

Supreme Court Case Study 6



Wartime Freedom of Speech

Schenck v. United States, 1919

***** **Background of the Case** *****

The freedom of speech guarantee of the First Amendment was not tested in the Supreme Court for more than 100 years after the adoption of the Constitution, despite the number of federal and state laws that placed limits on free speech during that period. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, the federal government felt that it had to protect itself against efforts to influence people to oppose the war. Therefore, it passed the Espionage Act, which made it a crime to cause or attempt to cause insubordination in the armed forces, obstruct recruitment or enlistment, and otherwise urge, incite, or advocate obstruction or resistance to the war effort.

Charles Schenck, who was general secretary of the Socialist Party in the United States, carried on a campaign encouraging young men to resist the wartime draft. He mailed thousands of circulars to men who had passed exemption boards and to men who had been drafted. In the circulars he declared that the draft was unconstitutional despotism and urged the men to assert their rights to resist the draft. Further, he claimed that the Thirteenth Amendment, which banned involuntary servitude except as punishment for committing a crime, was violated by the conscription act and that a conscript was little better than a convict. The circular declared, "If you do not assert and support your rights, you are helping to deny or disparage rights which it is the solemn duty of all citizens and residents of the United States to retain." He described arguments in favor of the draft as coming from cunning politicians and a mercenary capitalist press. For these actions Schenck was convicted of conspiracy to violate the Espionage Act by attempting to obstruct the recruitment of men into the United States's armed forces. Schenck challenged his conviction on the grounds that his First Amendment rights had been violated.

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Constitutional Issue *****

The Court had to decide whether Schenck had been properly convicted and whether the Espionage Act was constitutional in the light of the free speech guarantees of the First Amendment. Was such a broad limitation on the right of free speech as the Espionage Act allowed a violation of the First Amendment? Or was the fact that the Espionage Act was designed to protect the nation's war effort a sufficient enough reason for the Supreme Court to reject Schenck's First Amendment defense?

***** **The Supreme Court's Decision** *****

The Court ruled unanimously that the Espionage Act was constitutional and affirmed that Schenck was guilty of having violated the act. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., wrote the Court's opinion. The opinion was based on the idea that the First Amendment guarantees are not absolute and must be considered in the light of the setting in which supposed violations occur. Holmes wrote, "We admit that in many places and in ordinary times the defendants in

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