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Jeff Flake

Senate Floor Speech on Truth and Power

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Mr. President, near the beginning of the document that made us free, our Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident..." So, from the very beginning, our freedom has been predicated on truth. The founders were visionary in this regard, understanding well that good faith and shared facts between the governed and the government would be the very basis of this ongoing idea of America.

As the distinguished former member of this body, Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, famously said: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not [to his] own facts."¹ During the past year, I am alarmed to say that Senator Moynihan's proposition has likely been tested more severely than at any time in our history. For it is that reason that I rise today, to talk about the truth and the truth's relationship to democracy. For without truth, and a principled fidelity to truth and to shared facts, Mr. President, our democracy will not last.



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2017 was a year which saw the truth -- objective, empirical, evidence-based truth -- more battered and abused than at any time in the history of our country, at the hands of the most powerful figure in our government. It was a year which saw the White House enshrine "alternative facts" into the American lexicon, as justification for what used to be simply called "old-fashioned falsehoods." It was the year in which an unrelenting daily assault on the constitutionally-protected free speech² was launched by the same White House, an assault that is as unprecedented as it is unwarranted. "The enemy of the people,"³ was how the President of the United States called the free press in 2017.

Mr. President, it is a testament to the condition of our democracy that our own President uses words infamously spoken by Josef Stalin to describe his enemies. It bears noting that so fraught with malice was the phrase "enemy of the people," that even Nikita Khrushchev forbade its use,⁴ telling the Soviet Communist Party that the phrase had been introduced by Stalin for the purpose of (quote) "annihilating such individuals" (unquote) who disagreed with the supreme leader.⁵

This alone should be the source of great shame for us in this body, especially for those of us in the President's party. For they are shameful, repulsive statements. And, of course, the President has it precisely backward -- despotism is the enemy of the people. The free press is the despot's enemy, which makes the free press the guardian of democracy. When a figure in power reflexively calls any press that doesn't suit him "fake news," it is that person who should be the figure of suspicion, not the press.

I dare say that anyone who has had the privilege and awesome responsibility to serve in this chamber knows that these reflexive slurs of "fake news" are dubious at best. Those of us who travel overseas, especially to war zones and other troubled areas all around the globe, encounter members of U.S. based media who risk their lives, and sometimes lose their lives, reporting on the truth. To dismiss their work as fake news is an affront to their commitment and their sacrifice.

According to the International Federation of Journalists, 80 journalists were killed in 2017.⁶ A new report from the Committee to Protect Journalists documents that the number of journalists imprisoned around the world has reached 262, which is a new record. This total includes 21 reporters who are being held on "false news" charges.



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Mr. President, so powerful is the presidency that the damage done by the sustained attack -- attack on the truth will not be confined to this President's time in office. Here in America, we do not pay obeisance to the powerful -- in fact, we question the powerful most ardently. To do so is our birthright and a requirement of our citizenship. And so, we know well that no matter how powerful, no President will ever have dominion over objective reality.

No politician will ever get us -- or tell us what the truth is and what it is not. And anyone who presumes to try to attack or manipulate the press for his own purposes should be made to realize his mistake and to be held to account. That is our job here. That is just as Madison, Hamilton, and Jay would have it.

Of course, a major difference between politicians and the free press is that the free press usually corrects itself when it's made a mistake. Politicians don't.

No longer can we compound attacks -- the attacks on truth with our silent acquiescence. No longer can we turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to those assaults on our institutions. And Mr. President, an American President who cannot take criticism -- who must constantly deflect and distort and distract -- who must find someone else to blame -- is charting a very dangerous path. And a Congress that fails to act as a check on the President adds to that danger.

Now we are told via twitter that today the President intends to announce his choice for the (quote) "Most Corrupt and Dishonest" media awards. It beggars belief that an American President would engage in such a spectacle. But here we are.

And so, 2018 must be the year in which the truth takes a stand against power that would weaken it. In this effort, the choice is quite simple. And in this effort, the truth needs as many allies as possible. Together, my colleagues, we are powerful. Together, we have it within us to turn back these attacks, to right these wrongs, repair this damage, restore reverence for our institutions, and prevent further moral vandalism. Together, united in the purpose to do our jobs under the Constitution, without regard to party or party loyalty, let us resolve to be allies of the truth -- and not partners in its destruction.



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It is not my purpose here to inventory all the unofficial untruths of the past year. But a brief survey is in order. Some untruths are trivial, such as a bizarre contention regarding the crowd size at last year's inaugural.

But some untruths are not at all trivial, such as the seminal untruths -- untruth of the President's political career -- the oft-repeated conspiracy about the birthplace of President Obama. Also not trivial are the equally pernicious fantasies about rigged elections and massive voter fraud, which are as destructive as they are inaccurate -- to the effort to undermine confidence in the federal courts, federal law enforcement, the intelligence community, and the free press, to perhaps the most vexing untruth of all -- the supposed "hoax" at the heart of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation.

To be very clear, to call the Russia matter a "hoax" -- as the President has done so many times -- is a falsehood. We know the attacks orchestrated by the Russian government during the election were real. They constitute a grave threat to both American sovereignty and to our national security. It is in the interest of every American to get to the bottom of this matter, wherever the investigation leads.

