

What if I were to ask you—or the ordinary American—what are the most repressive governments around the world when it comes to freedom?

Who suppresses freedom of speech and enterprise the most?

You'd surely say North Korea. Iran. Russia. Maybe Zimbabwe.

But what if I told you Germany should be on that list? That France should be on that list—and many other EU countries? Oh, and that Canada, where I live, should be on that list, too?

I'm not saying those countries are the same as the fear-based, authoritarian societies of North Korea and Iran and Venezuela. Not by a long shot.

But I am suggesting that some of the free countries are not, in fact, living up to their promises of liberty. And that many allies of the U.S. have gotten in the habit of using the government against political enemies or disfavored companies.

In Scotland, hate crime legislation adopted last year criminalizes anything that "stirs up hatred" against an array of protected groups—including the disabled, the old, the LGBTQ community, and others.

In Australia, the government started enacting hate crime laws just last week that impose jail sentences on those who display hateful symbols, like swastikas.

In Germany, authorities have ramped up their policing of online hate speech, extremism, misogyny, and misinformation by arresting people who've made "offensive" posts, and seizing their

[laptops and other devices](#). Last year, the [German government banned](#) a far-right magazine for “anti-human hate speech and agitation”, and [shut down a protest](#) because the protesters were Irish and speaking Gaelic, rather than English or German.

In the UK, the police have taken to arresting people who post videos on social media accounts deemed offensive. They have been sent to jail for weeks or months at a time. As my colleague Maddy Kearns reported for *The Free Press*, British people have been arrested and convicted for “antisocial behavior” such as [praying silently](#) near abortion clinics. The Orwellian Big Brother punishing you for expressing an impolitic thought is now the law of the land in the land of Orwell.

In the European Union, the “Digital Services Act,” adopted in 2022, bars the dissemination of any content deemed “harmful” or “illegal”—but doesn’t provide much clarity about what “harmful” or “illegal” entails. Right now, EU officials are [going after Elon Musk](#), threatening his platform X with fines—because he [endorsed the AfD Party](#) in Germany. But make no mistake—a precedent is being set. In the future, other people with “unpopular” politics and agendas will be targeted.

In Canada, Liberal Party leaders, including the lame duck Justin Trudeau, have come up with tons of terrible ideas that would regulate what you can say or do. As [I have reported](#) for *The Free Press*, they want to push the limits of censorship. One proposal would fine you for [saying good things](#) about fossil fuels. Another proposal: arresting people for hate crimes that have yet to be committed. The ongoing political turmoil in Canada is the only reason these things have not yet happened yet. But understand: There is nothing stopping the next Liberal government from moving forward and making these proposals the law.

You may be thinking: Well, that's a shame for the Australians or Canadians or Brits or whoever, but we're not them. This is the United States, and we have a long, storied tradition of protecting First Amendment rights.

American courts have ruled time and again on the side of the protesters, the flag burners, the neo-Nazis—the assumption being that, if the most offensive speech is protected, then all speech is protected.

Until recently, as you are no doubt aware, it was the left wing in America that felt most passionately about defending those rights. Historically, the people who stood up for unpopular opinions were ACLU lawyers and college professors. It was people on the right who were less enthusiastic about the full-throated exchange of ideas.

Whatever the case, I am a great admirer of Americans' affinity for free expression, and I cannot stress enough how unique this conversation is—the one that we're having right now. In no other country that I'm aware of do people argue with such passion for our right to say or protest or believe whatever we want.

But I'm worried. Because we live in an illiberal moment.

This moment has been building for many years, and there are many forces behind it—cultural, political, and economic.

For one thing, the left has lost its passion for the First Amendment.

Now, it's true that there are plenty of conservatives who would prefer that school libraries not include books about gender fluidity or critical race theory. There are others who have gone so far as to ban authors like [Toni Morrison](#) or [Margaret Atwood](#).

All that is wrong. But I'm less concerned about this trend than I am about the censorship that has happened under Joe Biden, in partnership with Washington and much of corporate America, including banks and social-media companies.

This partnership affects far more people than a relatively small number of school boards canceling, say, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*.

And it's harder to detect. When a school board removes a book from its shelves, there's usually a school board meeting, a public airing of opinions. But when Meta or Amazon or PayPal or Bank of America decide that one of their users or account holders has voiced the wrong opinion, they can take action that the vast majority of us will never know about. They can suppress an algorithm, remove a book from the digital shelf, suspend a checking account.

Which raises a frightening prospect: We do not even know that our freedom is being taken away.

In case you think I'm overstating things, consider the relatively recent phenomenon of debanking—which [I've reported on](#) for *The Free Press*. It entails big banks quietly ending their relationship with customers who have unpopular opinions. Banks have targeted people on both sides of the aisle—from President Trump's most fervent supporters to Muslim Americans, among others.

What's concerning isn't so much who has been wronged, but the creeping illiberal tide that has swept America over the past several years.

But the number of tech CEOs who attended President Trump's recent inauguration gives me hope. I'm told this signals the dawn of a new era in America—a return to first principles. Many of you may have misgivings about so many billionaires steering national policy, and for good reason, but if the billionaires coming around to President Trump means they are coming back to their Silicon Valley roots and their belief in an unfettered marketplace of ideas, if this means that the shadow bannings and mysterious manipulations of the social media universe will stop, if this means that we can speak more freely now—then, well, that is a great thing.

That is the most important thing because, as you know, all freedoms stem from *this* freedom.

My parting thought: The city on a hill that is America, with its abiding faith in human beings' right to speak and think freely, is as important today as it has ever been. Maybe more. At a moment when we are told, over and over, that we are suffering through "late-stage capitalism" or that Western liberal values are hateful, or wrongheaded, I want to emphasize that there is nothing wrongheaded about standing up for the liberties that you, the Americans, have so valiantly defended for so long, liberties that other peoples and governments are too cowardly to stand up for. In some quarters, this commitment to liberty ebbs and flows—it has more to do with prevailing opinion or what's trending. The great wisdom of America has been always to rise above the ebbing and flowing, to ignore whatever was in or out of

fashion, and to commit, with unwavering fervor, to your first principles. Principles that must be defended now more than ever.
