

# Supreme Court Case Study 12



## 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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## Supreme Court Case Study 12 *(continued)*

saying all that was said in the circular would have been within their constitutional rights. But the character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. . . . The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic.” Holmes then enunciated a principle that he felt defined the true scope of the First Amendment as it applied to political expression. “The question in every case,” Holmes wrote, “is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent. It is a question of proximity and degree. . . . When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.”

The *Schenck* case clarified some limitations on free speech and supported the notion that the rights of the people are not absolute but must be balanced with national interests that are judged to be essential.



### Questions



**DIRECTIONS:** Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Why was the Espionage Act passed?
2. Explain the clear and present danger principle that Justice Holmes enunciated in the *Schenck* decision.
3. According to Holmes, what factor made Schenck’s actions, which at other times would have been protected by the First Amendment, illegal at the time he performed them?
4. How far do you think the government should go in trying to protect itself against threats to its policies in times of war?
5. Eight months after the *Schenck* decision, the Court again applied the clear and present danger principle. Holmes dissented in that case, stating that unlike the *Schenck* case, actions of the convicted man in the second case had little or no effect on the nation’s war effort. What do you think this reveals about Holmes’s attitude toward free speech guarantees?

# Supreme Court Case Study 53



## The Right to Search Students

### New Jersey v. T.L.O., 1985

#### \*\*\*\*\* Background of the Case \*\*\*\*\*

A New Jersey high school teacher discovered a 14-year-old freshman, whom the courts later referred to by her initials, T.L.O., smoking in a school lavatory. Since smoking was a violation of school rules, T.L.O. was taken to the assistant vice-principal’s office.

When questioned by the assistant vice-principal, T.L.O. denied that she had been smoking. The assistant vice-principal then searched her purse. There he found a pack of cigarettes along with rolling papers commonly used for smoking marijuana. He then searched the purse more thoroughly and found marijuana, a pipe, plastic bags, a large amount of money, an index card listing students who owed T.L.O. money, and “two letters that implicated T.L.O. in marijuana dealing.”

The assistant vice-principal notified the girl’s mother and turned the evidence of drug dealing over to the police. T.L.O. was charged, as a juvenile, with criminal activity. T.L.O., in turn, claimed the evidence of drug dealing found in her purse could not be used in court as evidence because it had been obtained through an illegal search and seizure. T.L.O.’s attorneys claimed that the Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable search and seizure. They maintained that the Fourth Amendment requirements for a warrant and probable cause applied to T.L.O. while in high school as a student. After appeals in lower courts, the case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court.

#### *Constitutional Issue* \*\*\*\*\*

T.L.O.’s case raised the question of whether the Fourth Amendment required school officials, when conducting searches of students’ property in school, to meet the same strict standards as police officials. In most instances police officers must have probable cause to believe that the subject of a search has violated or is violating the law, and generally must obtain a warrant issued by a neutral judicial officer. If these standards are not met by the police, evidence they have gathered from a search can be excluded as evidence of guilt in a criminal trial.

#### \*\*\*\*\* The Supreme Court’s Decision \*\*\*\*\*

Justice Byron R. White wrote the Court’s 6-to-3 decision, which ruled against T.L.O. The Court concluded that the Fourth Amendment ban on unreasonable searches and seizures applies to searches conducted by school officials but that the search of T.L.O. was reasonable. The Court also ruled that school officials do not have to meet the same standards as police officers when conducting searches.

Justice White wrote that students have a real need to bring personal property into school and have “legitimate expectations of privacy” while in school. At the same time, however, “against the child’s interest in privacy must be set the substantial interest of teachers and

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