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After Trump, Can “The Only Security of All is in a Free Press” Still Be True?

The First Amendment protects the president’s right to say media is “the enemy of the American people,” to “mock, needle, evade and even demean the press,” and to describe legitimate stories as “fake news.”² But the constitution doesn’t protect his right to “suppress or punish speech” and to propose “government retribution against news outlets and reporters.”³ So PEN America finally stood up to President Trump’s attacks against the press on October 16, 2018.⁴

Like another tyrant’s long chain of abuses,⁵ this president has crossed the line.⁶ He has attacked CNN’s news coverage as “fake,” “garbage,” and “terrible.”⁷ In retaliation, he personally opposed a merger between CNN’s parent company and AT&T.⁸ He has attacked the *Washington Post* and threatened to go after its owner, Jeff Bezos, and Amazon—threats he then carried out.⁹

The president’s attacks inspire violence against journalists.¹⁰ In 2018, a man threatened to murder Boston Globe journalists for being “enem[ies] of the people”—the president’s own language.¹¹ Trump’s actions are unconstitutional.¹² Jefferson would recognize this president for what he is—a tyrant.¹³

If you believe the above—that President Trump’s actions infringe upon the press—I need to take you on a world tour, courtesy of Reporters Without Borders.¹⁴

China: The state controls all media, more than a hundred journalists are currently detained, and you can be arrested for posting the wrong comment online.¹⁵

Democratic Republic of Congo: Pledges from a newly installed president may not be enough to curtail the alarming amount of arrests, attacks, threats, and ransacking of media outlets.¹⁶

Iran: Since 1979, the state has imprisoned or executed at least 860 journalists.¹⁷

Philippines: President Duterte declared that “[j]ust because you’re a journalist, you are not exempted from assassination, if you’re a son of a bitch. Freedom of expression cannot help you if you have done something wrong.”¹⁸

Russia: We see arbitrary imprisonment of journalists, nonstop propaganda on television, and attacks against the media continue to go unpunished.¹⁹

The United States is far from perfect.²⁰ But when we look beyond our country, we see what the absence of a free press really looks like: imprisonment, state-sanctioned murder, and censorship. I argue that attacks against President Trump actually prove our press’s *freedom*. What do you think would happen to a journalist in North Korea who uses the type of language that Politico or The New York Times employs?²¹ Only in a free nation can a media outlet call the president a dictator without facing brutal repercussions.²² Read an editorial piece. You’ll find many examples of a vibrant free press denouncing an elected president.

After writing, “the only security of all is in a free press,” Jefferson continued: “The force of public opinion cannot be resisted, when permitted freely to be expressed. The *agitation it produces* must be submitted to. It is *necessary* to keep the waters pure.”²³ Thanks to Trump’s blustering, we have a great deal of agitation. And *that’s* what keeps this nation free and its people secure.

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