



### **An Open Letter to Leaders of American Institutions**

We direct organizations that defend the freedoms of speech and the press. We write to sound a collective, unified alarm about the Trump administration's multi-front assault on First Amendment freedoms, and to call on leaders of civic and other major institutions—including universities, media organizations, law firms, and businesses—to stand more resolutely in defense of these freedoms that are integral to our democracy.

In little more than 100 days, President Trump and the agencies under his control have threatened First Amendment rights through a breathtaking array of actions. They have sought to control speech and association by imposing unconstitutional conditions on a wide range of federal grantees and contractors. They have sanctioned lawyers for their representation of people whom the president views as political enemies. They have arrested, detained, and threatened to deport international students—including lawful permanent residents—solely because of their participation in lawful political protest. They have purged crucial datasets from government websites, gutted agency offices responsible for compliance with the Freedom of Information Act, and imposed new and indefensible restraints on public employees' right to speak on matters of public concern. They have invoked civil rights laws to justify extensive and unwarranted intrusions into universities' autonomy and academic freedom. Resurrecting a policy introduced during President Trump's first term, they have barred legal scholars from providing information and expertise to the International Criminal Court. They have banned the Associated Press from the White House press pool because it declined to update its stylebook to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America." Books have been removed from U.S. military service academy libraries, and other federally operated educational institutions, because they do not conform to the administration's ideological preferences, and federal funds are being used as a cudgel to censor curriculum and promote the administration's viewpoints in schools. The Federal Communications Commission has threatened to revoke the licenses of television and radio networks and stations whose reporting the administration disfavors.

There have been other times in our nation's history that witnessed sustained and misguided efforts to suppress speech. All of our organizations have opposed both Democratic and Republican administrations when they abridged First Amendment freedoms—as all of them, at various points, have done. But we share the view that the Trump administration's actions, taken together, represent an extraordinary and in some ways unprecedented challenge to First Amendment rights and the values they embody. These actions call for a forceful, uncompromising response. Some institutions have countered in exactly this way, to their credit.

It has been disheartening, however, to see so many others capitulating to the administration's unconstitutional demands rather than asserting their rights. The logic that leads even powerful institutions to compromise or submit in these circumstances is of course easy to understand. But when one institution "bends the knee," its peers face increased pressure to do the same. Each surrender makes the assertion of First Amendment rights more costly and more perilous. We fear that if major institutions continue to submit rather than stand on their rights, the freedoms of speech and the press will be seriously and perhaps irrecoverably weakened.

If First Amendment freedoms are compromised, our democracy will be compromised, too. Democracy and free speech are inextricably linked. If we are to govern ourselves, we must be able to inquire, speak, write, associate, and protest without fear of governmental retaliation. The public must have broad and undistorted access to reliable information about the government's decisions and policies. The press must be free to report independently and critically without fear of official reprisal.

Leaders of civic and other major institutions must do more to defend these principles. They must stand more firmly in defense of First Amendment freedoms, and they must fight back unhesitatingly and energetically when their rights, and the rights of those they serve and represent, come under threat. We are ready to help. Our organizations have all committed significant resources to challenging Trump administration policies that violate the First Amendment, including those described above, and we are willing to do more. We are ready to represent and support institutions whose First Amendment rights are infringed or threatened.

If our democracy is to survive, the freedoms of speech and the press need a vigorous, determined defense. Leaders of this country's most powerful, well-resourced, and prestigious institutions must play a larger part in this effort.

Jodie Ginsberg  
Chief Executive Officer  
Committee to Protect Journalists

Anthony D. Romero  
Executive Director  
American Civil Liberties Union

Jameel Jaffer  
Executive Director  
Knight First Amendment Institute at  
Columbia University

Trevor Timm  
Executive Director  
Freedom of the Press Foundation

Summer Lopez and Clarisse Rosaz Shariyf  
Interim Co-CEOs  
PEN America

Clayton Weimers  
Executive Director  
Reporters Without Borders (RSF USA)

Greg Lukianoff  
President and CEO  
Foundation for Individual Rights and  
Expression