

Freedom of Speech Is Necessary — and Fragile

Two party-states, one lesson: when speech dies, the list is read aloud.

Li and Sun Private Foundation · September 2026

A free country is not a country in which everyone is kind. It is a country in which a man may say that the ruler is wrong, and the worst legal consequence is argument, not a cellar. That is what freedom of speech is for. It is not decoration. It is the alarm that tells you the rest of the Constitution is still attached. When the alarm is ripped out, the other rights do not linger. They follow it down the stairs.

Two filmed and remembered episodes make the point without theory. In Moscow in the 1930s, the Party became the only permitted voice, and even dying men recited the Leader's name in the hope that liturgy would spare a child. In Baghdad in 1979, a new president read names in a packed hall, on camera, and made the party slogan the last public sentence a condemned comrade was allowed to speak. Neither episode is a curiosity of foreign cruelty. Each is a demonstration of what happens when speech is no longer a right against power, but a performance *for* power.

What speech actually protects

The American First Amendment is often sold as a lifestyle: say what you feel. That is the least of it. Speech, in a constitutional order, is the right to contradict the people who can jail you. It is the right to say the official story is a lie before the lie hardens into a list. It is the right of a minority of one to remain a citizen after he has offended the room.

Without that right, elections are theater, courts are clerks, and education is catechism. A people that cannot criticize its government cannot know whether the government is still theirs. Rights and duties come in pairs; speech is the duty's precondition as much as the right's exercise. You cannot contribute to a republic you are not allowed to describe honestly. You cannot assimilate into an order whose public language is only applause.

Speech is also how a country stays joinable. An immigrant who fled a party-state did not cross an ocean to learn a new hymn to a new Leader. He came because, here, the Constitution is supposed to sit above the man. If that stops being true in practice, the country he chose has begun to rhyme with the country he left.

Stalin: the hymn at the wall

The Soviet Union did not lack words. It drowned in them: newspapers, congresses, slogans painted on factory walls. What it lacked was speech that could cost the ruler anything. By the Great Purge of 1937–38, the Party had absorbed the public square. To doubt the line was not error. It was wrecking, espionage, “enemy of the people.” Confession became the only remaining genre.

High officials learned that even loyalty was not a shield. Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Iona Yakir, Ieronim Uborevich, and other Red Army commanders were condemned in June 1937 and shot within hours. A later official story—Voroshilov repeating it to colleagues, recorded in Khrushchev-era rehabilitation files—held that some of the condemned shouted “Long live Stalin!” and “Long live Communism!” as they died. Historians treat that shout as a retelling, not a stenographic last word. Whether they cried the slogan from faith, from terror, or from a last bargain for their families, the meaning is the same. The only permitted sentence at the edge of the grave was the Leader’s name.

The family bargain was not a rumor. Grigory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev confessed in 1936 after being given to understand that confession might spare their lives and their kin. They were shot. Sons, wives, and sisters were later arrested or executed. Nikolai Bukharin wrote Stalin from the cell, begging not to be shot, asking for poison instead of a bullet, signing himself “your wretched Nikolai.” He was shot in March 1938. His wife went to the camps; his infant son grew up in an orphanage. Nikolai Yezhov, who had run the peak of the Terror, said before his own secret trial in 1940 that he would die with Stalin’s name on his lips. He was shot. The machine ate its operators.

Stalin’s system made speech into a hostage. NKVD practice treated wives and “lineage” as fair game. Relatives of the executed were often told the dead man had been sentenced to “ten years without right of correspondence.” The public language of the state was a lie so complete that even grief had to use the official form. That is what the end of free speech looks like when it is finished: not silence only, but compulsory poetry.

Saddam: the list in the hall

On 22 July 1979, days after he pushed aside President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, Saddam Hussein packed senior Baath Party officials into Al-Khuld Hall in Baghdad and ordered the session filmed. He announced a “Syrian plot.” Muhyi Abdul-Hussein Mashhadi was produced to confess and to name names. Saddam then read sixty-eight alleged co-conspirators. Each man had to stand, recite the party slogan, and walk out of the hall. They were loaded onto trucks.

