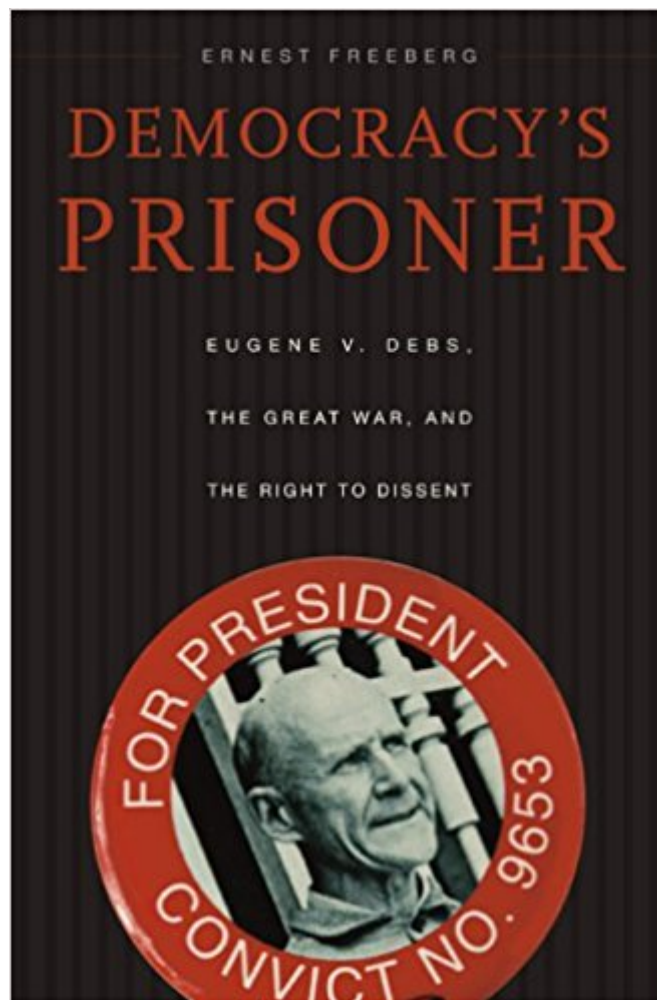




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# Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, The Great War, And The Right To Dissent



## Synopsis

In 1920, socialist leader Eugene V. Debs ran for president while serving a ten-year jail term for speaking against America's role in World War I. Though many called Debs a traitor, others praised him as a prisoner of conscience, a martyr to the cause of free speech. Nearly a million Americans agreed, voting for a man whom the government had branded an enemy to his country. In a beautifully crafted narrative, Ernest Freeberg shows that the campaign to send Debs from an Atlanta jailhouse to the White House was part of a wider national debate over the right to free speech in wartime. Debs was one of thousands of Americans arrested for speaking his mind during the war, while government censors were silencing dozens of newspapers and magazines. When peace was restored, however, a nationwide protest was unleashed against the government's repression, demanding amnesty for Debs and his fellow political prisoners. Led by a coalition of the country's most important intellectuals, writers, and labor leaders, this protest not only liberated Debs, but also launched the American Civil Liberties Union and changed the course of free speech in wartime. The Debs case illuminates our own struggle to define the boundaries of permissible dissent as we continue to balance the right of free speech with the demands of national security. In this memorable story of democracy on trial, Freeberg excavates an extraordinary episode in the history of one of America's most prized ideals.

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## Customer Reviews

This account of the trial and jailing of Eugene V. Debs for sedition in opposing WWI will be read by

many as a warning for our times, yet it stands on its own as solid history. Remarkably, in 1920 Debs ran from prison a clever presidential campaign that gained him almost one million votes. Freeberg, associate professor of history at the University of Tennessee, relates this tale in a fast-paced narrative that underplays the irony. Debs a firebrand orator and radical Socialist Party chieftain whom Woodrow Wilson and others considered a security threat became a model federal prisoner who worked to alleviate the situations of fellow inmates. He also issued biting criticisms of American policy and never left off denouncing capitalists for having caused WWI. Not surprisingly, Debs's stance long delayed his pardon, first by Wilson, then by Warren Harding, who eventually commuted his sentence in 1921. But it gained Debs the wide hearing he sought. The most enduring consequence of this whole affair is the fuel it contributed to the growth of civil liberties consciousness and organization in the United States. Not for the first time, administrations brought about the very results they most opposed. 17 b&w photos. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

