"Knowledge starts as offendedness": Jonathan Rauch on Free Speech

Video Transcript

Rauch: Since you'll never be able to go find everything offensive and trigger-warn all of it -- that's like cleaning the sand off the beach -- why not just have one trigger warning? It would go on page one of every college catalog or every college website, and it would say, "WARNING. At this university students could be exposed, at any moment, without warning, to ideas, comments, readings, or other materials that they find shocking, offensive, absurd, annoying, racist, sexist, homophobic, discriminatory, or generally obnoxious. We call this education."

My name is Jonathan Rauch. I'm a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a big fan of FIRE for 15 years.

You know, I've been a freedom of speech activist for as far back as I can remember, but I really got most involved in 1989 during the Rushdie affair, when Ayatollah Khomeini announced a fatwa calling for the death of Salman Rushdie based on a novel he had written.

And the response from the west was watery; it was weak. People weren't sure what they were defending. Their responses were kind of legalistic, where a lot of people said, "Well, look, he did write a very offensive book, so what should he expect?" That kind of thing.

And it seemed to me that there needed to be a more deeply rooted, robust defense of the ethic that says no, that's the whole point. That's what intellectuals are for. They're there to challenge received wisdom, even if it's received wisdom of millions of devout Muslims and the Ayatollah Khomeini.

And I thought, you know, a book that sort of gets to the bottom of this could make a difference. And I quit my job at that point and started work on that book.

Someone just asked me this question: Why do I think free speech is so important? And it is such a basic question, it's very hard to answer. It's one of these things we almost never ask ourselves. There are tons of reasons, but for me they boil down to the fact that the open society is

where we get our knowledge and where we get our opportunities to flourish as human beings and to be ourselves, something that, as a gay man, has meant a lot to me.

And all of that depends on the ability to think, both by ourselves and with others. And that's critical exchange; that's free speech.

The whole point of universities is to develop knowledge. That is the one place where it is most important to have critical exchange, where every opinion should be subject to testing all the time. It's the worst place in the world to have an ethic where you're worried about being punished for what you believe or for being offensive, because knowledge starts as offendedness.

As H. L. Mencken once said, "There's pretty much never been a great idea that didn't begin as a heresy that offended someone." So I think colleges, especially, have an obligation to be free speech environments, not just one little area, but the whole place.

You know, I've seen a fair amount of campus speech codes over the years, and they're pretty competitive for most absurd. So it's hard to say, but I do have a most absurd provision of campus speech codes. My all-time favorite is "inappropriately directed laughter." I've committed that one myself any number of times.

Since the last 20 years or so, I think we've seen kind of a burrowing in of the speech code mentality. You know, back in the early 90s, when I was first writing on this, there was a very frontal, direct kind of ideological challenge to free speech, saying it hurts minorities. It said things like, "Hateful words are like bullets." They talked about verbal violence. They were trying to go root and branch after the ethic of free speech and open communication.

You don't see that very much anymore. Now it's much more of a kind of bureaucratic furniture, where these campuses all have these speech codes, and they think they have to have the speech codes because what federal bureaucrats tell them. So it's kind of bureaucrats talking to each other, thinking they have to do all this stuff and have all these speech codes. It's become less ideological and more mechanical.

And I don't know if that's better or worse. Free speech is not only minorities' best friend. In some ways it's our only reliable friend. If we can't speak in a majority culture, if we lose our voice, it is so easy to oppress us.

The way minorities get real rights and real freedom is by fighting hate and bigotry, and that's grounded almost uniformly in ignorance and fear. And

if we're forced underground, if we can't show who we are, if we can't make our arguments, we are literally helpless. This is why I believe that hate speech laws are not our friend.

FIRE in 15 years has, all by itself, made a fundamental change in the culture of universities by providing counterarguments and pushing back against kind of brain dead bureaucracy that doesn't really get free speech, and by empowering students and faculty who want to take a stand. And that's been a game changer. I've seen it. I've lived through both sides of this, and I want to tell you the side with FIRE is better.