# 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 ravages inflicted upon it 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 obsequies will be said over its remains at this gathering, it will soon 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 real; and the tattered, unhealthy condition of this great bulwark of our national integrity presents a rather sad spectacle to those who take the trouble to examine it.

But while we properly lament the recent assaults upon this right to think and, if need be, dissent, it is well to remember that this is by no means a new phenomenon in American life. Too often for our own good, we fail to remind ourselves of numerous instances in our national history, reaching back into the seventeenth century, either of the categorical denial of the right to dissent or the vigorous, if not always successful, advocacy of the kind of conformity that we abhor today. The banishment of Mrs. Anne Hitchinson to an inhospitale Rhode Island wilderness was her punishment—and capital punishment, at that—for daring to dissent from the official "line" enunciated by the church fathers in Massachusetts. More than two hundred years later Professor Benjamin Hedrick was summarily thrown out of the University of North Carolina because the word got 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 sedition acts, our "red scares," and our Lusk Committees. **The principal lesson we have learned from these nightmarish experiences is that when agencies and persons have undertaken to sit in judgment on the thoughts and views of their fellows, they have found it impossible to distinguish between healthy, vigorous criticism and dissent on the one hand and treasonable 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 directed them, 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 quietude and ease and to be suspended as a part of an intellectual austerity program in times of stress and strain.

This has not always resulted in the dragging of a William Lloyd Garrison through the streets of Boston because he expressed extreme views against slavery or the banning of a Hinton Helper from his native North Carolina because he, too, hated slavery. It has, nevertheless, occasioned numerous compromises on our part with what we have proudly hailed as a great tradition in American democracy — the freedom to dissent. Our compromise with freedom to dissent has caused us to burn books, literally and figuratively, and at least on one occasion to sentence a book to be whipped. 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 spawned a specious brand of Americanism that shouts down as un-American any new ideas or concepts that challenge the status quo.

In extenuation it should be said that happily our deficiencies in this regard do not stem from illiberalism that is grounded in the underlying social and political philosophy of the nation. All of our great statements of national policy, from the Bill of Rights to Roosevelt's Four Freedoms message, vigorously support the right of persons to think and to act without fear of recrimination. And although we have had our periods when the cries against dissent and non-conformity were loud and vehement, they have, for the most part, been superficial and transitory. But, as Professor Commager has observed, our basic freedoms are not as basic as we like to think; just as our passion for individualism is not as passionate as we suppose.

**We have, indeed, been much too preoccupied with other things to care deeply and seriously about things of the mind, spirit, and conscience. We have had a continent to span and populate, a rich, virgin land to exploit, and a place to win in the sun. Thus, we have been largely material-minded; and even the great watchwords of freedom we utter have been geared to our material well-being. Among us the term "individualism" is sacred, but the notion grew up in a context where its meaning suggested bravery in the face of possible loss of life and limb and stubbornness in getting and holding a plot of land or a vein of gold.**

**Among us "free enterprise" is sacred, but in our culture it has economic connotations and suggests a fierce determination to oppose governmental interference with making profits, unless perchance the government wants to intervene to guarantee or increase them. Almost never do we applaud individualism when it involves the insistence of a person to think as he pleases or to speak out against prevailing opinions and policies. Almost never do we look upon free enterprise as an essential ingredient in intellectual progress. We simply have not had the time or the inclination to apply our great utterances in behalf of liberty to things of the mind.**

While this preoccupation with developing a strong economic basis for a civilization explains our excessive materialism, it does not excuse it; and great harm has come from it. Undoubtedly, it has fostered an anti-intellectualism that has permeated almost every facet of our national life. In trying to dissociate education from life we have glorified the self-made man and have tended to regard the magnificent growth of America as a kind of super "Operation Bootstrap."

Too often we have measured achievement solely in quantitative terms and have given little recognition either to quality per se or to mental and spiritual forces in evaluating progress. We have equated "best" with "biggest" and "most powerful." We have equated "beauty" with "garishness" and "gaudiness." Even in education we have equated "learning" and "intelligence" with "size" and "quantity." Thus, a woman from Ohio could extend genuine sympathy to the British professor when she learned that the benighted land from which he came did not have as **many** colleges and universities as the great, big, powerful, rich Buckeye state.

