Franklin Delivers Memorable Dissent Message

Editor's note: Reprinted with permission from Dr. John Hope Franklin, from his talk in Strong Auditorium, Wednesday evening, February 23.

When a conference of college and university people is called to discuss the status of our intellectual freedom and to examine the passions inflected upon us by recent unhappy experiences, that is evidence enough that it is still alive. And one cherishes the hope that, in view of the fact that no objections will be raised over its remuneration at this gathering, it will both be full of vitality and strength again. While we are happy that intellectual freedom is not dead, I am afraid that our joy can hardly be described as unbounded.

The ravages have indeed been loud and the lasting, unhealed condition of this great bulwark of our national integrity presents a father and apostrophe to those who take the trouble to examine it.

But while we properly lament the recent assaults upon this right to think and, of course, of course, is it well to remember that this is by no means a new phenomenon in American life. Too often for our good, we fail to re-examine and re-assess our abysms in our national history, reaching back into the seventeenth century, or whether the categorically denied the right to dissent or the vigorous, if not always successful, advocacy of the kind of conformity that we enjoy today. The har-

ishment of Mrs. Anna Hichlstone to an insipid Rhode Island wilderness was her punishment—

and capital punishment, at that—

for daring to dissent from the offi-


cial line” smothered by the church fathers in Massachusetts.

More than two hundred years later Professor Benjamin S. Lee observed that the same

bureaucracy out of the Uni-

versity of North Carolina because he

were around that he was in sympathy with a new political organization called the Republican

Party.

Through the years, moreover, we have had our alien and sedi-

tion acts, our “red scares,” and our

Committees.

The principal lesson we have learned from these

nightmarish experiences is that when agencies and persons have

erected it impossible to distinguish between healthy, vi-


gorous criticism and dissent on the one hand and unreasonable

subversion on the other.

All through our history some

Americans have upheld the right of individuals to think and to speak and to act as their consciences dictate the hour, so long as their actions did not encroach upon the rights of others. And who can criticize this noble gesture? But it must be added that, for most of us, this gesture has been a luxury item, to be enjoyed in periods of ease and peace and to be sus-

pended as a part of an intellectual surrender program in times of stress and strain.

This has not always resulted in the drugging of a William Lloyd

Garrison through the streets of Boston, because he expressed extreme views against slavery or the banning of a Whig Helper from his native North Carolina because he, too, hated slavery.

It has, nevertheless, occasioned numerous complications on our part with whom we have proudly hailed as a great tradition in American democracy—

the freedom to dissent. Our compromise with freedom to dis-

sent has caused us to bear burdens, literally and figuratively, and at least on one occasion to sentence a book to be burned. It has caused authors to modify their treatment of our history to comply with the wishes of publishers and prospective readers. At times, it has

spoiled a sparsely funded kind of Americanism that always flourishes in a free and lively republic.

In extenuation it should be added that this has been an harmless, these deficiencies in this regard do not stem from illiberal

that is grounded in the under-

lying social and political philo-

sophy and is a part of all of our

speech of national policy, from the Bill of Rights to Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms message, vigor-

ously described as a part of an intellectual surrender program in times of stress and strain.

Our achievements in technology and our successes upon us habits of standardization and conformity have become increasingly difficult for the individual to assert himself in any field, from newspapers and magazines to television, movies, and songs. Jokes that the materialism of this society is such that, in getting and holding a plot of land or a way of gold.

Among our “free enterprise” is sacred, but in our culture it has econo-

mic connotations and suggests a force determination to oppose governmental interference with making profits, unless perhaps the government wants to intervene to guarantee or increase them. Almost never do we applaud innovation when it involves the insistence of a person to think as he pleases or to speak out against prevailing opinions and policies. After all, most do we look for open enterprises as an essential ingredient in intellectual progress.

We simply have not had the time or the inclination to apply our great

assurance in behalf of liberty to the affairs of the individual.

While this preoccupation with developing a stable economic basis for a civilization claims our exclusive materialism, it does not exclude it; and we cannot get away from it. Undoubtedly, it has fos-


terd an anti-intellectualism that has permeated almost every facet of our national life. We have tended to regard the magnificent growth of America as

in some other way, we would be quite willing to have the opportunity for

excessive powers of conformity. They bring about conditions under which our liberties are through unanimity and security through orthodoxy.

When the challenge is from the outside and a crisis arises, the claims of rationality are magnified. But in our culture it lies in the background of every component part of our political, economic, and social life. These crises bring into focus the tendency to equate our past with our present and to consider our way of life in the same terms. We want to define our lives in the same way as others. We demand that all our customs be as universal as possible, and to disregard all local variation.

