

How did the Cold War affect American's freedom of speech, political activity, and dissent?

Name

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Definition 'Cold War' refers to the period in the world history which was marked by extreme geopolitical, ideological, and economic strife between the United States of America and the former Soviet Union (USSR) in the second half of the 20th century. It began in 1947 soon after the World War II had ended. Both the USA and the USSR had fought alongside each other during WWII and later emerged as the world superpowers. However, the desire to wield maximum control of the global affairs almost set these countries into a war-path. On the one hand, the USA sought to spread democracy, while the USSR, on the other hand, sought to spread communism. This conflict ranged from mere subtle espionage in major cities to open warfare in places such as the Vietnam or Afghanistan. The Cold War was thus pegged on anti-communism sentiment that ended up curtailing the America's freedom of speech, altered the foreign policies, and discouraged the voices of dissent.

The Cold War period is characterized as one of the most repressive times in the history of the U.S. where the freedom of speech was significantly subjugated. In an effort to bring to light cases of espionage, root out disloyal citizens, and the threat of communist spreading across the world, the U.S. government rolled out a number of programs that instilled so much fear among the Americans. At the centre of the repressive policies was the anti-Communist Senator Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was in charge of the House Un-American Activities Committee that was intended to investigate acts of subversion that threatened the U.S. constitution (Michaels, 2017). This committee inadvertently began looking into suspicious individuals within the federal government either directly, or indirectly supporting communist's agenda. Those holding public offices were thus required to take loyalty oaths as one of the measures to test or deter Communist sympathizers. The loyalty program later became part and parcel of Presidential Executive Orders (Athans, 2002). The end result was of this loyalty program is that many Americans became afraid or discouraged of raising their thoughts or debating outside what was regarded as the norm. The "red scare"

and fear of contradicting the norm made many Americans afraid of ‘exercising’ freedom of speech as embodied in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The right to openly and publicly express ones idea were significantly hampered as one could easily be mistaken or linked to communist sympathizer.

The Cold War equally affected the American politics to a greater extent. The U.S. presidents under the full backing of the congress set out to revise their foreign policies so as to come up with policies that would protect their global interests. For example, President Eisenhower minimized domestic government spending in order to support foreign military missions that sought to stop the spread of communism. In addition, more money was saved and invested in national defence. J.F. Kennedy’s New Frontier promoted patriotism and vision of a better and powerful America among the youths. The American foreign policies significantly shifted in the wake of an increasingly fortified military industrial complex. In fact, Eisenhower in his farewell speech, rightly predicted a situation where the growing military-industrial complex would one day master the American political thinking. This became true during the Vietnam War.

Similar to the limitation to the freedom of speech that was witnessed at the start of the Cold War; the voices of dissent were equally silenced. The “red fear” had generally been used as propaganda to silence any person who might express a contrary opinion to that and the latter was considered as the norm. Political dissent was generally discouraged during the cold war. J. Edgar Hoover, who was the then FBI director, was always quick to link any form of protest to communist subversion. This also included the civil rights demonstrations which were under the leadership of Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. In a number of occasions, Hoover referred to Dr King as a communist, and worked so hard to disqualify him as the leader of the civil rights movement (Aby, 2009). The prolonged presence of the United States military in Vietnam is partly attributed to the silencing of voices of dissent. President Lyndon Johnson

(1963-1969) widely quoted the containment policy in an effort to justify U.S.'s presence in Vietnam. Similarly, beginning from President Truman all the way to President Nixon, their actions in Vietnam were anchored on the basic principle that, as they believed, was shared by the "attentive public" (Gelb and Betts, 2001). It was believed that the war in Vietnam must never be lost, but, instead, the U.S. should remain involved in war. Such principles were basically used to silence the voices of dissent.

In conclusion, the Cold War affected the freedom of speech by linking those who express their dissenting voices to communist sympathizers. This was especially propagated by the "Red fear" that was largely promoted by the anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy and his team of supporters. The Cold War also prompted the various American administrations to alter most of their foreign policies. This included reducing domestic spending and investing more on military and defence, and, logically, led to increasing of public discontent.

References

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