

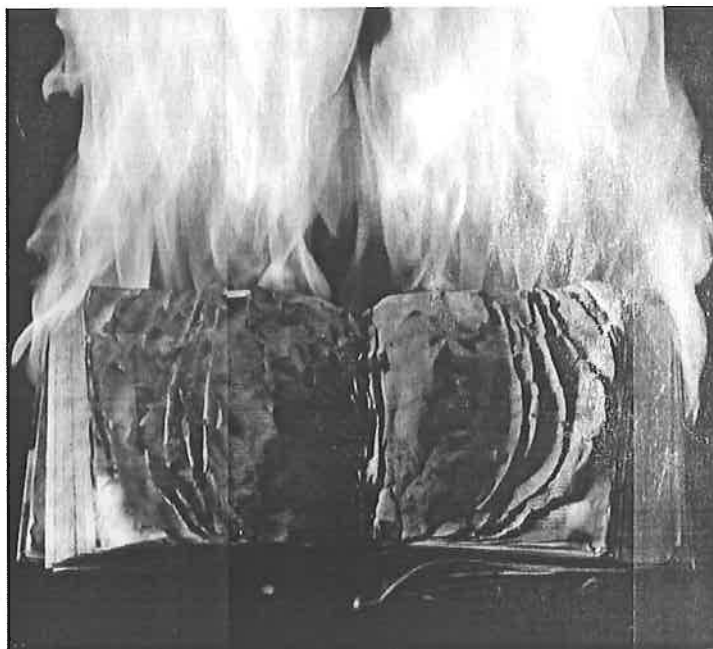
FAHRENHEIT 451: CENSORSHIP AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

Background and Introduction to *Fahrenheit 451*

Many people, students included, believe that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects speech, publications, or expression of any kind. Generally, however, the First Amendment is interpreted to mean that Congress can only limit speech when the need for a particular restriction is extremely compelling or when there is a type of speech (such as pornography or certain threats of imminent violence) that infringes on another right or freedom. When speech is restricted by the government, a "narrowly tailored" law must be passed to address just the specific need identified. Thus, under certain circumstances, speech in its many forms is subject to regulation. In determining what degree is permissible, the courts balance the interests of the state with the interests of some greater public good. Throughout history, the limits of permissible expression have been defined and influenced by the cultural concerns and social standards of the time. At different stages in our country's development, different concerns and social standards become prominent and shape interpretations of the law.

For example, concerns over political speech as an incitement to rebellion or "revolution" in the wake of the memories of the horrors of the Civil War (1861–1865) eventually resulted in the articulation during World War I (1914–1918) of the "clear and present danger" test and the idea that the right to free speech depended on the circumstance. During World War I, the government was concerned that dissent and political opposition to U.S. involvement would hinder the U.S. war effort, for example, by hindering recruitment to the armed forces, insubordination, refusal of duties, or mutiny. Writing for the U.S. Supreme Court in *Schenck v. United States*, 249 U.S. 47 (1919), Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who served in the Union army during the Civil War said the question is whether the words used in a particular circumstance "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."

Fahrenheit 451—the temperature at which paper will burn—is a social satire or a book depicting a "negative utopia" or "dystopian" society in which book reading is an illegal, treasonous act. The government, supported by the people, has banned books because they contain controversial and contradictory ideas. Book readers are considered to be dangerous criminals who can stir people up with their ideas. Firefighters no longer put out fires but instead burn books and the homes of people who keep them. (See Handout 1 for a detailed synopsis on p. 15).



Ray Bradbury, the book's author, has noted that at the time he wrote the novel, "Joseph McCarthy was threatening libraries and investigating backgrounds of screenwriters trying to find out if they were communists." McCarthy, a senator from Wisconsin, led a campaign against supposed "communist subversives" that initially targeted individuals whom he claimed had infiltrated the government, and the State Department in particular. Historians generally agree that both the United States and the Soviet Union actively planted spies in the government of the other; however, McCarthy expanded his investigation to include congressional hearings that probed the political beliefs and associations of ordinary citizens

FAHRENHEIT 451: CENSORSHIP AND THE FIRE

in a wide range of professions, from the motion picture industry to church and civil rights organizations to academia, in an effort to rid the country of "communists." Initially conceived as part of his reelection strategy, McCarthy's Senate hearings resulted in allegations of communist subversion and espionage in the U.S. government in the Department of State, Voice of America, U.S. Information Libraries, Government Printing Office, and the U.S. military. One of McCarthy's other targets was public libraries. His investigation of the Overseas Library Program led to the publication of a list of 30,000 books that had been authored by alleged communists and communist sympathizers. After the list was published, the books were removed from many library shelves.