



Restoring U.S. Press Freedom Leadership

A proposal to the incoming Biden administration from the Committee to Protect Journalists

Introduction

The Committee to Protect Journalists is an independent, nonprofit organization that promotes press freedom worldwide. Founded in 1981, we defend the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal.

CPJ and our partners recognize the powerful role that the United States has played historically in supporting press freedom around the world. The Trump administration's hostility toward the press has contributed to the current wave of global media repression, including the record numbers of journalists imprisoned. The Biden administration has a chance to restore U.S. leadership, improve the flow of information within countries and across borders, advance democracy and freedom, bolster open markets, protect human rights, and reduce conflict. That task is urgent, critical and demanding, but can begin with a few simple but highly visible steps that include speaking out forcefully in defense of press freedom and empowering U.S. diplomats to do the same. The new administration should also create a new, temporary position of Special Presidential Envoy For Press Freedom.

Background: Press Freedom and U.S. Foreign Policy

The defense of press freedom has been a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since WWII. The U.S. government has promoted and funded independent media around the world; publicly defended journalists and news outlets under threat; disseminated credible news and information in censored societies via U.S.-government funded media; and promoted and defended the internet as a shared global system of information. The U.S. also led by example. The robust, pluralistic, and independent domestic media, protected by the First Amendment and a political culture that tolerated and even encouraged aggressive reporting, has been the envy of journalists everywhere. U.S.-based media report news not just for Americans, but for the entire world. Their stories shape global perceptions and help set the international agenda.

- History backs our firm belief that in the realm of press freedom, the U.S. is the indispensable nation. In recent years, U.S. policies and actions have produced these outcomes:

- Release of imprisoned journalists in Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Egypt
- Protection of journalists working for U.S. outlets (Vice President Biden raised concerns with Chinese leadership about the treatment of American journalists there)
- Defense and promotion of a free and open internet, including successfully opposing efforts by China to bring internet governance under UN control
- Creation of international institutions, including the special rapporteurs for freedom of expression of the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

The Trump Administration's Press Freedom Record

President Trump's persistent, aggressive, personalized attacks on individual journalists and the media as an institution was a defining feature of his presidency. While President Trump failed to realize his most dangerous proposals — such as jailing journalists or “making it easier” to sue them for libel — his language corroded public trust in the media. President Trump's disdain for expertise and his attacks on journalists' credibility have had a particularly devastating impact during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to trusted information is a matter of life and death.

President Trump's rhetoric has done tremendous damage outside the U.S., where autocrats and dictators have denounced critical media as “fake news” while jailing record numbers of journalists. A group of journalists from Brazil, Pakistan, India, Tanzania, and Nicaragua who were honored by CPJ for their courage told Vice President Mike Pence during a 2019 White House meeting that President Trump's actions had emboldened their leaders to crack down on domestic media. The Trump administration also failed to offer a robust defense of American journalists or media organizations under threat. U.S. officials failed to take appropriate or effective action when New York Times reporters faced arrest in Egypt, or when China expelled dozens of reporters from leading U.S. outlets. The most egregious

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failure of the Trump administration to stand up for press freedom was its response to the murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi.

An Opportunity for the Biden Administration

By designating the promotion and protection of press freedom as a focus of U.S. foreign policy, President Biden has the opportunity to restore American influence in a critical area; improve the flow of information to advance U.S. strategic, political, and economic interests and those of its democratic allies; and ensure the internet remains a shared global resource. However, this can only be achieved if defense of press freedom is a matter of principle, and not expediency. America must

confront its adversaries, but also challenge its friends.

A free press is necessary to understand and resolve complex geopolitical issues. Championing press freedom is of tremendous importance to journalists in this country and around the world, as well as to businesses, immigrants, and ethnic communities in the U.S. The U.S. media community expects the government to stand up for American journalists when they are imprisoned or taken hostage. Recent examples include freelance journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, killed in Syria in 2014; Jason Rezaian, jailed in Iran from July 2014 to January 2016; and Austin Tice, unaccounted for after being detained in Syria more than eight years ago.

