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Mr. President, stop attacking the press

by John McCain

After leaving office, President Ronald Reagan created the Ronald Reagan Freedom Award to recognize individuals who have fought to spread liberty worldwide. Nancy Reagan continued the tradition after her husband's death, and in 2008 she bestowed the honor on human rights icon [Natan Sharansky](#), who credited Reagan's strong defense of freedom for his own survival in Soviet gulags. Reagan recognized that as leader of the free world, his words carried enormous weight, and he used them to inspire the unprecedented spread of democracy around the world.

President Trump does not seem to understand that his rhetoric and actions reverberate in the same way. He has threatened to continue his attempt to discredit the free press by bestowing "fake news awards" upon reporters and news outlets whose coverage he disagrees with. Whether Trump knows it or not, these efforts are being closely watched by foreign leaders who are already using his words as cover as they silence and shutter one of the key pillars of democracy.

According to the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), 2017 was [one of the most dangerous](#) years to be a journalist. Last year, the organization documented [262 cases](#) of journalists being imprisoned for their work. Reporters around the world face intimidation, threats of violence, harassment, persecution and sometimes even death as governments resort to brutal censorship to silence the truth.

The committee's report revealed a bleak global climate for press freedom, as more governments seek to control access to information and limit freedom of opinion and expression. They do this not only by arresting journalists but also by fostering distrust of media coverage and accusing reporters of undermining national security and pride. Governments dub the press the "enemy of the people," weaken or eliminate their independence, and exploit the lack of serious scrutiny to encroach on individual liberties and freedoms.

This assault on journalism and free speech proceeds apace in places such as [Russia](#), [Turkey](#), [China](#), Egypt, [Venezuela](#) and many others. Yet even more troubling is the growing number of attacks on press freedom in traditionally free and open societies, where censorship in the name of national security is becoming more common. Britain passed a [surveillance law](#) that experts warn chills free speech, and countries from France to Germany are looking to do the same. In Malta, [a prominent journalist](#) was brutally murdered in October after uncovering systemic government corruption. In Poland, an independent [news outlet was fined](#) (later rescinded) nearly half a million dollars for broadcasting images of an anti-government protest.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration's attitude toward such behavior has been inconsistent at best and hypocritical at worst. While administration officials often condemn violence against reporters abroad, Trump continues his unrelenting attacks on the integrity of American journalists and news outlets. This has provided cover for repressive regimes to follow suit. The phrase "fake news" — granted legitimacy by an American president — is being used by autocrats to silence reporters, undermine political opponents, stave off media scrutiny and mislead citizens. [CPJ documented 21 cases](#) in 2017 in which journalists were jailed on "fake news" charges.

Trump's attempts to undermine the free press also make it more difficult to hold repressive governments accountable. For decades, dissidents and human rights advocates have relied on independent investigations into government corruption to further their fight for freedom. But constant cries of "fake news" undercut this type of reporting and strip activists of one of their most powerful tools of dissent.

We cannot afford to abdicate America's long-standing role as the defender of human rights and democratic principles throughout the world. Without strong leadership in the White House, Congress must commit to protecting independent journalism, preserving an open and free media environment, and defending the fundamental right to freedom of opinion and expression.

We can do this by encouraging our partners and allies to review their laws and practices, including the abuse of defamation and anti-terrorism laws, to better protect press freedom and ensure that they do not unduly shrink the space for free speech. We can authorize U.S. foreign assistance to support independent media outlets and programs that create greater media pluralism. We can do more to foster conditions in which freedom of expression and information can thrive, including working to change increasingly political attitudes toward journalism. And we can condemn violence against journalists, denounce censorship and support dissidents and activists as they seek to speak the truth.

Ultimately, freedom of information is critical for a democracy to succeed. We become better, stronger and more effective societies by having an informed and engaged public that pushes policymakers to best represent not only our interests but also our values. Journalists play a major role in the promotion and protection of democracy and our unalienable rights, and they must be able to do their jobs freely. Only truth and transparency can guarantee freedom.

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