

Our freedoms guaranteed under the First Amendment have never been more threatened than they are today. We have to stand up for a free press, and a first step is seeing through false choices.

ALTOONA, WI - Forty-five words. That's all it took for our nation's founders to grant us five bedrock freedoms. In just 45 words, they gave us freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to peaceably assemble, and the right to petition our government.

These five freedoms guaranteed under the First Amendment have never been more threatened than they are today. Press freedom is under assault as the president brands the news media an " enemy of the American people ." Both of the First Amendment's religious freedom clauses are being ignored as non-Christians are subjected to increasing discrimination and even targeted for deportation . The first of the two, namely the establishment clause , is disregarded as more and more American taxpayers are being forced to fund religious schools.

Free speech has become anything but free as the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that money is speech and corporations are citizens with speech rights, thereby blessing unlimited corporate election spending. Lawmakers in states all across the country are now trying to criminalize freedom of assembly and peaceful protest.

These are dangerous and threatening times for the First Amendment. The rise of fake news is a serious threat, but not the only one or even the biggest one. It's not just that lies are being widely and quickly spread, it's that a highly organized effort is being made to persuade the public that no news can be trusted, that no one is telling the truth. Journalism is being delegitimized.

Ongoing and escalating attacks on the separation of church and state gravely threaten religious freedom. State-endorsed religion is a small step from state-sponsored religion, which is another small step away from state-imposed religion. Heaven help us if we continue down this road toward the establishment of a state church.

The equating of money and speech is transforming a central First Amendment right into a commodity that must be purchased at great expense. Calls to limit the capacity of the rich and powerful to buy politicians and own our government are savaged as assaults on free speech. We are essentially being told we can try to deal with corruption in government, or we can have free speech, but not both. This is a false choice, and must be seen as such. We can have freedom *and* democracy. We can guarantee all people the right to speak freely without at the same time granting them a license to buy off our elected representatives and corrupt our government.

Rescuing the First Amendment begins with seeing through such false choices — and ultimately refusing to make them. But for the rescue operation to ultimately succeed, we the people are going to have to prove that the land of the free is truly still the home of the brave. We're going to have to demonstrate genuine courage in defending dissent and condemning attacks on peaceful protest. We're going to have to stand up for a free press and make it clear we do not see journalists as our enemies but rather as indispensable defenders of democracy.

If we don't, those 45 words describing five precious freedoms won't be worth the parchment they were written on.

— *Mike McCabe*

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