



Jonathan Bridges
Free Speech, If We Can Keep It
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Walking through the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., you'll find a hallway lined with candid photographs of former U.S. presidents. These images capture everything from tense negotiations with Nikita Khrushchev to the Watergate hearings, and even lighter moments, like the "Gipper" singing in the rain.

These snapshots, taken by photographers and club members, represent both the triumphs and the darkest hours of our nation's history. They recall an era when journalists dedicated countless hours to deep-dive investigations because the truth actually mattered. Back then, reporters were willing to risk their reputations, careers, and sometimes even their lives to get the story right. Today, that level of grit is rare in mainstream media. Instead, we usually get politically charged narratives dictated by editors who serve liberal agendas.

I recently attended [The College Fix](#) gala at the Press Club. It's an organization with an important mission: training the next generation of free-thinking journalists. Their student reporters are active at universities across the country, breaking news and covering stories the mainstream media completely ignores. Many of these fellows go on to secure internships at major outlets nationwide, both mainstream and conservative. Seeing a ballroom packed with these bright young reporters was a powerful reminder that real journalism isn't dead yet.

Their introductory video featured a line that really stuck with me: "Before there was Substack, free-press journalists had pamphlets." While the major newspapers of the colonial era remained loyal to the English Crown, Thomas Paine used his pamphlet, *Common Sense*, to make the radical case for independence. We often forget that the revolutionaries we celebrate today, including Paine, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Washington, and Hamilton, were once considered radicals. They used the power of the pen to challenge the status quo long before a formal free press even existed.

The authors of the Constitution valued free speech so highly that they put it right at the top in the First Amendment. Yet, 250 years later, those protections are under threat. You don't have to look far for proof. Just last week, the *Carolina Journal* [reported](#) they are still being

denied membership in the NC Capitol Press Corps because of their affiliation with the John Locke Foundation, even though other affiliated groups, like NC Newsline, are allowed in. Furthermore, ABC and CBS recently refused to air a speech by Donald Trump during primetime. Globally, we see journalists jailed for reporting on corruption and private citizens imprisoned just for their social posts. It feels like the "free world" is becoming less free, and I worry that our appetite for free speech is waning.

Ann Widdecombe, a former British Conservative Member of Parliament who was recently [murdered](#), hit the nail on the head when she said: "Nobody has the right to live their lives being protected from offense or from insult or from hurt feelings. It is an occupational hazard of living in society." I believe what is often framed as concern for others' feelings is actually just an excuse to exert government control and silence dissent, the primary tools of any authoritarian regime.

Many people are starting to wonder if Americans could eventually be jailed for free speech. We live in the greatest country on earth because we have freedom of conscience; we are free to think for ourselves, independent of the government. Our Constitution was specifically designed to be challenged through checks and balances, and if our rights are infringed, we can petition the courts. While we are a litigious nation, that legal system is exactly what keeps tyranny at bay.

Today, we see a growing appeal for expanded government control on both ends of the political spectrum. We reached this point partly because a biased press has driven anti-capitalist narratives, but we can save our country through a truly free press. The same drive that led the Founders to rebel against tyranny must now drive us to protect free speech at home and abroad. The question is: can we keep it?

I believe we can, and we must. This happens through the power of citizen journalism. We see it when ordinary people start Substacks to blog about injustices in their schools and communities. We see it when journalists move beyond a quick tweet to truly investigate a story, the kind of work Bob Woodward would approve of. And we see it through organizations like The College Fix, which continues to train reporters who cherish liberty and fight for the truth.

I would like to see even more groups training not just students, but all conservatives, including parents, activists, and volunteers, to write about corruption in their own backyards and report the local news that mainstream media ignores. The Leadership Institute offers excellent [training opportunities](#) in writing. Those who love liberty and capitalism can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines while a socialist agenda is pushed. We need more citizen journalists in our nation and right here in Wilmington. I encourage

you to start writing for *The Wilmington Standard*. If you see something happening in your community, write about it. As that video at the gala stated: "A free press helped build this nation; a biased press threatens it." We hold the power in our hands to combat that threat.

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