



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **Swift Boat Censorship**

**by Anthony Gregory**

The recent hot topics of American politics — John Kerry’s service in the Vietnam War, whether he lied about it, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth ads claiming that he lied, and George Bush’s reaction to those ads — seem to have come right out of an alternate dimension. Although a candidate’s military experience and honesty about it are important factors in how much Americans can trust him to be commander in chief during wartime, some voters are far more likely to be focused on the actual issues of the day, including a war on terror that has so far consumed thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars. Some American citizens no doubt see the foreign-policy platforms of Kerry and Bush as nearly identical, and also have reason to question the veracity of both major candidates in their statements about political events, past and present. Who is the greater war candidate or the bigger liar may seem impossible to know, if not a moot point altogether. Bush has consistently said that Kerry “served honorably” in Vietnam. So why all the bickering?

There is, however, a very important issue at stake in the Swift Boat ads controversy, but it has more to do with domestic policy than with foreign wars.

Many Democrat partisans have called upon Bush to denounce the anti-Kerry ads. Republican partisans have cried “censorship!” at the attempt of Kerry supporters to have television stations pull the ads. Just a few months ago, many liberals cried “censorship!” when Bush supporters tried to pressure movie theaters to refuse to screen Michael Moore’s anti-war film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

Of course, the attempts by liberals and conservatives to limit the impact of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the Swift Boat ads are not censorship. True censorship involves force, specifically government force, used to prohibit people from speaking, writing, or publishing, under penalties of law. When people boycott or pressure companies to refrain from publishing or broadcasting, by threatening to withhold patronage or to complain loudly in public, such pressure, even though directed to lessen the impact of another’s message, is certainly *not* censorship — in fact, it is itself an exercise of free speech.

Kerry's supporters have continued calling upon Bush to denounce the ads. Bush's supporters point out that President Bush spoke out last Monday against all "soft money" ads produced by independent political groups, called "527s," when he said,

I said this kind of unregulated soft money is wrong for the process. And I asked Senator Kerry to join me in getting rid of all that kind of soft money, not only on TV, but used for other purposes, as well....

I, frankly, thought we'd gotten rid of that when I signed the McCain-Feingold bill. I thought we were going to, once and for all, get rid of a system where people could just pour tons of money in and not be held to account for the advertising....

I don't think we ought to have 527s. I can't be more plain about it. I hope my opponent joins me in condemning these activities of the 527s.

While many of Bush's supporters have defended the ads, they still favorably invoke the president's condemnation of all such ads, as if to show that the president is above the partisanship of nasty smear campaigns. Meanwhile, many Democrats are upset because Bush has not specifically denounced the Swift Boat ads in question, but has made only more general statements.

Lost throughout all of this is that Bush has essentially called for censorship of an entire class of political advertising. Whereas attempts by frustrated citizens to boycott, discredit, and otherwise limit the impact of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth or Michael Moore cannot be properly called censorship, the president of the United States, in lamenting that a law he signed has not eliminated all 527 ads from television, is advocating censorship, and suggesting the government should more vigorously restrict what private groups are allowed to say on television. While Bush's defenders accuse his opponents of trying to "censor" the Swift Boat Veterans, it is their president who is the real threat to free speech.

This is an outrage. Several years ago, Bush spoke out against the kind of campaign-finance laws, championed by John McCain, that would limit the free speech of independent groups. He then signed McCain-Feingold, admitting it had unconstitutional provisions, saying that he hoped the Supreme Court would trim those out (a dereliction of constitutional duty if ever there was one). Now he is saying the laws apparently don't go far enough since some of these ads are still being aired. Talk about flip-flops!

Bush's increasing embrace of McCain-Feingold demonstrates that politicians are not too concerned that campaign-finance reform will interfere with their power to rule. Incumbent politicians such as Bush don't need to rely on ads as much as their opponents do, because high officeholders can call press conferences and use the bully pulpit to speak directly to the people,

and convey their message, whenever they want. Political challengers don't have that same advantage.

Furthermore, the Democrats and Republicans do not hesitate to restrict what others can spend on and say in political advertising, because the politicians in power could vote themselves campaign money from the Treasury, even if all independent funding of political advertising were outlawed. With all of these advantages that incumbent politicians and the two major parties wield over concerned citizens outside the political process, campaign-finance reform is no more and no less than censorship of ideas and messages from those without influence in the system. The corruption in politics is caused by much more than campaign donations, and the same politicians who are easily corrupted by outside money cannot be expected to pass any laws that would disrupt the racket they have going. Put simply, campaign-finance restrictions do not threaten the power of the ruling class; they limit the voice of the people.

President Bush and many Republicans used to have the correct position on campaign-finance reform: Political ads are a form of speech protected by the First Amendment, and laws that regulate and restrict them are an affront to freedom of speech. Now that they hold the reins of power in Washington, D.C., they have, not surprisingly, decided to embrace this odious type of censorship. This is bad for an honest political process, bad for liberty, and bad for America.

*Anthony Gregory is a writer and musician who lives in Berkeley, California. He earned his bachelor's degree in history at UC Berkeley, where he was president of the Cal Libertarians. He is an intern at the [Independent Institute](#) and has written for [RationalReview.com](#), the [Libertarian Enterprise](#), and [LewRockwell.com](#). See his webpage, [AnthonyGregory.com](#), for more articles and personal information.*

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