

The Detroit News

Trump's media attacks are destructive

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October 22, 2017

After NBC News ran an article that maintained that President Donald Trump had asked for the U.S. nuclear arsenal to be increased nearly tenfold, Trump, as is his wont, tweeted: “With all of the Fake News coming out of NBC and the Networks, at what point is it appropriate to challenge their License? Bad for country!”

The answer, of course, is that it's never appropriate for a person sworn to defend the Constitution to threaten to shut down speech, not even if that speech irritates him or undermines his political priorities or happens to be genuinely false news. Trump might have framed his contention in the form of a question, but he's clearly comfortable with regulatory restrictions on speech. This puts in him league with those who support “fairness doctrines,” those who want to overturn the Citizens United decision and so on.

When I tweeted critical comments about Trump's “license” idea, a follower accused me of practicing “literal-ism.” This is not new. As you know, we're not supposed to take everything Trump says seriously. Sure, it's more than likely his threat is nothing more than bluster. There is less of a chance that he'll challenge the “licenses” of networks — whatever that means; networks don't function on licensing tied to the veracity of their reporting, obviously — than there is of the GOP passing any meaningful bill. It's just more fuel for the corrupt symbiotic relationship between the president and the establishment media. Each side can now preen for a cycle.

But none of this changes the fact that presidents *do* have the power to undermine your privacy and destroy your life over free expression. It doesn't change the fact, as we learned over the past eight years, that when presidents play around with authoritarian ideas for political gain, a faction of Americans — always a different faction, depending on who is speaking — are comfortable hearing it or offer rationalizations for it. All the while, we continue to abandon neutral principles for political gain.

A forthcoming Cato Institute poll, as reported by Reason magazine, found that 50 percent of Democrats believe “government should prevent people from engaging in hate speech against certain groups in public.” What's more, 53 percent believe defending someone else's right “to say racist things” is tantamount to “holding racist views yourself.” It's a position similar to the one that alleges anyone who supports due process for those accused of rape on college campuses is merely defending rape.

Recently, about 200 staff members of the American Civil Liberties Union — an organization that bills itself a defender of constitutional rights — complained that the group's “rigid stance” on the First Amendment was undermining its attempts to institute racial justice. Is this really the choice

— liberty or “justice”? For progressives, many of whom are abandoning liberalism, it seems the answer is yes.

They’re not alone. The Cato poll finds that 72 percent of Republicans would support making it illegal to burn or desecrate the American flag. More than 50 percent of them believe, as Trump once suggested, that those who do should be stripped of their U.S. citizenship. Fifty percent of Republicans believe the press has too much freedom in America. Other polling has found similarly disturbing results.

The entire “fake news” outrage — from Trump’s usage of the phrase to the Facebook presidential election scare — is an excuse for someone to limit speech. No, it doesn’t matter if most journalists now lecturing you about the First Amendment are a bunch of enormous hypocrites. Nor does matter that their biased coverage has eroded your trust. There is a bigger marketplace for news now than ever. Don’t watch NBC.

But even if you’re not idealistic about free expression, it might be worth remembering that any laws or regulations you embrace to inhibit the speech of others, even anchors reporting fake news, could one day be turned on you.