

Freedom of Expression Takes a Hit

By J. B. Leftwich

What ever happened to freedom of expression, a staple of this once-great republic where citizens - unknowns or celebrities -- could vent their thoughts without fear of reprisal?

Apparently, freedom of expression has vanished along with other freedoms vanished or vanquished with the advance of political correctness that dictates immunity to sectors of our population but denies the same exercise to the others.

Rush Limbaugh, bombastic and pompous though he may be, was forced out of his job with ESPN for expressing an opinion - an opinion, mind you, about the eastern news media. His opinion: the media and the professional football powers are eager to bolster a certain black quarterback who, according to Rush, is overrated.

Maybe, Donovan McNabb is overrated. I don't know. He certainly has impressive credentials including the year he was a senior at Syracuse when he scared the living daylights out of Tennessee as it marched to the national championship.

Most football pundits and media types run counter to Rush's opinion. But theirs are opinions which they have a right to express and do express.

In today's intolerant atmosphere, Rush Limbaugh should have known better. It's a sad commentary that in this country built on freedom concepts, you no longer have the right of expression. Religious or racial opinions, right or wrong, must be expressed guardedly. Offend the pressure groups and you are on the clean-out-your-desk express.

Reverse the circumstances and you create ho-hum response. Suppose Rush had said Peyton Manning was an over-rated quarterback whom the news media and the NFL protected. Would there have been an outcry? Do you think pressure groups would have weighed in? Foolish questions.

Rush Limbaugh directed his criticism toward the NFL and the news media, a fact that is obscured in the mad rush to condemn him. From the heated reaction, you would have thought he had targeted blacks as a race.

It is the "gotcha" syndrome. Liberals have awaited the day when Rush Limbaugh, foremost conservative spokesman, would self-destruct. It was a day of glee for them - the day Rush fumbled and Arnold admitted groping. It was almost a day of atonement for all they had endured during the administration of a president who had to admit he did more than grope.

What the leadership of racial minority groups fail to grasp is the important side effect that comes from the national focus on one sector of our racial mix. Crusading for a divisive cause further detours that sector from blending into the main stream.

“Rush's resignation from ESPN may stop the dogs from barking at his heels and all this may soon be forgotten -- but it shouldn't be. Hyper-censorship about anything in any way involving race is a danger to this whole society, on matters far more weighty than football.

“A highly developed and highly rewarded racial grievance industry benefits from its ability to intimidate, silence and extort. But there is always a price to be paid. That price is paid by American society as a whole, but especially by minority communities that the grievance hustlers claim to be helping.

“Even wrong ideas have a contribution to make, when they provoke open discussions and investigations that end up with our knowing and understanding more than we knew or understood before. People's lives are being saved today by medicines based on a knowledge of chemistry that developed out of alchemy, a centuries-old crazy idea of turning lead into gold.

“A long time ago, it was said that the truth will set you free. But today the idea seems to be that only the right spin will set you free. And the right spin of course means the left spin.”

The above quotes were written by Thomas Sowell in his nationally syndicated newspaper column.

Even newspapers often are censors. Some newspapers buy Sowell's column and, fearful of offending a minority, never publish it.

It should be noted here that Sowell, regarded as one of the country's foremost thinkers, is black.

Favored athletes often receive good press. *Tennessean* columnist Larry Woody wrote of his desire for Jefferson Street Joe Gilliam's success as Gilliam competed against Terry Bradshaw for starting quarterback with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Presently, I am “desirous” - Rush's word - of Byron Leftwich succeeding as quarterback of the Jags. I also acknowledge a fondness for Steve McNair. And Eddie George, a first class act.

The question of whether Limbaugh's charge is true or not will remain in limbo. It's an untouchable subject. Also edging toward limbo is the broader concept of freedom of _expression. Any doubts? Ask Rush Limbaugh or the Dixie Chicks.

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