

STATEMENT OF SENATOR BURNS
HEARING ON "INTERNET FREEDOM PROTECTION ACT"
RULES COMMITTEE
MAY 3, 2000

I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. Today's hearing deals with one of the bedrock principles upon which this country was founded – the ability of individuals to express their opinions freely without government interference.

The Chairman, Sen. Bennett and I introduced the "Internet Freedom Protection Act" last October 19 to ensure that individual citizens using the Internet to share their beliefs would not be subject to the same onerous bureaucracy that Political Action Committees and other institutional political entities face. I believe this bill is a commonsense Internet free speech bill. This bill simply prevents the F.E.C. from regulating political communications by individuals over the Internet.

This bill is very narrow in scope – it covers only individuals who don't receive compensation for their Internet communications. Further, these individuals cannot solicit political contributions using the Internet. I do want to emphasize, however, that just because this bill was narrowly tailored, the F.E.C. should not feel free to engage in regulations not specifically prohibited by this bill. In fact, I will be proposing additional language to make the bill clear on this point.

I would like to commend the current Commission for re-thinking its ill-advised policy that inhibited the political speech of individuals using the Internet. The current Commission understands the unique nature of the Internet, which has essentially re-created the system of many citizens armed with their own small printing presses that was envisioned by the founding fathers. Despite this positive turn of events, though, the need for passage of the "Internet Freedom Protection Act" remains strong. It is critical that future Commissions not engage in actions or policies that would stifle political speech.

If an American citizen feels strongly enough about a candidate or issue to create a website to express his views, he should not be subject to oversight by federal election bureaucrats. Free expression is the founding principle of this country. Currently 90 million Americans use email or access the Web. Undoubtedly, many of these communications are political in nature. We should not expect the F.E.C. to somehow monitor and regulate all of this activity.

The flowering of the discussion of ideas that has been fostered by the Internet is unprecedented. Whether on websites, chatrooms or email, the revolution in information technology has resulted in ongoing vigorous sustained debates on the critical issues facing this country. The Internet allows any individual to become a publisher and have the same access in the "marketplace of ideas" as the largest political party or corporation.

As Chairman of the Senate Communications Subcommittee and co-Chairman of the

Internet Caucus, I have been convinced time and again of the folly of trying to regulate the Internet. The government should not impose burdensome regulations on political speech on the Internet. Instead, the government should act to keep the Internet a free speech zone.

I urge my colleagues to support this narrowly-crafted, common-sense bill.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.