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If activists are silenced, who speaks for the animals?

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In the last few years - ever since the passage of the chilling Animal Enterprises Terrorism Act and the implementation of an earlier incarnation of the law - the free speech rights of some animal activists have been trampled in McCarthy-like fashion. People who spoke at public events about the torment that animals are forced to endure in laboratories, sent faxes in protest, ran an informational Web site and organized and attended protests on public property - activities associated with constitutionally protected free speech - found themselves facing prosecution as "terrorists."

This should give all Americans pause. People who engage in nonviolent protests and civil disobedience are sitting in jail cells, stigmatized by one of the most politically charged and discrediting labels of our time, while people who wake up every morning and go to jobs in which they torment and kill animals in laboratories continue to enjoy their freedom, paychecks, social lives and families.

As a case in point, PETA just released the findings of an eight-month undercover investigation at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Wearing a hidden camera, our investigator documented circumstances that violate our moral sensibilities about how we ought to treat animals and represent what we believe are dozens of violations of federal laws and guidelines governing the treatment of dogs, cats, rabbits, monkeys, mice, rats and pigs.

Tiny mice with grotesque tumors were left to suffer from cancers that had nearly grown bigger than their bodies. Laboratory workers couldn't even manage to make sure that all mice had water, and one worker admitted that mice in the laboratory die of dehydration "all the time."

Monkeys were kept deprived of water so that they would cooperate during experiments in exchange for a sip. Imagine these animals' lives: They had holes drilled into their skulls and metal hardware attached to their heads. They live in tiny cages, all alone, without even the touch and comfort of a companion. They are so emotionally and physically traumatized that they constantly whirl or rock back and forth. And on top of all this, they are always thirsty - so thirsty they'll do almost anything for a few drops of water.

Our investigation also revealed that shelters near Salt Lake City sell dogs and cats to this university as though they were disposable laboratory equipment. Our investigator's video footage shows dogs at the shelter wagging their tails as lab techs approach their cages to assess whether they'd be good "subjects," unaware of the invasive, painful tests that are

about to be conducted on them. This is a betrayal of these vulnerable animals and also of the public, which counts on animal shelters to be havens for homeless animals.

So think about it. People who drown, burn, cut open, shock, poison, starve, forcibly restrain, addict and inflict brain damage on helpless animals - whose only "offense" is that they weren't born human - are walking among us, being granted tenure and promotions and receiving huge chunks of our tax dollars to bankroll their cruel and crude experiments. On the frequent occasions when they violate federal animal welfare laws in their laboratories, the government usually just asks them to pinky swear not to do it again. Meanwhile, compassionate people who are willing to speak up about one of the great injustices of our time and use nonviolent protest tactics to effect change for animals may be locked up.

Like all other citizens and businesses, companies and people who abuse animals are already protected from violence and criminal acts by state and federal laws that have been used effectively by police and prosecutors to punish people who engage in illegal conduct against them. To shield them from public opinion and discussion and to protect them from peaceful and heretofore lawful pickets by locking up those who dare to challenge the suffering that occurs inside laboratories is an attack on every American's right of protest.

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