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OUR VIEW

Trump's attacks on the media risk freedom

“Words spoken by the president of the United States matter. Are you tonight recanting the oath you took on Jan. 20th to preserve, protect and defend the First Amendment?” U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse, R-Nebraska, asked this important question of President Donald Trump last week.

Trump said NBC should be punished for a story he didn't like by having its Federal Communications Commission license revoked. The president didn't understand the broadcaster doesn't rely on such a license. The threat is nevertheless deeply objectionable.

Trump's tweets and comments often are empty provocations, mainly intended to inflame his true believers. However, his many threats and insults thrown at working journalists and media organizations have real-world consequences. They must not go unchallenged by any American who genuinely cherishes our own democracy and cares about the pursuit of freedom in the rest of the world.

Trump's current target is NBC News. It is not the most revered member of the journalistic profession, being widely accused of wimpiness last year in covering the president's sexual assault admission to “Access Hollywood” host Billy Bush and this year's allegations of sexual predations by movie producer Harry Weinstein. The network's former news anchor Brian Williams was demoted for lying about his experiences covering the Iraq War.

The president's rant centers on an NBC report that Trump wanted a nearly tenfold increase in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The network implied it was this proposal in a July 20 meeting that led Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to call Trump a moron. There is no indication the network's report was incorrect. When asked directly, Tillerson didn't deny it.

Everyone understands why politicians get frustrated at the news media. It often is an adversarial relationship. Our traditions place the press in the role of independent watchdog over government. Because of this, some politicians regard the news media with the same loathing heaped on police internal-affairs divisions in procedural cop shows. Trump has taken this idea and ramped it up, trying to immunize himself against legitimate news by painting all journalists as liars and traitors — smart alecks out to get him.

The president's disdain for national media is ironic, considering how his celebrity status led to his election. Without the lavish coverage of him

by television, magazines, radio and newspapers, he might still be nothing but a bankrupt casino owner. Most politicians implicitly realize they have some form of symbiotic relationship with the press. Hopefully, this usually is in the public interest by sharing information and building a sense of national unity, but other times it simply derives from a shared desire to ride the publicity train to fame and fortune.

Many politicians indulge in ritual complaints about victimization by the press. Trump far oversteps normal bounds. Calling major news outlets “the enemy of the American people” and saying journalists are “sick people ... trying to take away our history and our heritage” places

honest news reporters at risk. There have been 20 arrests and 21 physical attacks on U.S. journalists this year, according to Columbia Journalism Review.

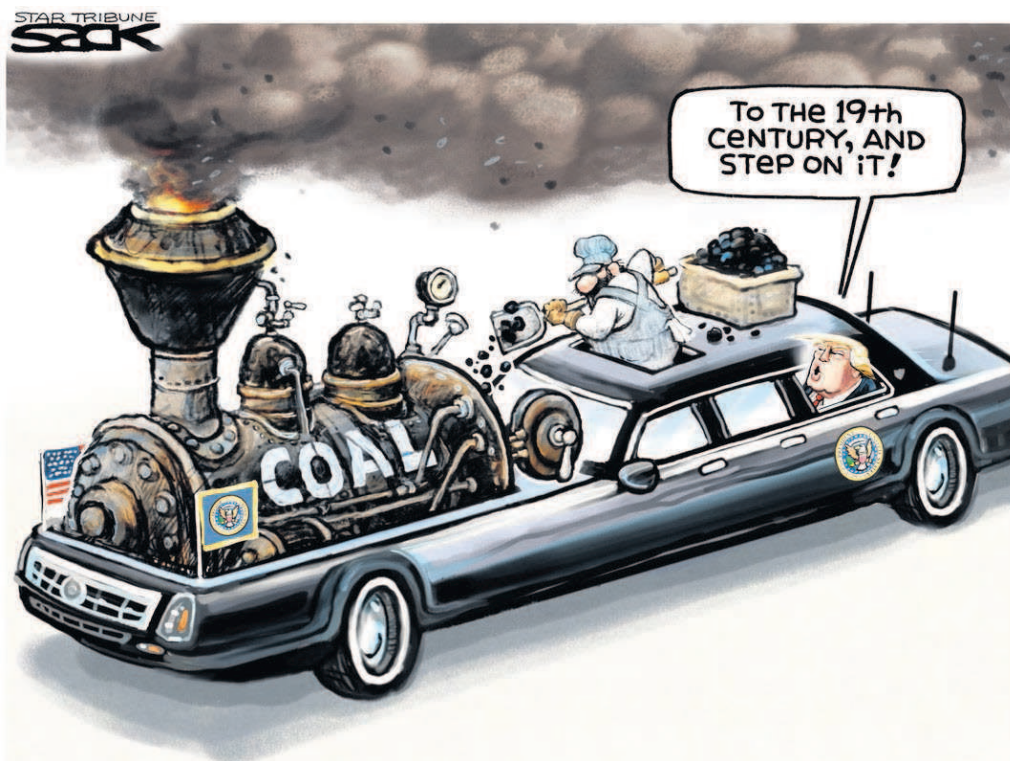
Trump's bullying words also have dangerous consequences beyond our borders. Worldwide, there are 259 journalists currently imprisoned for doing their jobs, CJR reports. In Turkey, Mexico and elsewhere, strongmen attack the independent press. Reporters doing their jobs by shining a light into the dark recesses of criminal enterprises and political repression too often pay for their courage with their lives. By attacking America's press, the world's biggest strongman provides inspiration for all who aspire to dominate others.

