



## Johnston: Freedom of assembly must apply to everyone equally

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On Aug. 11, a protest was held on Massachusetts Street in response to University of Kansas officials taking down a piece of art following last month's flag incident. This demonstration included nearly 600 protesters who roamed downtown Lawrence, many with matching t-shirts reading "Art is the Voice of Freedom." The protest was a testament to peaceful assembly and free speech.

But the people of Lawrence aren't always so keen on demonstrations. After a protest earlier this year dubbed "Defend Our Flag," many people spoke up at the following city commission meetings, bringing up that we shouldn't allow protests of that nature because they instill fear and discomfort in bystanders. One attendee stated that "the violence, even though it wasn't physical, was still very present" and that we shouldn't tolerate that type of behavior in Lawrence.

At face value, this seems unbalanced. The right to protest must apply equally to everyone, not just those whose ideas are in the majority.

The right to assemble is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. Combined with protections for free speech, this can be powerful in the hands of the people. It allows them to voice their concerns, opinions and beliefs in public without fear of the government silencing them. If we are to remain a society that actually values diversity and freedom, we must protect the voices of people of all beliefs.

In the statement made by the attendee above, the violence allegedly present in the "Defend our Flag" protest wasn't physical; however the attendee nevertheless expressed that the way in which the protestors were making their stance was itself a form of violence. This is a common point you may have heard before: the idea that hate speech is violence. According to the CATO institute, 53% of Americans agree with that. Unfortunately, these people are misinformed.

Violence, by its very nature, must be physical. Speech that you disagree with does not equal violence. People can be insulting, repulsive individuals with awful opinions, but that still doesn't make them violent.

In fact, the only speech that should legally be prohibited is speech that calls for immediate violence. If a protester is threatening to hurt someone, or vice versa, then that is, of course,

reprehensible, and they should be prosecuted. But if they are simply stating an opinion you find abhorrent, calling that violence and asking the city to step in is a dishonest attempt at silencing their ideas through government.

The Lawrence City Commission should realize this. If any policy is to be taken to limit protests or create a permit system, it would have to apply equally to people of any political alignment. Ideally, a permit system should be avoided as it invites opportunity for certain groups to be doled out permission and others excluded, from what would otherwise be a self-regulated process. The amount of large protests per year is small enough, and the ease at which you can avoid protests that you don't wish to be a part of makes this a non-issue.

Let people protest whatever they want, let them voice whatever opinions they want.

If threats of violence are directly made, then we have a duty to call them out, regardless of political affiliation. But if people are speaking out peacefully about issues they are passionate about, then we should be thankful we live in a country where we are able to do that, whether we agree with them or not.