
1978 BCALA Statement on “The Speaker”

We, the undersigned members of the American Library Association, have requested this opportunity to make a statement because we believe that neither the Executive Board, the Council, nor the membership feels or subscribes to what we perceive “The Speaker” to be representing in the name of the Association. In the heat of discussion immediately after viewing the film at the annual conference last summer, there was not enough time to gain proper perspective, especially on a film that is as subtle as this one. It is important to us and to the ongoing welfare of the Association for you to know how we feel about “The Speaker.” It would be easier for us to remain silent, but that would mean acting as if the issue were either resolved or dead, or that it does not matter. It is no insignificant charge that we make: first, that the central thesis of “The Speaker” is counterfeit and falsely identified as a First Amendment issue; and second, that the example chosen to illustrate the principle of free speech is presented in a highly unsuitable and irresponsible fashion, insensitive, and in poor taste and skillfully racist.

“The Speaker” is predicated on the thesis that if the high school Current Events Club does not invite the controversial character, Dr. James Boyd, to address the student body in the last lecture of the year-long series he would *ipso facto*, be deprived of the right of freedom of expression. The students are allowed to labor under the belief that the First Amendment *obligates* them to select Dr. Boyd because of the controversial nature of his views, which center on the black race as mentally inferior to the white race. This supposed obligation to the First Amendment continues to be the central focus of the film.

Dr. Boyd has come to the attention of the Current Events Club precisely because he has been publicly exercising his First Amendment rights to the fullest. Under the protection of the law he has been free to express himself verbally, to write and publish his controversial views, and to seek as many audiences and sponsors as he wishes. Thus, he has already enjoyed the benefits

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guaranteed in the law. The First Amendment pledges to protect freedom of expression but not to supply an audience. If the film's interpretation of the First Amendment were applied, it would follow that wherever Dr. Boyd's name is suggested there would be no choice but to *invite him*, for otherwise he would be deprived of his freedom of expression.

The real issue of "The Speaker" is not Dr. Boyd's First Amendment rights and the supposed obligation to invite him to speak; that contrived controversy is a deception and is the cause of the impossible confusion. The real issue is, first, the denial of the Current Events Club members' right to invite the speaker they have decided on, and second – the heart of the matter – whether or not the school's cancellation of the students' choice could be properly justified. Victoria Dunn's [teacher advisor to the club] one concern throughout the film is her claim for Dr. Boyd; her attention is riveted on this overriding interest to the extent that no matter what action takes place, her comments and protests never vary. Under her guidance the Club members are fighting for *Dr. Boyd's* right to be invited to lecture, instead of fighting to uphold their *own right* to invite the speaker of their choice. Because everyone had accepted the authority of the history teacher on the matter of Dr. Boyd's right to the invitation, the school was faced with making the agonizing choice between violating the proposed speaker's First Amendment rights and violating *personal* integrity and feelings of human decency by sponsoring his presentation. The pity and irony are that the school's act of canceling the speaker was never evaluated in the light of actual court rulings that define the school's obligation in a situation like this. As a consequence, no one ever learned how the First Amendment actually applied to this particular situation. It is incredible that the central issue of the film is overlooked completely, never addressed.

We maintain that "The Speaker" is fraudulent in nature because it rests upon a misrepresentation of the First Amendment; that the interpretation set forth is a manipulation of the First Amendment to deftly force the ordinary program-planning function of choosing a speaker to conform to imaginary First Amendment strictures. This distortion completely discredits and invalidates "The Speaker." This fundamental error, established at the beginning of the film, is never corrected. The twist of the truth is so subtle that it glides by easily and is woven into a sequence of superficially logical arguments and action to support the deception. Our second charge is that the example chosen to dramatize the First Amendment is unsuitable and presented in a highly irresponsible fashion; that underneath its smooth, superficial plausibility and sophistication, "The Speaker" is insensitive, in poor taste, and subtly, but strongly racist.

The great many librarians viewing "The Speaker" at the 1977 Detroit Conference sense that there was something fundamentally wrong about the film, even if they could not immediately identify all the reasons. It takes a while to sort out the half-truths and untruths, amidst the web of subtle nuances. Dr. Boyd's

thesis presumes the superiority of the white members of the audience and their in-born right and authority to judge the mental fitness of other races. The black students would become invisible men and women in such an audience, while their erstwhile peers are being instructed in the cardinal principles of white supremacy. The school's consent to these terms would result in the students being categorized and *addressed* as "superior" or "inferior."

The purpose of a lecture series such as the one sponsored by the Current Events Club is to broaden the students' knowledge and understanding of significant issues that confront the nation and the world, in an effort to help make them capable of forming intelligent opinions. None of the lectures can be comprehensive; the expectation is that each will be a highly informative introduction and overview, including an explanation of various schools of thought, especially in controversial areas, in the context of the overall subject or problem.

