



The bipartisan war against free speech

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Conservatives often complain about attacks on free speech in the United States. They are more right than they know. For the threat does not emanate only from the left. The right is guilty too -- not that you'd know it from reading their jeremiads against political correctness.

The leftist assault on speech has been a staple of conservative polemics for decades. I wrote columns on the subject myself in the early 1990s for the *Daily Californian*, the student newspaper at the University of California at Berkeley. Both President Donald Trump and his amen chorus at Fox News have latched onto this issue to suggest a conspiracy by pointy headed coastal elitists to silence the right-thinking heartland. They complained incessantly, for example, about a mythical "war on Christmas" -- as if President Barack Obama were sending people to prison for saying "Merry Christmas." But just because the assault is exaggerated doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Last month, Ian Buruma was forced to resign as editor of the *New York Review of Books* after publishing an essay by Canadian radio personality Jian Ghomeshi, who had been accused, and acquitted, of charges of violence against women. Buruma was criticized for giving a platform to a #MeToo predator, for not providing a fuller explanation of the case against Ghomeshi, and for sounding cavalier in an interview about his decision to publish. Those are legitimate concerns, but they are not grounds for dismissal.

More than a hundred contributors to the *New York Review*, including literary heavyweights such as Joyce Carol Oates and Ian McEwan, published an open letter denouncing Buruma's exit as "an abandonment of the central mission of the Review, which is the free exploration of ideas."

Another storied liberal magazine, the *Nation*, betrayed the cause of free speech in July by retracting a poem, "How To," in which a hustler gives advice in black dialect on how to panhandle effectively. Because the poem was written by a white poet and suggested faking physical infirmities, poetry editors Stephanie Burt and Carmen Giménez Smith cringingly apologized for the "disparaging and ableist language that has given offense and caused harm to members of several communities." Oh, please. Grace Schulman, the *Nation's* poetry editor from 1971 to 2006, was right to be "deeply disturbed by this episode, which touches on a value that is precious to me and to a free society: the freedom to write and to publish views that may be offensive to some readers."

Similar transgressions against free speech are even more common on campus, where conservative scholars such as Christina Hoff Sommers and Charles Murray have been shouted down by mobs of progressives. At my alma mater, the home of the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s, violent protesters last year forced the cancellation of appearances by Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos. Both are absurd and sinister figures who should never have been invited in

the first place, but once the invitation was extended it should not have been rescinded under threat of force. (Yiannopoulos was finally able to speak briefly a few months later under heavy security that cost the university an estimated \$800,000.)

Interpreting the polls

Yet many of those who claim to speak for liberalism have a different view. A Cato Institute-YouGov survey last year found that 52 percent of Democrats favor a ban on hate speech, while 72 percent of Republicans oppose it. So does that mean that Republicans are pro-speech? Hardly. A more accurate interpretation would be to say that most members of the overwhelmingly white Republican Party aren't bothered by defamation of minorities, i.e., people unlike them.

Yet Republicans are happy to crack down on speech that offends their own sensibilities. In that same survey, 63 percent of Republicans agreed with Trump that journalists are the "enemy of the American people." An Ipsos poll in August found that 44 percent of Republicans think that the president should be able to shut down news outlets for "bad behavior" -- which, according to Trump, amounts to accurately reporting what he says and does.

As these figures would indicate, a disturbing number of Republicans applaud Trump's assault on the First Amendment - the likes of which we haven't seen since the Red Scares of the 1920s and 1950s. The Cato-YouGov survey found that 65 percent of Republicans favor firing NFL players for refusing to stand for the national anthem, a faux issue that Trump has used to rally his white nationalist base against highly paid African American athletes. How can conservatives with straight faces oppose policing "micro-aggressions" against minorities but support policing micro-aggressions by minorities?

Their hypocrisy reveals that many conservatives are no friends of the First Amendment. But then neither are those progressives who would fire an editor or shut down a campus speaker for voicing sentiments they find objectionable. The war on speech is a more bipartisan phenomenon than either side would care to admit. All too many ideologues of left and right are divided not on the principle of suppressing speech but on the details of which speech should be suppressed.