
A Free Press

by Eugene V. Debs

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A Congressman by the name of Hayes, credited to Iowa,¹ has introduced in Congress a bill to establish in the person of the Postmaster-General a censorship of the most odious character.

As the law now stands upon the statute books of the nation all needed protection is given, since indecent or immoral publications cannot be sent through the US mails without committing a penal offense. But this does not satisfy a set of long-eared and long- and short-haired cranks, they demand a censorship, by virtue of which the Postmaster-General may determine by his sweet will what is objectionable and should be cast out.

The law contemplated by the bill introduced by Hayes, "would be," says the *New York Herald*, "an intolerable tyranny."

A free press, answerable in the courts for any offense it may commit against law and morality, is the foundation of free government. A bill to create an arbitrary, ignorant, and partisan press censorship should receive short shrift at the hands of Congress. There is not even a plausible excuse for the suggestion of so monstrous a law. As was conclusively shown by a Senate report in 1882, there is law enough and to spare already on this subject. It is already a penal offense to send immoral or indecent publications through the mails. Whoever does so may be indicted, and upon conviction in the courts must go to prison for his offense. In a country of law and of orderly court proceedings this surely is enough. It would be an intolerable outrage for Congress to clothe the Postmaster-General or any other public officer with authority to supersede the courts, and without indictment, trial, or proof of any kind condemn men to shameful and ruinous penalties upon his own ignorant or prejudiced whim.

¹ **Walter I. Hayes** (1841-1901) was a Democrat elected to four terms in the House of Representatives from Iowa's 2nd Congressional District. He was a Member of Congress from 1887 to 1895.

The views of the *Herald the Magazine* fully endorses, and we do not believe the bill introduced by Hayes will become the law of the land.²

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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² According to the *Los Angeles Times* of March 4, 1894, the bill proposed by Rep. Hayes, in the tradition of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, would give to the Postmaster-General “the power to exclude from the mails all publications of an immoral nature and also those which criticize the administration or any of its acts.” Hayes’s 1894 proposal foreshadowed the Sedition Act of 1918, wielded with effect against radical opponents of the Wilson Administration’s military campaign in Europe.