In a column in CJR, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger notes the First Amendment guaranteeing freedom of speech and the press “is a core part of the American identity. As much as it is about ‘rights’ — the right of dissent, of sovereignty residing in the citizenry and not in the government, and so on — it is also about the character of the society. To listen to people speak of free speech and press is to hear about fortitude, bravery, magnanimity, self-doubt, and the capacity to reason and respond; to recognize the importance of compromise, and to learn to live with some degree of chaos, uncertainty, and discord; and to value creativity and change over always trying to preserve the status quo.”

As Sen. Sasse said, words matter — especially those of the U.S. president. Some are taking his words to heart. Freedom suffers as a result.

Trump swore to uphold the Constitution. He must endeavor to keep his word, even when it comes to freedom of the press.

His many threats and insults thrown at working journalists and media organizations ... must not go unchallenged



OTHER VIEWS

Why I went to North Korea

Since my five-day visit to North Korea recently, I've encountered pushback from critics who ask, “Why go?”

First, they argue: You needlessly put yourself at risk and give Kim Jong Un a bargaining chip if he grabs you. The U.S. government shouldn't have to worry about bone-headed journalists in enemy territory.

Second, they say: By going to North Korea, you simply become a mouthpiece for a country that you admit is the most totalitarian country in the history of the world. It's a Potemkin country, and you become a “useful idiot” transmitting propaganda.

Frankly, these are legitimate arguments. So let's seize the moment for an honest discussion — and, in the process, let me offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse of reporting there.

Getting a visa to North Korea is always tough, and my latest attempt involved long and delicate negotiations with North Korean diplomats — and with my wife. (That's not a complaint: If she were eager for me to go to North Korea, I'd be worried.)

Four of us from *The New York Times* obtained visas (stay tuned for a video we're making from the trip), and then quickly received U.S. State Department approval, along with special U.S. passports valid for travel to North Korea.

The only way into North Korea is on daily flights from Beijing on creaky Russian planes. The in-flight entertainment is a video of a North Korean military orchestra playing classical music, interspersed with scenes of missiles being launched.

From the moment we arrived, we were escorted by two Foreign Ministry handlers, and we were housed at a guarded Foreign Ministry compound.

Our hosts were always courteous, but there was a whiff of menace that didn't exist on my previous trips to North Korea, not least because three Americans are currently being detained there. And just in August, North Korea sentenced two South Korean journalists and their publishers to death in absentia for their writing.

It was also troubling that we were given strong hints that the Foreign Ministry was isolating us and escorting us as protection from military and security agencies, which weren't on board with our presence.

North Korea is the most rigidly controlled country in the world, with no open dissent, no religion and no civil society, and there is zero chance that anyone will express dissatisfaction with the government.

Still, the conversations were illuminating. Ordinary North Koreans were unfamiliar with the name of Otto Warmbier, the American student who died days after being returned to the United States in a vegetative state after his detention in Pyongyang for stealing a poster. But they knew all about President Donald Trump's threats to destroy their country.



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment

That's because the government wants them to know about Trump's threats, because they bolster Kim's nationalist narrative that he protects Korea from imperialist U.S. aggressors.

Being on the ground in a country lets you see things and absorb their power: the speaker on the walls of homes to feed propaganda; the pins that every adult wears with portraits of members of the Kim family; the daily power outages, but also signs that the economy is growing despite

international sanctions; the Confucian emphasis on dignity that makes officials particularly resent Trump's personal attacks on Kim; the hardening of attitudes since my last visit, in 2005; and the bizarre confidence that North Korea can not only survive a nuclear war with the U.S. but also emerge as victor.