This account of the trial and jailing of Eugene V. Debs for sedition in opposing WWI will be read by many as a warning for our times, yet it stands on its own as solid history...Freeberg relates this tale in a fast-paced narrative...The most enduring consequence of this whole affair is the fuel it contributed to the growth of civil liberties consciousness and organization in the United States. Not for the first time, administrations brought about the very results they most opposed. (Publishers Weekly 2008-03-03)Freeberg argues that Debs's case illustrates the problems associated with silencing public discourse, most especially during a time of war. Debs was never a threat to national security; instead, he was a principled individual expressing his political beliefs. This excellent introduction to Debs and the Socialist Party is also an engaging examination of an issue that still tensely engages us today. (Michael LaMagna Library Journal 2008-06-01)The Eugene V. Debs story is a moving, albeit instructive one, though he likely will never be given his due as one of the great figures of American history. Jailed for speaking out against the so-called "war to end all wars," Socialist Debs ran for president in 1920, garnering a million votes. By the way, when he was finally released from that same Atlanta penitentiary, the whole of the prison's population--guards and prisoners--cheered him. (Robert Birnbaum The Morning News 2008-06-30)If history is what the present wants to know about the past, Democracy's Prisoner is teeming with lessons. But above all, it's the story of one extraordinary man's showdown with the establishment--and how that confrontation turned into a complex political struggle whose outcome was up for grabs. Carefully researched and expertly told, Debs's story also brings

a fascinating era into sharp, vivid focus. (Peter Richardson Los Angeles Times Book Review 2008-06-15)Freeberg's Democracy's Prisoner explores the arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment of Eugene V. Debs and the subsequent campaign to free him from a federal penitentiary. America's best-known socialist, Debs was loved by the party faithful and despised by conservatives as a traitor. For speaking out against the war, he became one of some 2,000 people arrested, and 1,200 convicted, for challenging the Wilson administration's war policy. Sentenced to 10 years in prison, Debs immediately became a cause célèbre to socialists, trade unionists, and civil libertarians...In [his] timely, readable, and engaging book, Freeberg reminds us of the fragility of rights in the context of fear, providing us with cautionary tales about what is lost when unquestioned political obligations trump the preservation of liberty. (Eric Arnesen Boston Globe 2009-01-04)Freeberg has written an exhaustive account of the three-year campaign to free Debs from federal custody while the nation struggled over civil rights and government power in the last days of the Wilson administration, which included the notorious "Palmer Raids" on suspected dissidents. (Bob Hoover Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 2009-04-19)Eugene Debs is a largely forgotten man today, an odd footnote in American history of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But this fascinating book about his climactic last years makes clear that he really mattered. In both political and legal ways he played a significant part in reducing intolerance of dissent in this country, and bringing to life the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech. (Anthony Lewis New York Review of Books 2009-07-02)Sending Debs to prison made him the center of a campaign for freedom of speech for dissenters and antiwar activists. And when the courts eventually recognized a constitutional right to dissent, they were following a broad public debate spurred by talented organizers and activists who came from places ranging from Debs's own Socialist Party to the new American Civil Liberties Union to the rank-and-file locals of the American Federation of Labor. Freeberg's beautifully written book combines a political biography of Debs in his years of crisis with a broader argument about the unintended consequences of the campaign to win his release. (Jon Wiener Dissent 2009-06-01)An important contribution for those interested in Eugene Debs and the early days of the American Socialist Party. (R. J. Goldstein Choice 2009-05-01)

A good account of the Socialist career of Eugene Debs, the beloved leader who was jailed under the Woodrow Wilson Administration because of his opposition to the US entry in World War I, as well as his outspoken opposition to capitalist abuse. The corporate malfeasance he railed against sounds very much like what's going on today; how discouraging. It's interesting to read about other famous contemporary progressives--Upton Sinclair, Samuel Gompers (not so progressive), Helen

Keller, Max Eastman, and the founder of the Nation magazine, Oswald Garrison Villard. The book does a good job of describing how the rallying for Debs's release from prison caused more division than unity among Progressives; some felt that it was counterproductive to push too hard against the Wilson Administration and subsequently the Harding Administration, and back them into a corner; while others felt that Debs's case had to be kept front and center. Communists, labor leaders, socialists, and other activists differed on what direction to take. Just like liberals today! The dilemma was whether to try to free the ailing socialist leader on humanitarian grounds, since he was nearing the end of his life and was much respected by the wardens, fellow prisoners, and even his political opponents in power, all of whom acknowledged his gentlemanly manners and virtue--or keep him imprisoned in light of his principled refusal to apologize or admit wrongdoing, and his insistence on the release of all political prisoners. The book is an in-depth treatise on the history of the First Amendment in the early part of the twentieth century, and the formation of the modern-day ACLU. In this regard, at least, the United States has made some progress. The one fault I found with this book is it gets a bit monotonous toward the end: Debs is about to be released, then somebody stalls; then it happens again, over and over. A briefer summary of the final contest would have made it more readable and no less informative.

