in erotic books, which inevitably brought him to the attention of the New York Young Men's Christian Association. After winning a major case in his crusade, the YMCA appointed him secretary of their New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in November 1872. The case in question was against a feminist named Victoria Woodhull. In 1872, she had published her chronicle of an affair between a celebrity minister and one of his parishioners. Comstock, having a strong distaste for feminists, requested a copy of the book under a false name and had Woodhull arrested under obscenity charges. Comstock used his status to lobby for ever stronger obscenity laws, finally succeeding in the 1873 Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use Act, which came to be known as the Comstock Act. The act allowed the random search and seizure of the United States mail without warrant by federal marshals. Comstock was given the position of special agent at the New York Post Office; allowing him to search the mail, seize whatever he deemed “smut”, and arrest the sender. He remained in this position of tyranny for forty years, being feared and abhorred by countless publishers of literature. Any and all artwork containing nudity was banned, including medical books on abortion and contraception. It was around this time that the term “Comstockery” was coined, referring to his exuberant censorship. It was originally termed by George Bernard Shaw,

who was himself targeted by Comstock. Shaw's play, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1905), was targeted for its themes of prostitution. The maneuver ultimately failed Comstock, and he lost the case. In fact, the negative publicity toward Comstock made the public even more eager to view the play, and its success was astounding. By his death in 1915, Comstock had destroyed over 160 tons of literature, as well as brought about the suicide of fifteen people (nndb.com).

Another great example of scandal and censorship in the United States government is the Pentagon Papers. Released by Daniel Ellsberg, the Pentagon Papers comprised the government's full report on theatrics and conspiracy performed during the Vietnam War. It included information pertaining to the government's plans to invade Vietnam, even though President Johnson repeatedly assured the American people that he had no such intentions. Ellsberg believed that the State department as well as the Defense department had both reached a consensus that there was no real chance for victory in Vietnam, but due to political tactics they could not say so publicly. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara reassured the public that victory was "right around the corner" on numerous occasions, even though we were falling further and further behind. Specific areas of the papers revealed the government knew early on the war would not likely be won, and that continuing would significantly increase the casualty count to levels much greater than stated publicly. Perhaps even more alarming was that the papers showed a pessimistic attitude by the military towards the American people and extreme apathy towards the casualties of the soldiers and civilians. Ellsberg knew that releasing the papers would inevitably cause his conviction and a life sentence in prison. Knowing this, he attempted throughout the 1970s to gain support from a few sympathetic senators, hoping they would present the papers on the senate floor. Ellsberg knew that a senator could not be prosecuted for something he said on record on the senate floor. No senator would accept, forcing

Ellsberg to send the papers to the New York Times himself on June 13, 1971. It was at this time that the Times began publishing the 7,000 page document. However, the Times quickly received an injunction by the Nixon Administration to cease publishing the installments. For 15 days the NY Times was prevented from publishing the Pentagon Papers. The Supreme Court quickly ruled the Nixon Administration's actions to be unconstitutional and allowed the paper to resume publishing. Although the Times didn't release the source of the leak, Ellsberg knew he would soon be discovered, and so he went into hiding. Despite extreme pressure by the Nixon Administration, the FBI was not successful in finding him. This proved to be very embarrassing for not only the Nixon administration but also the previous Johnson and Kennedy administrations. Attorney General John Mitchell immediately sent a telegram to the New York Times, ordering them to cease and desist. When the Times refused, the government brought suit against them, but ultimately lost the Supreme Court case. They were successful, however, in getting an appellate court to order the temporary suspension of publication by the Times. This was a turning point in American history, as it was the first time a newspaper was ever censored by the government, regardless of how short a time it lasted. Ellsberg quickly fired back, releasing the Pentagon Papers to a plethora of other newspapers as well. He was clearly making the statement that if the government was going to censor this they would need an injunction sent to every newspaper in the country. On June 28, 1971, Ellsberg went to the US Attorney's Office in Boston and publicly surrendered. After being taken into custody, he was charged with conspiracy, theft, and espionage. He completely believed that he would spend the rest of his life in prison. Nixon's next step was to discredit Ellsberg, and try to fix some of the damage that had already been done. Nixon sent two men to break into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office, hoping to find something to discredit him with. When they turned up empty handed, the White House flew

CIA commandos to Washington, in hopes of assassinating Ellsberg. Due to the size of the crowd, their mission was doomed from the start. Because of the obscene amount of government malfeasance, this whole scenario led to all charges against Ellsberg being dropped, a president's resignation, and a whole population left feeling alienated by their own government (u-s-history.com).

The X-Files, a former television mystery, had basis in the true saga of the Pentagon Papers (u-s-history.com). The X-Files was fictional entertainment based upon the premise that the truth is out there, and it most likely will not be revealed by the government; it's up to us. All it takes is one alienated loner to, out of a sense of moral justice, bring to light truths hidden from the public eye. One person can make a difference.

Works Cited

angelfire.com/vt2/UnitedStudents/history.html

beaconforfreedom.org/about_project/history.html

"Censorship." Merriam Webster. 2004.

civilliberty.about.com/od/freespeech/tp/History-of-Censorship.htm

firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?item=about_firstamd

nndb.com/people/230/000117876/

u-s-history.com/pages/h1871.html