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### Free Press: Democracy's Engine

[T]he only path to a subversion of the republican system of the Country is, by flattering the prejudices of the people... to throw affairs into confusion, and bring on civil commotion.

-Alexander Hamilton, Objections and Answers Respecting the Administration

A democratic structure of government, i.e. a system of governance that invites citizen participation in the decision-making process, requires an informed populace to function in an efficacious manner. This representative model assumes a level of knowledge of its members, whose responsibility is to make rational choices at the ballot box. In the same way that Adam Smith justified capitalism on the basis of better products outcompeting worse ones, our founders justified democracy by arguing that candidates who have better ideas will rise to the top in the marketplace of ideas, and the end result will be an election in which the country has aligned its ballot with the best politicians.

A free press, though, is the proverbial engine that powers this machine of democracy. Only in a society in which the media can present information without constraints can the citizens have access to differing ideas, weigh their relative merits, and proceed with the best one. Conversely, an illiberal, hermetic civil society without access to protected journalism has access to only one ideology, that of the state. This authoritarian form of government will inevitably stagnate and fall, as it has no flexibility to evolve based on the suggestions of its media. In this way, America's greatest strength comes not from our economy or military, but from the domestic free press that inculcates our nation's inherently self-reflexive nature. Although the United States has made mistakes, only the ability to criticize the government and freely debate ensures that, in the

long term, we will come to acknowledge our faults and progress beyond them.

Given these foundational facts of democracy, Hamilton's prescient observation seems all too relevant now: the nation seems to possess confusion and civil commotion in spades. One may ask if the democratic machine has ceased to run, as the capacity for the country collectively to sort right from wrong and truth from falsehood eludes us. At a time of increasing polarization, government coercion of the press, and ideological media bubbles, however, the freedom of the press possesses more importance, not less.

Only through a reclamation of free press can we hope to move past this morass of myopia and gridlock by once again cultivating a shared national identity, based on an informed citizenry. This shared national identity does not come from everyone agreeing, but rather everyone agreeing to disagree. Too many citizens fall on one side, lauding the press for eight years when the opposition is in power, then excoriating the media the next two terms. It is only through an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the press every year, both to criticize and praise the government, that we will be able to separate one's party from the press and move forward as a country.