The protest will immediately arise that we cannot deny or ignore the fact that we live in a world where the belief in white supremacy exists, that black people have no right to declare this unholy subject to be the one area that may not be discussed; and that the subject should be put out on the table to be dealt with like any other idea. We agree completely. Our quarrel is with the irresponsible method of presentation, which is certainly not in the manner that "any other idea" is customarily presented.

The subject of race is not sheltered and forbidden by frightened, supersensitive black librarians. *Every subject under the sun* is fair game for open-minded investigation. The search for truth is everyone's quest of a lifetime. The problem of race in all its aspects cries out for both scholarly and popular study and discussion, at all levels. The subject of the mental inferiority of black people – more commonly identified as "white supremacy" or "racism" – has plagued this country for three centuries and now convulses the world. It is hollow mockery for Victoria Dunn to represent Dr. Boyd's point of view as "unpopular" or as "minority opinion." The fact of the matter is that few ideas in history have burrowed so deeply into the human mentality as this one, or have been used so skillfully for human exploitation. After a one hundred year effort to erase the segregation and discrimination laws left over from chattel slavery, the "Jim Crow" signs have been torn down. This obviously does not mean that the problem of the races is now history; its tenacious hold persists without the support of law, manifesting itself now in more subtle ways, but continuing as a devastating social force.

Periodically, the subject of the inferiority of black people is revived in the popular forum, after the manner of Shockley and Jensen today, each time with supposed new and more scientific proof. This theory was out of keeping with the spirit of democratic idealism that characterized the civil rights protest movement of the 1950s and early 60s. However, as the moral fervor of those

years began to wane in the face of the frustrating task of building new patterns of human relationships after the official end of segregation, the black inferiority rationale, always lurking in the wings, now is reasserting itself and finding *new* acceptance.

It might be said that some subjects are as painful and offensive to other people as the charge of mental inferiority is to black people, but there is a unique ingredient affecting the black person. The supreme personal insult, added to all other human burdens and possible degradation, is to judge a race of people as inherently inferior in mentality to others, for that denies their status or classification as true, full-fledged human beings; it denies their very humanity. Many men believe women to be physically and mentally inferior to themselves, but there is never any challenge to white women's humanity or to their inclusion in the presumed superior race. A murderer has degraded himself in the worst way possible, but he is a fallen human being and his birthright remains intact – unless he is black. The arrogance of this attitude is unspeakable and is one of the most hateful of all problems to cope with, even when it is an unconscious assumption.

There is an unwholesome emphasis in the film, and especially in the "Discussion Guide," on "tolerating ideas we detest." The spirit of the First Amendment is more like the popular saying, "I disagree with what you say, but I will fight to the death to defend your right to say it." Democracy does not require "tolerance of ideas we detest." This nation was founded by people who would *not* tolerate "ideas they detested." Slavery in the country would not have been ended if tolerance of the detested idea had prevailed, nor would Hitler have been stopped. There should be closer study of this phrase before it is used in the name of the American Library Association, either by inference as a cardinal principle, or aligned with a twisted perception of the First Amendment.

Why was this theme of the inferiority of black people chosen and developed without consultation with a representative group of members of the Association directly affected?

The American Library Association contracted for the production of a film on the First Amendment to be released for distribution after the Executive Board viewed and approved the finished product. The fact of the matter is that the Executive Board had the right and a definite obligation to be sensitive to the character of the film. Censorship, a loaded, frightening word has been charged, but it has no valid application to this situation.

We have *never* asked that the film be censored. The Association has had experience with handling a finished study which was considered unsatisfactory and never published by the American Library Association. We feel that there are solutions to the crisis created by "The Speaker" which have not been utilized.

We regret that emphasis has been placed upon *our reaction* after the film was produced rather than on the manner in which the film was conceived and

developed. We realize that these are past events but we feel the need to state emphatically that our sector of the Association has been deeply hurt, and is profoundly disappointed that there has been no sensitivity to our feelings.

Disturbance over “The Speaker” is deepening, not subsiding. Its lingering, troubled presence has cast a pall over the Association that will not just go away. The American Library Association’s integrity is at stake. It will not be easy to resolve this dilemma, but we have confronted other difficult problems before with wisdom and courage.

This is a statement from the following persons and carries the endorsement of the A.L.A. Black Caucus.

Signed:

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A PDF of the original BCALA document, a link to the film on YouTube, and other resources related to this issue can be found at the website of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom at <http://www.oif.ala.org/oif/?p=5008>