One does not have to go very far to find examples of this. But there is no easy way out, it is the comfort of our country and our security. In such a society, the pressure of conformity and pressure of uniformity are everywhere. We have some day force them to accept our policies because we have the capacity to do so ourselves.

These traits of our national character—anti-intellectualism, excessive materialism, illiberal-
Franklin Advocates Dissent in Stirring Strong Speech

(Continued from page four) again. There is a great moral and challenge, of fear and open discussion and of a critical examination of our leaders. History teaches us that there can be no honor in the world; there are many who would be heroes; and those societies that set out to establish and defend certain political positions, and will struggle which otherwise merely a reprehensible role and will occlude these wise opinions that will, since the general or private interest is served, is rare or never the whole truth, it is only by the conflict of adver
dictions that this is made. The character of the truth can be known if we are certainly true to the faith. To deny this is to assume our own unthink-
ing, and the prophecy that will, and maybe, and certainly contended, it will be, the manner of a man to feel
ful. We can only endeavor to realize the feeling of its rational goals.

I am afraid that in the past few years those wise words of Mill have been lost in the buffeted by the storms and streams of ideological warfare, we have asserted in the name of freedom a temptation to confuse confusedly extraneous with a particu-
lar material. We have had too few in
tellectuals, South Americans, as the pressing issues of the day.

And when persons have dared discontinue to look at the matter of that, I could say the same, and they have been need for exploration of our dif
dent communities, the usual courage of the human mind.

It is not possible to assess the damage that the current climate has done to our land. I would not profer to consider the issue, but several of our colleges and universities have suffered as they have attempted to pursue the true path of research and development. The harm has been done can hardly be discounted, the world is no longer the same as it once was.

It is true that the world is no longer the same as it once was, but it is also true that those who have been compelled to unmoor their
targets to and as those who may be might 

Given to our institutions of higher learning the pride of allowing university in, after all, a definitely and, in some cases, an executive, is not a business corporation or a private institution, but an institution of social conscience. It is the duty of every university, which is to create and preserve and, indeed, to enhance the freedom of its students.

The present status of the arms race suggests that we cannot bomb our way to a better society. There is a
d a possibility that there are other ways to achieve the aims of reason,
discussion and moral progress. These societies that set out to establish and defend certain political positions, and will struggle which otherwise merely a reprehensible role and will occlude these wise opinions that will, since the general or private interest is served, is rare or never the whole truth, it is only by the conflict of adver
dictions that this is made. The character of the truth can be known if we are certainly true to the faith. To deny this is to assume our own unthink-
ing, and the prophecy that will, and maybe, and certainly contended, it will be, the manner of a man to feel
ful. We can only endeavor to realize the feeling of its rational goals.

I am afraid that in the past few years those wise words of Mill have been lost in the buffeted by the storms and streams of ideological warfare, we have asserted in the name of freedom a temptation to confuse confusedly extraneous with a particu
lar material. We have had too few in
tellectuals, South Americans, as the pressing issues of the day.

And when persons have dared discontinue to look at the matter of that, I could say the same, and they have been need for exploration of our dif

dent communities, the usual courage of the human mind.

It is not possible to assess the damage that the current climate has done to our land. I would not profer to consider the issue, but several of our colleges and universities have suffered as they have attempted to pursue the true path of research and development. The harm has been done can hardly be discounted, the world is no longer the same as it once was, but it is also true that those who have been compelled to unmoor their
targets to and as those who may be
John Franklin Speaks on Dissent

(Continued from page six)

teria were added to that already present. Rather, it should be regarded as an increasing apprehension over the condition of our freedom and its effect on the intellectual vitality and integrity of the nation. It should be remembered that we have always tended to be deficient in our respect for dissent, because of our historic affinity for materialism, anti-intellectualism, and conformity.

Even before our recent unhappy experiences we needed to re-examine this whole problem with a view to strengthening the position of those who assume the role of critics and of those devoted to things of the mind. If such a re-examination is more urgent today than it was five years ago, it is not so much because of the current assaults on freedom as because of the continuing need for the balance and wisdom that discussion and difference will provide.

The role of those of us who are members of colleges and universities seems clear. If we appreciate the historic function of our institutions in man’s struggle to free his mind from the shackles of ignorance and superstition, if we value those factors that have made our institutions vital and constructive forces in the community, we will insist on their right to be free. Only in an atmosphere of freedom to seek and find, to evaluate and accept or discard, to discuss and dissent can they remain true to the motto that must ever be theirs, “To seek the truth in order to deliver man from his own sins and weaknesses.”