At one factory, we came upon workers doing their “political study.” North Koreans

explained that they have political study for two hours a day, plus most of the day on Saturday, so I asked what they focused on these days. “We must fight against the Americans!” one woman answered earnestly. And then the North Koreans in the room dissolved into laughter, perhaps because of the oddness of saying this to Americans.

A visit humanizes North Koreans, who outside the country sometimes come across as robots. In person,

you are reminded that they laugh, flirt, worry, love and yearn to impress.

A military officer greeted me with a bone-crushing handshake, and I asked if that was meant to intimidate and convey to the Yankee imperialists that North Koreans are muscular supermen. He laughed in embarrassment, and when we ended the interview, he was much gentler.

I left North Korea fearing that we are far too complacent about the risk of a cataclysmic war that could kill millions. And that's why reporting from within North Korea is crucial: There simply is no substitute for being in a place. It's a lesson we should have learned from the run-up to the Iraq War, when the reporting was too often from the Washington echo chamber rather than the field. When the stakes are millions of lives and official communications channels are nonexistent, then journalism can sometimes serve as a bridge — and as a warning.

Yes, we must carefully weigh the risks — physical risks and the danger of being used by propagandists — and work to mitigate them.

But I have a sinking feeling in my gut, just as I had on the eve of the Iraq War, that our president may be careening blindly toward war. In that case, the job of journalists is to go out and report, however imperfectly, and try to ring alarm bells in the night.

Nicholas D. Kristof, a columnist for The Times since 2001, is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who grew up on a sheep farm in Yamhill, Oregon.

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YOUR VIEWS

Real men don't abuse women

Harvey Weinstein uses his position of power to sexually assault and harass women and is deservedly vilified and ruined. Donald Trump does the same thing and is elected president. What's wrong with this picture? Could it be the celebrity status of the women Weinstein abused as opposed to the “ordinary,” not so well known women abused by Trump?

Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, Bill Clinton — all powerful men using their positions to try and justify and/or rationalize their actions with vulnerable women. It is definitely a black mark on our gender and should be called out immediately, never overlooked with the hope that it might be a one-time occurrence. It happens all too often and for too long the bad habit of blaming the victims to protect the abuser has kept those at fault from paying the ultimate price for their

abhorrent behavior.

We are male by birth, but men by choice and real men don't abuse women in any way shape or form.

David Gracia
Hermiston

Humane society is worthy of support

I noticed on Facebook that Mason Murphy is hosting the Humane Society dinner and auction at 40 Taps again (Nov. 4, 5:30 p.m.). I have attended these since they started and the community involvement has been good.

Something as important as a Humane Society in our community is worth everyone's effort. I can remember when we had nowhere to place the unwanted abandoned pets and would not want to see

that again. So donate and attend, it's for a great cause, and it's fun.

Thanks, Mason, for your hard work.

Mary C. Long
Pendleton

Support the Clean Energy Jobs Bill

It's great that some Republicans are accepting science. Federally, the 50-member House Climate Solutions Caucus, half of whom are Republicans, proposes legislation. But in Oregon, our Republican representatives still sit on their hands. Many of them claim to accept the science, but talking the talk is totally inadequate; they must walk the walk.

After a season of national hurricane and wildfire disasters almost certainly made more severe by human-induced emissions

of climate pollution, the urgency of action should be hitting home. Alas, it is not! Facing a legislative proposal that places a cap on our contribution to this global warming problem, Oregon's Republicans grope from reason to reason to oppose meaningful action. While a few Oregon Republicans stick their heads in the sand, tout the denier hoaxes, and claim not to believe the science, others claim to accept the science and still do nothing.

We've had purely voluntary pollution reduction goals in place for 10 years and are nowhere near the trajectory of reduction we need to be; voluntary goals have failed. It's time to support the Clean Energy Jobs Bill — a win-win solution for rural Oregon with funds allocated to supporting renewable energy projects in economically depressed areas.

Trisha Vigil
Medford

LETTERS POLICY

The East Oregonian welcomes original letters of 400 words or less on public issues and public policies for publication in the newspaper and on our website. The newspaper reserves the right to withhold letters that address concerns about individual services and products or letters that infringe on the rights of private citizens. Submitted letters must be signed by the author and include the city of residence and a daytime phone number. The phone number will not be published. Unsigned letters will not be published. Send letters to managing editor Daniel Wattenburger, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801 or email editor@eastoregonian.com.