But this trait of anti-intellectualism has become more serious as it has come actually to deride true learning and knowledge, to caricature those devoted to the pursuit of truth, and to demand a standardization of life and a conformity of thought that may ultimately destroy even the materialism that we prize so highly. Too many "practical-minded, hard-headed, red-blooded" Americans fail to blush when they insist that the artist, writer, or philosopher has no virility, no vitality, that he is not practical. Too many of them refer to the man of learning as an "egghead" and delight in seeing the professor or the thinker portrayed as a daffy, half-dazed creature who obviously could not pass a sanity hearing. This can hardly be regarded as a healthy condition in a nation where people speak glibly, but with slight appreciation for its implications, of achieving peace and freedom in the minds of men!

Our achievements in technology and mass production have imposed upon us habits of standardization and conformity which make it increasingly difficult for the individual to assert himself in any way. We look at the same picture magazines and television shows; and we go around parroting the jokes that the masterminds of last night's variety program created. We read the same newspapers and book digests; and we go around agreeing wholeheartedly with the editorial in the local paper that is too frequently syndicated by a big news agency to editors who have neither the industry nor the talent to write editorials for themselves.

Of all the sins of a highly materialistic social order, habits of standardization and conformity are the deadliest. Conformity is the easy way out, it is the comfortable rut, it is the wall that provides security. In such a society the provincialism and insularity of conformity breed intolerance and insulation. Members of such a society gradually come to regard differences as abnormal and dissent as heresy. There was a time when our politicians lacking in originality in appealing for popular support, felt called upon to apologize for not having been born in a log cabin. One can only hope that the pressure of conformity will not some day force them to apologize for having the capacity to think for themselves.

These traits of our national character — anti-intellectualism, excessive materialism, and tyrannical conformity — daily detract from our greatness as a people and a nation. But it is not until our position is challenged and crises arise that we realize the extent of the damage they have done. These crises flush to the surface the fears, doubts, and misgivings that are the inevitable results of long years of uncritical acceptance of every component part of our political, economic, and social order. These crises bring into focus the complacency and indifference that are the by-products of conformity. They bring about conditions in which we seek strength through unanimity and security through orthodoxy.

When the challenge is from the outside and a crisis is created by the claims of another way of life, we huddle together as frightened children and dare anyone speak out in criticism of our way of life lest it give comfort to our adversaries. Worse still is the increasing pressure on everyone to get up and testify regarding his hatred for other ways of life; and he who does not do so is suspect.

From this state of existence it is only a few steps to the point where critics become traitors and other cultures become ipso facto sinister things. Under such circumstances, as John Milton pointed out centuries ago, when the streaming waters of the fountain of Truth do not flow in perpetual progression, they "sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition."

I am mindful—and I am confident that all of you are mindful—of real dangers that may beset the course of any nation or people. I am aware of the necessity of meeting challenges fearlessly and courageously. And in the face of real danger that person who would not rise to meet the danger would be unworthy of the protection and opportunities his country has afforded him. But as long as it is possible to say so, one would hope that a distinguishing feature of this country will be the ability of its people to debate the issues of the day, to differ as vigorously as possible, and to dissent if their consciences advise them to do so.

**One does not have to make concessions to other ideologies or to think or act traitorously to rec-**

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# Franklin Advocates Dissent In Stirring Strong Speech

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**ognize the value, in times of crisis and challenge, of free and open discussion and of a critical examination of our own way of life.** History teaches us that there can be no lasting security without freedom. And those societies that actively encourage freedom—even to dissent—have the best chance to preserve and, indeed, to enhance their security.

The present status of the arms race suggests that we cannot bomb our way into freedom and security; and the implications seem to be that the way of life that promotes reason, tolerance, freedom, and the opportunities for choice will have the clear advantage in a struggle which otherwise remains merely a reprehensible and vulgar testimony of the perfidy of man.

It is well for us to remember the admonitions of John Stuart Mill regarding the value of permitting the advocacy of any and all opinions, regardless of how untenable and objectionable. "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 . . . 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 . . . 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 the most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension of feeling of its rational grounds."

