

White nationalists have tried to weaponize free speech. Here's why it's still worth defending.



Perspective by Jeffrey Aaron Snyder

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is associate professor in the educational studies department at Carleton College and the author of "Making Black History: The Color Line, Culture, and Race in the Age of Jim Crow."

November 16, 2018 at 6:00 a.m. EST

“Freedom of speech is no longer a value,” Nesrine Malik recently proclaimed in the Guardian. “It has become a loophole exploited with impunity by trolls, racists and ethnic-cleansing advocates.” Many on the left agree. “Your free speech hides beneath white sheets,” students at William & Mary chanted last fall when they shut down a talk by an executive director of the ACLU. As Talib Kweli Greene declared earlier this year: “Being a free-speech absolutist in this era is a white privilege pushed by those who believe, like Trump, that there are ‘very fine people’ who march with KKK and Nazis.”

Yes, it is indisputable that “free speech” has been used as a cudgel by right-wing media to assail “politically correct” colleges and universities and the “snowflakes” who attend them. That’s why Ann Coulter, Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos have relentlessly invoked free speech to overlay their reprehensible views with a veneer of righteousness.

But as journalist Katie Herzog insists, the far-right’s attempt to “claim the mantle of free speech” as their own is “a tactic, not an ideology,” something Spencer himself admitted in a May 2018 interview.

And this is why we must continue to defend the importance of free speech, in all its forms.

After all, this battle has happened before. Forty years ago, white working- and middle-class Americans co-opted the language and strategies of the civil rights movement to combat government-mandated school desegregation initiatives. Framing their antibusing campaign as a civil rights issue, white activists portrayed their aggressive push to maintain control over their white neighborhoods and schools as a noble cause. That racial-justice activists did not respond by abandoning civil rights as a value is a lesson that today's critics of free speech should remember.

In the spring of 1972, Irene McCabe led a 620-mile "Mothers' March" from Pontiac, Mich., to Washington to protest "forced busing." "This is our civil rights movement," she declared.

The Mothers' March was part of a powerful antibusing movement that arose in response to a dramatic uptick in court-ordered school desegregation plans in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Concentrated in northern cities and led in the main by "ordinary housewives and mothers," antibusing activists described themselves as civil rights crusaders devoted to local schools and protecting their children from the long arm of the federal government.

Chanting slogans such as "Neighborhood Schools for All," they staged sit-ins, boycotts and marches. In Boston, a group called ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) adopted a logo featuring a lion draped over a bus, emblazoned with the motto "Stop Forced Busing." One of its members even called ROAR a "white NAACP."

History textbooks today portray opposition to busing as an integral part of white backlash to the black freedom struggle, contributing to white flight and the hollowing out of urban America. At the time, however, politicians and the mainstream news media largely affirmed the self-serving view of white activists, attributing resistance to busing to concerns about their "rights as parents, taxpayers or homeowners, not about race." Television networks broadcast the sentiments of McCabe and her antibusing allies as "earnestly as they had the achievements of Mrs. Rosa Parks in the Montgomery bus boycott," historian Nathan Huggins observed in 1978.

Black civil rights advocates fiercely contested this false equivalence, highlighting the "hypocrisy" of whites who said they supported "civil rights" and "integrated education" but were opposed to busing. National NAACP leader Margaret Bush Wilson described the busing controversy as a "phony" issue intended to "divide and confuse" the public. "Busing," Wilson said, "is as American as apple pie."

When antibusing activists attempted to insert themselves into the civil rights struggle, civil rights leaders such as Wilson, Vernon Jordan and Thurgood Marshall called their bluff — and they intensified their efforts to fight institutional racism and eliminate the massive racial disparities in educational opportunities.

Imagine, for a moment, that the left had responded to the antibusing movement by attacking *all* civil rights proponents as racist reactionaries, and by dismissing the civil rights ideal *itself* as a misleading fantasy that only advanced the interests of the white, the rich and the powerful. Instead, social justice activists remained committed to the importance of civil rights, and that model then provided the foundation for dramatic gains in women's rights, disability rights and gay rights, among others. It remains essential and alive with the potential to transform the world for the better.

Similar to the “Where are white civil rights?” placards held up at antibusing rallies, the spectacle of white nationalists and conservative flamethrowers masquerading as free speech martyrs is difficult to stomach. I can understand the urge to distance ourselves from the free speech cause when some of its loudest proponents are morally bankrupt opportunists. But like civil rights, free speech is much too important to give up for dead.