An important figure in U.S. history. This elucidates some very trying times in U.S. history in which freedom of speech was under attack. Also Debs was jailed for a while in Woodstock, IL where I live.

I have always been interested in Debs and adding this to my library has enlightened me further.

A second book from U of Tenn. History professor Ernest Freeberg takes us back to a turbulent period in our history, the early 20th century. Eugene Debs was a shadowy name to me before I read this book as were the details of the U.S. involvement in the "war to end all wars" WW1. Freedom of speech is the issue and all sides of the issue were thoroughly explored by Prof. Freeberg. A thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening read.

Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War and the Right to Dissent by Ernest Freeberg is not so much a biography of the book's main individual subject as it is a brilliant and insightful history and analysis of the right of free speech during the period immediately prior to, during, and after the first world war. The book centers around the life of American Socialist leader Eugene Victor

Debs, the former union leader, one-time Indiana State Senator, and five-time candidate of the Socialist Party of America for President of the United States. The book spends little time on Debs early life and antecedents, taking us instead into the time leading up to the Great War, when President Woodrow Wilson campaigned on the slogan "He Kept Us Out of War" only to renege on that promise after he is re-elected. One of the first casualties of the war becomes freedom of speech, as censorship is ramped up under the guise of preventing internal dissent from becoming an aid to the enemy. Eugene Debs and the Socialists are opposed to the war, and especially the draft. They see the war in terms of the class struggle they are fighting in which poor men go off to die in wars so that rich men can prosper. Wilson and leading members of his cabinet are able to convince Congress to pass the Sedition Act, legislation that drastically limits what critics of the war are able to say. As government censors are able to shut down the socialist message using post office censorship and arrest of those advocating open resistance to the draft and other opposition to the war, often on questionable or spurious grounds, Debs is able to initially avoid arrest. But as public pressure mounts from supporters of the war, Debs is arrested following a speech he makes in Cleveland, the tone of which, the author argues, one must contort to find offensive to the law. Freeburg provides an interesting account of Debs' trial, his conviction, his sentencing and his appeal process. Much of the book describes Debs' life in prison, first in Moundsville, West Virginia, and later at Atlanta Penitentiary. A remarkable aspect of the story is how Debs is able to win the respect of the wardens of both institutions as well as of the inmates, even though political dissenters were considered to be a lower caste in the prison system at the time. Debs is described in near-sainted terms as he is allowed to work in the prison hospital and is allowed liberties not offered to other inmates. Remarkably, he is even allowed to run for President as the nominee for the Socialist Party while still bearing the label "Convict 9653". Meanwhile, as the war concludes, the issue of whether or not those imprisoned under the Sedition Act should now become pardoned becomes one that divides the nation. Freeburg describes the efforts to win Debs release, first from the Wilson administration, and later from his successor Warren Harding. This begins at a time when Wilson's Attorney-General, Mitchell Palmer, mounts a war against the "red scare", also at a time when the world witnesses the Russian Revolution and its results, with mixed opinion, and at a time when many veterans resent the dissenters, while others assert that free speech was what they were fighting for in the first place. It is a time when the socialist cause fractures, and when many have differing views of the future of the labor movement. This vast difference of opinion makes a political fence that is difficult for those in office to straddle. I chose this book with the intention of learning more about the fascinating life of Eugene Debs, but in the end, found my interest captivated by the

author's outstanding account of the history of free speech during this crucial era and his careful study of this complex issue. Freeburg fairly presents all of the arguments espoused both by those seeking to defend the limits placed on speech and by those who viewed these limits as unreasonable and extreme. This includes politicians, judges and lawyers, academics, journalists, soldiers, those in the labor movement, and citizens in general. I hesitate to say that this book will be of special interest and value to those with an interest in the right of free speech, because in reality, that subset should capture all of us.

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