Recommendations

The Committee to Protect Journalists makes the following recommendations to the incoming Biden administration:

Make a major speech in support of press freedom.

President Biden should articulate the importance of press freedom in U.S. foreign policy, placing that commitment in the broader context of support for democracy, human rights, and political freedom. The President should recognize the critical role that journalists play in providing trusted, accurate and timely information, which people everywhere need in order to hold their leaders accountable, particularly in the midst of a pandemic. The President should recognize that the social media companies also play a vital role, but that toxic speech, misinformation, and online harassment

have corrupted the information environment and undermined public trust, and commit to working with all stakeholders to find solutions. The President should champion the most courageous reporters who have risked their lives to report the truth, such as Filipina-American journalist Maria Ressa, and should pursue justice for journalists imprisoned or killed, including U.S. resident and Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, murdered by a Saudi government hit squad in October 2018. U.S. intelligence agencies should make public their findings on the Khashoggi murder, and anyone found to have played a role in the crime should be subject to targeted sanctions.

Strengthen and support press freedom domestically to set an example for the world.

The Biden administration should work directly with a coalition of press freedom groups, including CPJ and the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, to address a broad range of domestic press freedom concerns including the aggressive prosecution of leakers, the harassment of journalists at U.S. borders, and the over-classification of information. President Biden should commit to an open and transparent administration that supports Freedom of Information requests, backs Justice Department guidelines that protect confidential sources, and pledges never to use the Espionage

Act to prosecute journalists or whistleblowers. These long-standing concerns of CPJ and the press freedom community were also raised during the Obama administration. President Biden should support efforts to ensure that attacks on journalists covering the recent wave of protests in this country are fully investigated and those responsible are held to account. (The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker is documenting more than 900 such incidents, the majority of them perpetrated by law enforcement.) Finally, the administration should recognize that the collapse of local and community media, along with public interest and accountability journalism, poses a threat to American democracy. The Biden administration should support the search for financial solutions that make journalism sustainable.

Participate in and support international governmental organizations that defend press freedom.

Under the Biden administration, the U.S. should rejoin the U.N. Human Rights Council; restore U.S. membership and funding to UNESCO; and support the work of the special rapporteurs of the United Nations, OSCE and the Organization of American States.

Strengthen State Department support for press freedom.

The Biden administration should seek to rebuild the State Department institutions that have traditionally supported press freedom. The record of its nominee for Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor should include support for press freedom. The incoming administration should send a directive to U.S. embassies around the world indicating that the defense of press freedom is a foreign policy priority, and

empowering ambassadors and other diplomats to take appropriate measures. It should work with Congress to create an Office of Press Freedom within the State Department. It should develop and implement a press freedom curriculum at the Foreign Service Institute. It should strengthen reporting on press freedom for the annual State Department human rights reports, in compliance with the Daniel Pearl Press Freedom Act, and integrate protection of journalists and freedom of information into broader departmental programming.

Ensure the independence of U.S. government-funded media.

U.S. government-funded media — including Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty — have been a source of credible news and information for people around the world for generations. The

Biden administration should ensure that the leadership of the U.S. Agency for Global Media is committed to editorial independence and the safety of the staff. The leadership of the USAGM must also be committed to supporting a free and open internet through effective management of the Open Technology Fund.

Appoint a Special Presidential Envoy for Press Freedom.

The president should immediately appoint a high profile individual, preferably an American journalist with a track record of defending the press, as the Special Presidential Envoy for Press Freedom, reporting to the Secretary of State and empowered to speak out about violations around the world. The Envoy should stand up for U.S. journalists and media organizations facing threats and harassment, pursue justice in the murder of Jamal

Khashoggi, work to free imprisoned journalists, attend trials, and take other actions as directed by the President or Secretary of State — all while the administration works to rebuild the State Department institutions that traditionally support journalism and press freedom. In order to ensure such institutions are not undermined, the Special Presidential Envoy should serve in a transitional role for a single, non-renewable two-year term, until the State Department resumes the capacity to play its historic role.



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