In the days that followed, twenty-two were sentenced to death, including five members of the Revolutionary Command Council. Some of those who had remained in their seats were handed rifles and told to shoot the condemned, so that survival itself became complicity. The camera recorded applause and tears. Saddam wiped his own eyes. The tape was circulated so that the country would learn the new constitution: the Leader reads the list.

This was not a parliament checking a president. It was a party hearing its own death warrant spoken as minutes. The slogan at the door was the cousin of “Long live Stalin.” It was not belief. It was the last public sound a man was allowed to make before the trucks. Those still seated understood the lesson without a lecture. Clap. Weep if the Leader weeps. Do not be the next name.

Saddam's hall is useful because it is visible. Stalin's cellars were hidden; Baghdad turned on the lights. The world can watch a roomful of powerful men discover, in real time, that their voices belong to someone else. That is fragility made plain. Speech did not decline by degrees in that auditorium. It ended when the first name was read and nobody could say, without dying, "this is a lie."

Why the right is fragile

Speech is fragile because it is the first target and the easiest to rename. No regime announces that it has abolished the truth. It announces that wreckers, traitors, racists, or enemies of the people have abused a privilege. The hall still makes noise. Newspapers still print. What has died is the right to contradict the list.

Fragility has a sequence. First, certain subjects become expensive: the Leader, the Party, the official past. Then the expensive subjects become shameful. Then they become criminal. Then the people who remember the old permission police the new silence themselves, because they have families. Stalin did not need every citizen to love him. He needed every citizen to know that a wrong sentence could buy a child a camp. Saddam did not need every Ba'athist to believe the Syrian plot. He needed every man in the hall to stand when called.

A second fragility is applause. In both rooms the survivors clapped. Applause in a terrorized assembly is not consent. It is camouflage. Societies that confuse noise with freedom are already half disarmed. A republic that measures health by how loudly the approved opinion is repeated has begun to borrow the party-state's instruments without yet borrowing its name.

A third fragility is the hostage. When speech is punished through kin, career, or exile rather than through an open statute, the law can still look decent on paper. The First Amendment can remain in the book while a man learns that honest sentences cost his children a future. Formal protection without social and legal courage is a plaque on a locked door.

What the American settlement is for

The United States did not invent the desire to speak. It invented—more exactly, it wrote down and then fought to keep—a rule that speech about public things is not a gift of the government. Congress shall make no law abridging it. The President is not a priest. The Party, if one exists, is not a church with a cellar. You may keep your heritage in the private room. You may not be required to chant a Leader in the public one.

That rule is why people leave party-states. It is also why the rule must be taught as a duty and not only worn as a costume. A country that calls ordinary patriotism, merit, or law-and-order "forbidden speech" is playing with the same fuse, even if the cellar has not been dug. A country that treats the Constitution as optional when the speaker is unfashionable has already told the next Saddam what the hall is for.

None of this requires saintly Founders or a childlike faith that Americans never silence anyone. It requires a standard. The standard is not “no one may be offended.” The standard is that the state may not empty a room by reading names, and private power should not be allowed to imitate that method until the legal right is a dead letter. The Soviet hymn and the Ba■th slogan are the exhibit. The opposite exhibit is a citizen who can say the ruler is a fool and go home to supper.

The Foundation’s use of the lesson

Li and Sun Private Foundation is an educational foundation that promotes immigrant assimilation into the American Republic. Assimilation, in that sentence, includes this: learn why the public order is built so that no official may own your last sentence. Heritage may remain in private life. The public ceiling is the Constitution. Rights pair with duties. Benefits pair with devotion. Speech is how those pairs stay honest.

We do not ask anyone to forget the country he fled. We ask him to notice what he fled. Stalin’s wall and Saddam’s hall are not foreign color. They are the demonstration that a system without protected contradiction will, in time, make even its servants recite. A man who has seen that, and who then treats American speech as a toy or a weapon only for his own faction, has not yet entered the Republic. He has only changed stages.

Freedom of speech is necessary because without it there is no way to say that the list is false before the list is read. It is fragile because the people with the list always have a reason, and the people in the seats always have families. The American task is not to admire the First Amendment as furniture. It is to keep the cellar locked and the hall unable to become a court. Keep your name. Keep your dead. Do not learn the hymn.