

Townhall

Analysis: Trump's Mused Threats Against NBC May Be Pure Bluster, But They're Still Harmful

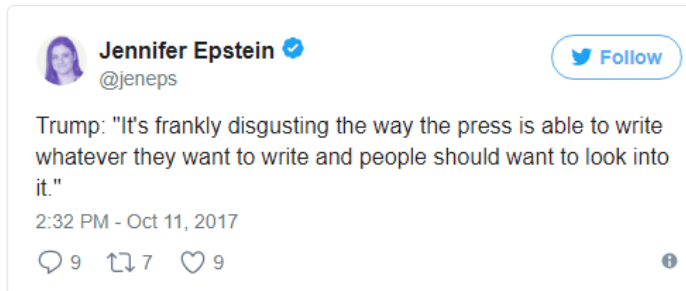
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President Trump made vaguely threatening comments about NBC News yesterday following a report that the White House and other senior administration officials vehemently denied. The veracity of that report is very much in question (I tend to believe strong denials from Gen. Mattis), and it's not like NBC is covering itself in journalistic glory these days. But *any* President of the United States wondering aloud whether a news outlet's broadcast license should be reviewed over content-related objections, or framing a media source as a threat to America, is inappropriate and speech-chilling. Nixon dabbled in it in the 1970's. Clinton demagogically attributed the Oklahoma City bombing to the "loud and angry voices" of conservative talk radio. And now Trump's beating this drum:



The answer to that question is "never," regardless of the suggestion's implausibility.



The press *is*, with narrow and specific exceptions, "able to write whatever they want." If people "want to look into it," they can look into the First Amendment. In fairness, Trump did tamp down his rhetoric, explicitly stating that he *doesn't* want to impose legal limits on the media, before reiterating his criticism about the press' dishonesty. But then he opened the door again a few hours later. Why is Trump's openly-stated impulse to muzzle the press destructive, even if he doesn't intend to follow through on his words? Because large elements of both of America's ideological tribes are increasingly embracing the notion of stifling and shutting down speech they don't like. The president is helping to normalize an illiberal, End of Discussion impulse. This silencing phenomenon obviously exists on the Left, but it's taking root among college students of varying political stripes, and with much of the public writ large. Polling suggests that a fair number of conservatives who ridicule intolerant Leftist "snowflakes" on university campuses are all too happy to indulge anti-speech meltdowns when they're triggered by offensive ideas or gestures. For instance, this is just dead wrong:



Sorry, kids, "hate speech" is protected by the First Amendment -- and sorry, Patriots, so is flag burning. It's not a criminal offense, let alone an act worthy of government-mandated citizenship forfeiture. A recent YouGov poll commissioned by the libertarian CATO Institute found that half of self-identified Republicans believe the US press enjoys *too much* freedom. Likewise, majorities of self-identified Democrats hold hostile views of free speech and expression: Lefties, too, hold many lamentable views regarding the legal and cultural importance of free expression in America. **Fully half of Democrats think that "government should prevent**

people from engaging in hate speech against certain groups in public." Some 53 percent say that defending someone else's right "to say racist things" is just as condemnable as "holding racist views yourself." **Two in three believe offensive speech constitutes an act of violence,** and the same number feel that college administrators "have an obligation to protect students from speech and ideas that could create a difficult learning environment."

Conflating speech with violence is a terrible, harmful distortion that could be employed to justify all sorts of restrictions on words. After all, we punish violent acts, and if *words* are also "violent acts," why not punish those, too? It's an awful idea. Prominent politicians who whip up the anti-speech mob and effectively endorse hecklers' vetoes should be excoriated. So should prominent politicians who foment agitation against press freedoms. And Americans across the political spectrum who believe in the fundamental principle of free speech must lock arms in defending it while calling out leaders, particularly within their own "tribe," who weaken it. The republic depends on it. And while we're on the subject of lamentable *End of Discussion* tactics, I'll leave you with the supposedly "anti-PC" Trump White House citing a previous left-wing PC witch hunt to discredit a policy critic. Pathetic:



Less of that, more of this, please.