Ignoring or denying the truth about hostile Russia -- Russian intentions toward the United States leaves us vulnerable to future attacks. We are told by our intelligence agencies that these attacks are ongoing, yet it is -- it has recently been reported that there has not been a single cabinet-level meeting regarding Russian interference and how to defend America against these attacks. Not one. What might seem like a casual and routine untruth -- so casual and routine that it has now become the white noise of Washington -- is in fact a serious lapse in the defense of our country.

Mr. President, let us be clear. The impulses underlying the dissemination of such untruths are not benign. They have the effect of eroding trust in our vital institutions and conditioning the public to no longer trust them. The destructive effect of this kind of behavior on our democracy cannot be overstated.

Mr. President, every word that a President utters projects American values around the world.



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The values of free expression and reverence for the free press have been our global hallmark, for it is our ability to freely air the truth that keeps our government honest and keeps a people free. Between the mighty and the modest, truth is the great leveler. And so, respect for freedom of the press has always been one of our most important exports.

But a recent report published in our free press should raise an alarm. Reading from the story (quote):

In February...Syrian President Bashar Assad brushed off an Amnesty International report that some 13,000 people had been killed [at] one of his military prisons by saying, 'You can forge anything these days. We are living in a fake news era.' In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte has complained of being 'demonized' by 'fake news.'

"Last month," the report continues, "with our President," (quote) "'laughing by his side' Duterte called reporters 'spies.'"

...In July, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro complained to the Russian propaganda outlet, that the world media ha[d] 'spread lots of false versions, lots of lies' about his country, adding, 'This is what we call "fake news" today, isn't it?'

There are more:

"A state official in Myanmar recently said, 'There is no such thing as Rohingya. It is fake news.' He was "referring to the persecuted ethnic group."

"Leaders in Singapore, a country known for restricting free speech, have promised 'Fake news' legislation in the [new] year."

And on and on and on. This feedback loop is disgraceful, Mr. President. Not only has the past year seen an American President borrow despotic language to refer to the free press, but it seems he has now in turn inspired dictators and authoritarians with his own language. That is reprehensible.



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We are not in a "fake news" era, as Bashar Assad says. We are, rather, in an era in which the authoritarian impulse is reasserting itself, to challenge free people and free societies, everywhere.

In our own country, from the trivial to the truly dangerous, it is the range and regularity of the untruths we see that should be the cause for profound alarm and spur to action. Add to that the by-now predictable habit of calling true things false, and false things true, and we have a recipe for disaster. George Orwell warned, "The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it."⁷

Now, any of us who have spent time in public life have -- have endured news coverage we felt was jaded or unfair. But in our positions, to employ even idle threats to use laws or regulations to stifle criticism is corrosive to our democratic institutions. Simply put: It is the press's obligation to uncover the truth about power. It is the people's right to criticize their government. And it is our job to take it.

What is the goal of laying siege to the truth? President John F. Kennedy, in a stirring speech on the 20th anniversary of the Voice of America, was eloquent in answer to that question:

We are not afraid to entrust the American people with unpleasant facts, foreign ideas, alien philosophies, and competitive values. For a nation that is afraid to let its people judge the truth and falsehood in an open market is a nation [that is] afraid of its people.

Mr. President, the question of why the truth is now under such assault may well be for historians to determine. But for those who cherish American constitutional democracy, what matters is the effect on America and her people and her standing in an increasingly unstable world -- made all the more unstable by these very fabrications. What matters is the daily disassembling of our democratic institutions.

We are a mature democracy. It is past time to stop excusing or ignoring -- or worse, endorsing -- these attacks on the truth. For if we compromise the truth for the sake of our politics, we are lost.



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I sincerely thank my colleagues for their indulgence today. I will close by borrowing the words of an early adherent to my faith that I find has special resonance at this moment. His name was John Jacques, and as a young missionary in England he contemplated the question: "What is truth?" His search was expressed in poetry and ultimately in a hymn that I grew up with, titled *Oh Say, What is Truth*. It ends as follows:

*Then say, what is truth? 'Tis the last and the first,
For the limits of time it steps o'er.
Tho the heavens depart and the earth's fountains burst,
Truth, the sum of existence, will weather the worst,
Eternal, unchanged, evermore.*

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.

¹ Attributed. Attribution veracity unclear.

² Official prepared remarks states "free press" instead of the delivered "free speech."

³ There were two tweets to this end. The initial tweet (NYT screenshot)



was deleted and replaced with a second (Twitter screenshot):



⁴ Source of forbidding the use of the phrase 'enemy of the people' unconfirmed.



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⁵ From Khrushchev's "secret speech." Quotation in larger context: "Stalin originated the concept "enemy of the people." This term automatically made it unnecessary that **the** ideological errors of a man or men engaged in a controversy be proven. It made possible the use of the cruelest repression, violating all norms of revolutionary legality, against anyone who in any way disagreed with Stalin, against those who were only suspected of hostile intent, against those who had bad reputations. The concept 'enemy of the people' actually eliminated the possibility of any kind of ideological fight or the making of one's views known on this or that issue, even [issues] of a practical nature. On the whole, the only proof of guilt actually used, against all norms of current legal science, was the "confession" of the accused himself. As subsequent probing has proven, "confessions" were acquired through physical pressures against the accused. This led to glaring violations of revolutionary legality and to the fact that many entirely innocent individuals -- [persons] who in the past had defended the Party line -- became victims." [Source: <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html>]

⁶ Source: <http://www.ifj.org/nc/news-single-view/backpid/50/article/2017-killed-list-excel/>

⁷ Widely attributed but disputed source.