I am afraid that in the past few years these wise words of Mill have not been heeded. As we have been buffeted by the stresses and strains of ideological warfare, we have succumbed to the ever present temptation to confuse fearless criticism with disloyalty or subversion. We have had too few instances of free and open debate on the pressing issues of the day.

And when persons have dared dissent from the overwhelming unanimity that has characterized our expressed opinions and policies, they have suffered embarrassment that has ranged from imputations of insanity to accusations of treason. It cannot be said that we have examined our positions objectively and freely. And the price we have paid for intellectual pacification when there was the most urgent need for exploration of our differences has been the sacrifice of the moral courage of the human mind.

It is not possible to assess the damage that the current climate has done to intellectual freedom in our land. I would not presume to estimate the harm that our colleges and universities have suffered as they have attempted to pursue the truth wherever it would lead. That harm has been done can hardly be denied; and it is no occasion for unmixed rejoicing to say, as one optimist recently said, that college and university people have been eloquent and courageous in the defense of their rights during the last five years.

Of course they have, although there was room for even greater eloquence and courage. They suffered a frontal assault by the anti-intellectual elements in the country, their backs were ot the wall, and it was do or die for many individuals, institutions, and educational foundations. Various student groups, moreover, have vigorously insisted on their right to be exposed to competing ideas and opinions so that they could weigh them and gain maturity of judgment. There have also been praiseworthy statements by professors and university administrators.

To focus attention on such developments is to run the risk of overlooking instances of irreparable harm that may have been done to our institutions of higher learning by the assults on them. A university is, after all, a delicately balanced, sensitive mechanism. It is not a business corporation or a trade union, though at times in our materialistic age it has taken on some of the characteristics of both. It cannot boast of many persons who can be counted among the toughest, most hardheaded members of our society.

When attacks, frontal or oblique, are launched on our colleges and universities, who among us can say that a courageous answer, here and there, is evidence of the ineffectiveness of the attack or the vitality of the institution? What of those worthy, but timid souls who run for cover to get out of the line of fire? What of the words and opinions that go unuttered because of the fear of reprisal or the fear of the loss of reputation or position? Mill summed up the possible damages done by attacks on intellectual freedom when he said, "Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral?"

Who among us can say how many student organizations have gone out of existence because they became known as dissidents? I wish I knew. I have seen and heard enough, however, to know that most students groups in this category have been completely liquidated! And surely no one can say how many such organizations never came into existence because its would-be founders knew that they would jeopardize their opportunities for later service and employment if they discussed controversial questions freely and entertained views that were unorthodox. How outraged the members of university communities will become if we continue to attack them, no man can tell. We can only say that no good can come from it.

As the distinguished president of this university said several years ago: "The anger and disaffection of the intellectual once aroused, are a sword against which neither the purse of the rich nor the law of the mighty can ultimately prevail. A great society never declines but the signs are first plain in either the indifference or the hostility of its intellectuals."

Yet, we have come to the point where some of our institutions are entrusting to office clerks the tasks of keeping loyalty records of students to be attached to their transcripts and employment folders. We have arrived at the point where several of our colleges and universities, including our two great service institutions, cannot debate the question of the recognition of Red China. They give as their excuse that since it is the policy of our government not to recognize Red China, it would be improper to debate the question. This is something of a yardstick that indicates how far we have gone toward the point of denying freedom of dissent. We can no longer play games, intellectual games, that is, in our colleges.

As the president of my own institution, largely supported by the federal government, remarked, "In a democracy it is the citizens' responsibility to continue to discuss and re-examine important questions even after public policy has been determined, for it cannot be regarded as a rigid, unchanging thing." He told the university debaters that if they would be true to their roles as seekers for truth and as good citizens, it was not only their privilege but their duty to debate the question of the recognition of Red China or any other controversial public question.

What I have said about the ravages that the principle of freedom of dissent has experienced in recent years should not be interpreted as alarm. Indeed, it would be unfortunate if any more hys-

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# John Franklin Speaks on Dissent

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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."**