



Bill of Rights: Not Dead Yet in Dearborn — But Almost

Public officials throughout America have made substantial progress in recent years in keeping demonstrators out of sight and earshot of the objects of their demonstrations. This is especially true when someone or something important comes to town, like the President or a national convention of one of the two major political parties.



The now commonly accepted compromise between the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of speech and assembly on the one hand and the official desire to spare the ruling elite the sights and sounds of the revolting peasantry on the other is something called a "free speech zone" — a roped or fenced off area where the unsightly rabble may congregate and hold their signs and chant their chants, unseen and unheard by the people who matter. So when, to cite but one of many examples, the Democratic National Convention was held in Boston in 2004, demonstrators had to enter what was essentially a cage under a bridge, several blocks from the convention center, to exercise their freedom of speech and assembly. It was not your father's First Amendment, but no one at the convention was complaining. And who listens to people in wire cages, anyway?

Perhaps some day, under our living and evolving Constitution, it may be permissible for communities to zone out free speech altogether. Dearborn, Michigan, might like to be in the vanguard of such a movement. Perhaps it already is. Recently four Christian missionaries were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct after police stopped them from passing out copies of the Gospel of John, in English and Arabic, outside the Dearborn Arab International Festival. Three men and one woman were arrested and police seized the woman's camera as she was videotaping a discussion with a group of Muslims. The woman, 18-year-old Negeen Mayel, a recent convert from Islam to Christianity, was also charged with failing to obey a police officer. The missionaries, later released on bond, said they spoke only with people who were willing to talk with them and that police told them they were not allowed to pass out their literature within five blocks of the festival. The Thomas More Law Center, an Ann Arbor, Michigan, law group defending the right of Christians to exercise their religious and civil rights, announced that it would represent all four defendants.



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on July 1, 2010

"These Christian missionaries were exercising their constitutional rights to free speech and the free exercise of religion, but apparently the Constitution carries little weight in Dearborn, where the Muslim population seems to dominate the political apparatus," said Richard Thompson, President and Chief Counsel of the Thomas More Law Center, in a press release. Dearborn is believed to be one of the most heavily Islamic communities in the United States, with an estimated 30,000 Muslims among the city's 98,000 residents.

The Constitution, Thompson said, does not allow police to ban free speech just because some may disagree with it. The attorney also claimed the arrests were in retaliation for video tapes made last year of what he described as "strong-arm tactics" of the festival security guards.

"This time, the first thing police officers did before making the arrests was to confiscate the video cameras in order to prevent a recording of what was actually happening," Thompson said.

The arrests came just one day after a three-judge panel of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals granted a temporary restraining order forbidding the city from stopping a Christian pastor from passing out literature and discussing his faith with Muslims attending the festival. The restraining order came in response to an emergency motion filed on behalf of Pastor George Saieg, a Sudanese Christian. It followed a ruling by U.S. District Court Judge Paul D. Borman upholding Dearborn's policy of prohibiting the distribution of religious material near the festival. The appeals court panel ruled the loss of a First Amendment right, "for even minimal periods of time, unquestionably constitutes irreparable injury."

Despite legal efforts to prevent it, Dearborn seems to be laboring hard for the dubious distinction of being the city where the Bill of Rights goes to die. The city fathers might even consider building a graveyard for it. It might even be a tourist attraction, assuming visitors would be permitted to come within five blocks of it without being charged with disorderly conduct.

What a wonderful way to advertise the city.



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