

## Free Speech: Concept Versus Reality

Spring 2003

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Twelve-year-old Charlotte Aldebron gained international attention after [her speech on the children of Iraq](#) was distributed worldwide in print and on the Internet. Like anyone critical of the war, she has encountered a great deal of resistance -- even hostility -- from people who consider her stance wrong or inappropriate. In this speech, delivered at a peace rally in April, Charlotte reflects on the lessons she has learned about free speech, the concept and the reality.*

The invasion of Afghanistan, and now Iraq, has given me a big lesson in freedom of speech-or, should I say, the difference between the idea of free speech and the reality of free speech. Yes, I can speak. But what does it matter if I have no place to speak? Or I am ostracized? Or no one listens?

In early March, my social studies teacher switched the class topic to Iraq. He said Saddam Hussein's time to disarm was up. We had to get rid of him-he was a brutal dictator who gassed his own people. I raised my hand. I said that the U.S. gave Saddam Hussein chemical weapons, and the CIA helped him find the targets to use them on. My teacher snapped back, "Actually, Charlotte, you're wrong." Then he turned away and refused to call on me again.

After the invasion, our class focused on combat. It was like a game: we got a hand-out on the Persian Gulf countries, called "The Players;" we were given photos with short bios of top Iraqis, the team we had to beat; we got a map of the Gulf region with the size and location of all the armies, and the weapons each possessed; we read an article about the threat of Iraq using chemical weapons against our troops.

My mother complained to the principal and the Commissioner of Education that we were being taught to glorify war, admire military strategy, and objectify the killing and maiming of human beings. The Commissioner responded that each school's curriculum was its own business. The principal answered that he thought the social studies lesson plan was "balanced and comprehensive." Yes, my mom was free to speak-in fact, she could scream her head off for all they cared. It wouldn't change a thing.

Meanwhile, in science, we had to answer questions like, "what are the advantages of biological weapons?" I said there weren't any advantages because biological weapons kill people. How can death be an advantage? I was asked to give two examples of biological weapons. I said one was the smallpox on blankets we gave to Native Americans to kill them. The other was E coli bacteria that have been found in McDonald's hamburgers. I said we could close the gap between the threat and the capability of biological weapons by signing the U.N. Chemical Weapons Convention, and by hiring more meat inspectors. Somehow, our assignments never got corrected.

I should tell you that I am famous in some countries. My speeches have been translated into French, Spanish, Norwegian, Danish, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Urdu, Bengali, and who knows what else. I have been featured in newspapers and on television and radio. A popular singer in Bombay read my speech at his sold-out concert. I've received over 3,000 emails.

But in my own community, I am invisible. The principal won't let me read my speeches in school. The local papers won't print them. When a Japanese TV crew came to do a story on me, the principal barred them from the school. When they interviewed my classmates on the street after school, the principal came running and angrily demanded that they not use the footage. Of course, they were filming when he did this and, of course, they used the footage. The Japanese know what a bad idea

war is because they have suffered the horrible consequences of our nuclear bombs.

I get encouraging emails from around the world telling me not to despair even if my own town and teachers and friends ignore me. Many say that I am very brave to speak out "in a country like the United States!" One such email was from a Japanese man who, at age 9, saw the two friends he was walking with in Honshu, on July 20, 1945, buried beneath the rubble of a building bombed by a P-51 Mustang fighter. He and his mother were miraculously spared. And there was the email from the Jordanian mother duct taping her windows with plastic sheeting to protect her children from possible chemical attack. And the Greek man whose parents were scarred for life by the Nazi occupation. And the Canadian who cannot understand calling human beings "collateral damage." And the man from Calcutta who hopes the warriors will come to their senses and put away their weapons. And the South Korean student who thinks it is wrong to sit at his desk and study when there are terrible crimes taking place. And the Iranian who cannot sanction the harming of innocents, even if they are the people of an "enemy" nation.

Because I am free to speak, these people have heard my voice and we have been able to share our desire for peace. Some of them live in countries where protesting is against the law. In the U.S., we are more subtle, we are more sophisticated. In the U.S., we can allow people to talk freely. We don't need to stifle speech to stifle dissent. We just have to block our ears.

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