



## US must clean up its own mess on press freedom

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After The Wall Street Journal published an op-ed article, "China is the Real Sick Man of Asia", on Feb 3, many readers, angry with the rabidly racist headline, have demanded an apology from the newspaper. They include 53 reporters and editors of The Journal who, in a letter, have urged the WSJ to consider correcting the headline and apologizing to "readers, sources, colleagues and anyone else who was offended by it".

Sadly, the WSJ has not tendered any apology. To make matters worse, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called the widespread condemnation of the headline as restriction of free speech. Which is truly shocking, especially because it came just weeks after his scandalous yelling at and cursing NPR host Mary Louise Kelly, including using the F-word multiple times, during an interview.

In an op-ed article on Feb 15, Brett Bruen, director of global engagement in the Barack Obama administration and a career diplomat, said Pompeo's consistent attacks on the media is a threat to press freedom around the world.

Pompeo may have been emboldened by his boss, who has frequently denigrated the press, to attack the media. From official speeches to tweets, the US leader has repeatedly called the media "enemy of the people" and accused it of disseminating "fake news".

The United States has made a great leap backward in press freedom under the incumbent administration. In the 2019 World Press Freedom Index, released in April 2019, the US dropped three spots to 48. It was the first time the US was placed in a "problematic" status for journalist category instead of "satisfactory" place, as in the past.

Reporters Without Borders, which released the index, said that, "never before have US journalists been subjected to so many death threats or turned so often to private security firms for protection".

Back in August 2018, David Kaye and Edison Lanza, two experts on freedom of the press at the UN Human Rights Council, said the US leader's attacks on journalists "run counter to the country's obligations to respect press freedom and international human rights law". They warned that such vitriolic rhetoric could result in violence against journalists.

Their concerns were validated in a report published on Jan 1. The US Press Freedom Tracker, which covers data based on news reports and information submitted by journalists and professional organizations, and more than two dozen press freedom groups, showed more than 400 incidents of press freedom violations in the US from 2017 to the end of 2019. These violations included arrests, subpoenas for source material and attacks on journalists.

That did not include the restrictions the US has imposed on Chinese journalists. According to Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, at least 21 Chinese journalists have been denied visa since last year.

Of all persecution of journalists in the US, nothing could be more abhorring than the US' attempt to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange from the United Kingdom to face charges under the US Espionage Act of 1917 for publishing Iraq and Afghanistan war logs. The classified US documents released by WikiLeaks a decade ago revealed the US' war atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, including a video showing the helicopter shooting in Baghdad that "collaterally" killed two Reuters correspondents.

In an article last June, my friend Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, criticized the US government for waging a war on press freedom in the name of national security. He said that if Assange and Wiki-Leaks are prosecuted for espionage in the US, it would deal a devastating blow to free and independent press in the US.

In other words, the US administration has to clean up its own mess on freedom of the press before pointing fingers at other countries.