



Even if Trump's threat isn't serious, it's still destructive

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After NBC ran an article maintaining that the president had asked for the nuclear arsenal to be increased tenfold, President Donald 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 fake 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 of me 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 the president's 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 that when presidents play around with authoritarian ideas for political gain, a faction of Americans — always a different faction, depending on who is doing the speaking — are either comfortable hearing it or offer rationalizations for it.

All the while we continue to abandon neutral principles for political gain. This is especially true on the issue of speech.

A forthcoming Cato Institute poll not only found that 50 percent of Democrats believe "government should prevent people from engaging in hate speech against certain groups in public" but that 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. Or, for that matter, it's reminiscent of the position of Democratic senators who

argue that Republicans' demands for due process for gun owners make them no better than terrorists.

Recently, 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.

But 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.

To some extent, it is likely that answers in these polls are more about signaling on race and gender issues than supporting any specific policy. In the same way, many of the answers are likely an outlet for frustration over flag protests or the media. Even so, what the polls do illustrate is that our hierarchy of ideals has changed in destructive ways. Americans find free speech a secondary principle.

The entire "fake news" outrage — from Trump's usage to the Facebook 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 than ever. Don't read 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 fake-news anchors, can one day be turned on you.

This is the lesson big-government Democrats and Republicans never learn.