

The High Cost of FREEDOM OF SPEECH

My name is Amir Sulaiman; I am Muslim of African decent born in America. I am a 26 year old, poet, writer, teacher, husband and father. I taped as a featured poet on HBO Def Poetry Jam in February of 2004. My episode aired August 8th through August 14th. Within six days of my performance airing, four FBI agents came to my mother-in-law's home in San Francisco. Although I have lived in Atlanta, GA since 2001 and was only visiting my in-laws in California, these agents came looking for me there. They asked for me but my brother-in-law informed them that I was not there. They waited hours for my return. As they were waiting, they questioned my brother-in-law about my background and asked about my "anti-American" poetry.

□ When I arrived, I told the agents I didn't want to talk to them without legal representation. In the last two months since then, they have called me on my cell phone. They have gone to the high school at which I taught and questioned the principal about me. Later they issued a grand jury subpoena for the names, addresses, phone numbers of all my students, the classes I taught, and my personal file. In addition, I learned at the Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport's ticket counter that my name has been added to the FBI's "no-fly" list. The agents did not return my lawyers phone calls for nearly two months but continued to question my friends and associates.

□ This experience made me wonder, what is freedom of speech? The reality is that speech has never been free. There have been many poets, writers, and speakers who blazed the trail upon which I walk whose free speech cost them their livelihood, their families and in some cases even their lives. Whether they were inspiring the powerless or chastising the powerful, people like Amiri Baraka, Soujourner Truth and Peter Tosh paid the cost for this "free" speech we talk about.

□ In a new world, wrought nearly insane with paranoia, I, simply by being Muslim, have become a threat. In an old world, still stuck in the muck of racism, I, as a young Black man, am still a threat. This fear is further compounded by my refusal to remain silent in the face of such blatant hypocrisy, thievery, and tyranny. As a Muslim, as a man, as a member of the Human Family, I must speak the Truth with the loudest, most effective voice I can muster, especially when the virtue of justice has been so casually ignored. It is my sacred obligation.

□ Islam, my way of life, does not allow me to remain still and quiet while a war is being waged not only against Islam and Muslims, but against the Human Family and Life itself. As the hadith of prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him and his family) states, **"Whoever among you sees wrongdoing should change it with his hand. If he is unable, then with his speech. If he is unable, then with his heart, and that is the weakest level of faith."**

□ I was born and raised in America. My mother and father were born and raised in America and their parents were born and raised in America. I consider America my country. This is beyond the sentiments of patriotism or pride. It is a matter of fact. My people have deep roots and a long history in this land. They have invested their blood in the soil of the South, in the factories of the North and the frontiers of the West. Upon the backs of my foreparents, this nation was built. My family's history in this country precedes the White House, the Pentagon even the Constitution. America is my country.

□ Although I do not agree with the policies of the leaders of this nation, their fate and my fate are irresistibly tied together. The decisions of our leaders affect my three little daughters, my parents, my home. This is what impassions my voice and intensifies my warning.

□ When I present poetry, it is not that I am speaking as Amir Sulaiman. Many people recognize my voice as their own. I have traveled the country presenting my poetry before audiences of many different racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and political backgrounds. They have encouraged me. They have implored me, even commanded me to continue using my poetry to broadcast their voices in ways and in places that they cannot. The people have found their sentiments in my heart and their voice in my words. This is a great blessing and an equally great responsibility. I must warn for fear that we, the people, be assigned to the same fate as our leaders who have created enemies then created wars in order to create revenue.

□ The artist is to be a warner for society at large. Often the artist is like Cassandra, the character is Greek mythology who was blessed with the ability to see the future but cursed with the promise that no one would ever believe her. Jesus, Muhammad, Ghandi and Malik Shabazz (Malcolm X) were all warners. All of them had loved ones in a society being led down a road towards destruction. All of them also had enemies trying to extinguish their message. Many governments and empires have made the error of silencing the warner. To silence the warner, in a strategy to prevent what is being warned against, is to unplug the fire alarm hoping that will prevent the house from burning down.

□ The vicious are only kindling a fire about their ankles. In fact, their habit of repression only fuels the brewing discontent and adds fire to the flames. They are dousing the fire with gasoline wondering why the flames only grow more intense and the hatred grows more severe. Both History and prophecy promise a day of awful reckoning for a society that has grown repressive, gluttonous and tyrannical.

□ My poetry is a sacred obligation that does not require the approval of the FBI or any other government department or agency. I will not ask for my right to speak, as that right has been given to me by the Most High. I only ask for more voices to come forward in the name of justice for the sake of all of us and our families. In truth, coming forward in the name of justice is a sacred obligation upon us all. We must give hope to the hopeless souls, warning to the obstinate tyrants and try to contribute to a more livable life for the Human Family.

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