2024 Yale Essay Contest First Place Winner

Mahesh Agarwal, Yale University, Senior

As I grew up, reciting the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence and watching Fourth of July fireworks with my immigrant parents, the American promise of “freedom” felt very real. After all, my childhood took place in the shadow of the twentieth century, when the U.S stood as a bulwark against Nazi and Soviet regimes that seemed rigid and inhuman. I learned about America’s historic injustices, but the moral of the story always seemed to reinforce our values. Because we were a country of fiery speeches and constitutional amendments, we were able to change and become better. While America kept producing new iPhone models and Avengers movies, I learned that other countries had dictators who prevented their citizens from getting enough to eat. Clearly, the American model of a free-market, free elections, and free speech was a success and a beacon for the rest of the world.

Over the past four years, as I’ve developed an adult consciousness at Yale, I’ve watched my country fray and grow confused. When I began my freshman year, Americans were still divided over the threat posed by Covid-19 and my classmates yelled about whether to wear masks, take vaccines, and continue life as normal. Some students saw social distancing rules as an affront to their freedom and flooded my inbox as a new senator in the Yale College Council. Four years later, as I prepare to leave this campus, my peers are divided over a new issue that began continents away but quickly trickled down to our dorms and courtyards. Ever since October 7th, Yale’s campus has become a collage of encampments, slogans, and candlelit vigils. But while students picketed on Beinecke Plaza, the Yale Political Union avoided debating the Middle East, with the president telling me that she thought, “we aren’t strong enough to handle that topic.” The university was designed to dislodge students' ideas and force us to think from first principles, and yet it so often feels like an emotional battleground rather than an intellectual one.

Just as I arrived at Yale and watched "free discourse" sow seeds of suspicion among people my own age, I met students from other parts of the world for the first time and began to wonder if censorship was the oppressive specter I had assumed it to be. One student in my philosophy seminar who came from Beijing told me that he felt, in moving to America, he had “traveled back in time” and boasted about his home country's bullet trains and sense of public safety. “Here, I’m always on guard. In China, women walk alone at night.” When I asked any of my Chinese friends whether they wished they could vote and discuss Xi Jinping without ending up in the back of police van, they shrugged and told me that Chinese people weren’t worried about politics. After January 6th, they asked me, did the American model seem so appealing?

If China, with its one-party state and social credit scores, seemed too dystopian, then Singapore appeared to be a modern, orderly alternative. One of my suitemates, an exchange student from Yale-NUS, beamed when telling me about his city’s immaculately clean streets and manicured public parks. “In Singapore, people reserve tables by leaving their phones. No one even thinks about crime.” I went down Wikipedia rabbit holes, reading about Singapore’s founder, Lee Kuan Yew, who believed in re-engineering his country into a global trade center that was perfectly, ruthlessly efficient. Yew forced different ethnic groups to learn English and created a justice

system that canes citizens for crimes such as illegal immigration. Yew also restricted the press and worried that foreign newspapers could "radically change the nature of Singaporean society." Although he ruled with a strong hand, Yew's policies seemed to work, and Singapore has become a country of glittering skyscrapers that's often ranked as one of the world's most desirable places to live.

Considering how many grievances our freedom can create, and how many shiny pieces of infrastructure exist in the unfree world, it's tempting to romanticize autocracy. Even the first amendment has some limits—one famously can't yell "fire!" in a crowded theater—and it's natural to wonder whether our love of liberty comes at the expense of security and progress. But while there are lessons to be learned from countries like China and Singapore, their stability is a dangerous mirage. Without the distractions of free expression, a government might be able to build fast trains and citizens may settle into pacific lives, content for politics to occur in the background. But recent events in both China and Singapore show how illiberalism can hold a people hostage. At some point, the train will roll towards a cliff and people will realize that they have no way to say "stop."

The perils of authoritarianism in China became clear three years ago, when citizens found themselves physically trapped by their country's "Zero Covid" policies. In response to the pandemic, the Chinese government instituted some of the harshest restrictions in the world. Entire cities were placed on strict lockdowns, with people confined to their homes for weeks on end. Businesses were shuttered, travel halted, and citizens subjected to constant surveillance to ensure compliance. Anyone who tested positive for the virus or was in close contact with an infected person was sent to government-run quarantine facilities. As people grew weary of the restrictions, protests began to break out across the country—a rare sight in conformist China. But in order to disagree with a draconian policy, protesters became criminals. By the time mass unrest pushed Beijing to change, dozens of people had been detained and previously quiet calls for democracy had grown louder.

Even in Singapore, a rich democracy, illiberalism has come with a steep price. Founded in 2011, Yale-NUS was hailed as a pioneering institution, bringing a Western-style liberal arts education to Southeast Asia. The university brought Yale's culture of residential colleges, double majors, and cheeky student newspapers to a new corner of the world and students seemed to approve. In 2021, however, the Singaporean government abruptly announced it was shutting the school down. While the official reason was financial, it was easy to read between the lines. One Singaporean told me that architects in Singapore purposely designed college campuses without the open "quads" that define universities in America, because they didn't want to create space for future protests. In this vein, the mission of Ivy League education was fundamentally at odds with Singapore's vision of social order.

As any competitive debater knows, the "slippery slope" argument is too often used hyperbolically. In the case of speech, however, restricted freedom is no freedom at all. Once any speech is labelled as "threatening," the government must suddenly take on the task of deciding what types of expression are acceptable in the first place. Beyond emboldening the government, restrictions on speech also domesticate citizens, who begin to believe that some people or ideas are too holy to criticize. If the consequences of free speech are messy, then it is the place of

students, commentators and everyday citizens to discuss how to make discourse more productive. Although I hope to travel across China soon, I am grateful to have been born in New Hampshire—a state that brazenly declares, “live free or die.”