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## Trump's stance against flag burning undermines the Right's fight for free speech

by Brad Polumbo

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On Saturday, President Trump set the internet ablaze with a tweet about flag burning. He endorsed a constitutional amendment proposed by Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., that would ban desecration of the flag and overturn Supreme Court precedent that currently declares flag burning a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment.

This is the last fight the president should pick right now. Trump and his usual apologists may think they're taking a stand for patriotism, but all they're really doing is betraying the principles behind free speech and making all Republicans look like First Amendment hypocrites.

First, on the core of the issue, the president and his acolytes are woefully misguided. Yes, burning the flag is horribly offensive, unpatriotic, and an insult to veterans. Yet it's exactly this kind of offensive speech and expressive conduct that it's so crucial the First Amendment protects.

Once we give in to a right-wing version of political correctness (aptly dubbed "patriotic correctness" by the Cato Institute's Alex Nowrasteh), every American's right to speak freely is imperiled by that precedent. Any principled defender of free speech must support and defend those rights even for their most vile of opponents.

But the biggest problem with Trump's stance is the real harm it does to the conservative movement's essential and ongoing effort to protect free speech from an increasingly illiberal Left. We're living in the middle of an all-out war against free expression — targeting primarily conservative speech — on college campuses and within institutions under liberal control such as social media and technology.

For instance, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education estimates that roughly one-third of colleges blatantly restrict student speech, and only about 8% have policies that clearly don't threaten free expression. It's no surprise a 2018 Gallup poll found that 61% of students feel that their campus climate prevents people from speaking freely. This campus assault on free speech is a civil libertarian's nightmare, and something Republicans have rightfully fought against.

Conservatives have also pushed back against big tech's crackdown on controversial right-wing speech. Just in the last year, Twitter has banned high-profile right-wing voices such as David Horowitz and James Woods, and a Quillette investigation found that "of 22 prominent, politically active individuals who are known to have been suspended [from Twitter] since 2005... 21 supported Donald Trump." Meanwhile, Pinterest censored and then banned the pro-life group

Live Action from its platform, and YouTube pulled the videos that revealed the original censorship.

This is clearly an assault on free expression, and Republicans have largely led the fight against it.

Trump is no exception, and he has spoken out on both these issues, decrying tech censorship and even signing an executive order defending free speech on campus. Trump deserves credit for this — but the president undermines all his good work when he flip-flops and supports speech restrictions on the other side.

In doing so, he makes all Republicans look like hypocrites, as it seems as if we only support free speech when it's conservative speech that's imperiled. Amid the far left's increasingly bold assault on free speech, this neuters our ability to reach the many neutral and even Democratic voters who still support speech rights for all. And that does more harm to the future of our country than burning the flag ever could.