

Trump's war on comedy threatens free speech for all

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For more than 20 years, comedians appearing in the [New York Arab American Comedy Festival](#), which I co-produce — have been making jokes about American presidents. In fact, we were mocking then-President [George W. Bush](#) in the midst of the so-called “war on terror.”

Not once since our festival began in 2003 did any of the Arab American comedians fear that telling jokes about Bush — or any president — could come with a cost. Nor should it. Comedians telling jokes about politicians, including the president, are as American as apple pie and the whoopee cushion — that is, until this year’s festival.

We are now confronted with a [war on comedy](#) led by President [Donald Trump](#) and an administration that has, by design, created a climate of fear and self-censorship. Every autocrat begins by silencing their country’s artists — because laughter is the enemy of fear. From Egypt to Russia, the first voices targeted are often comedians and satirists. What begins as punishing a joke quickly becomes quelling dissent.

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For the first time in our 22-year history, some comedians appearing in this year's festival have expressed concerns about telling jokes that mock Trump. They fear it could result in losing bookings, or even being fired from jobs. As the agent for one Arab American comedian put it, telling jokes that target the president is "too much of a risk in the current climate."

Adding to these concerns is that we have many immigrant comedians in the festival who are green card holders and not yet U.S. citizens. These entertainers fear that if they perform jokes about Trump or his administration, they will endanger their legal status. After all, we've all seen the case of [Mahmoud Khalil](#), a green card holder whom the Trump regime is still [seeking to deport](#) simply for his advocacy on behalf of Palestinian human rights.

In October, [more than 550 artists and entertainers](#), led by Academy Award-winning actress Jane Fonda, revived the Committee for the First Amendment, a group originally formed during the McCarthy era to oppose government censorship and political blacklists. Their warning was stark: Once again, the federal government is waging a coordinated campaign to silence dissent across media, academia and the arts. The last time this happened, comedians, writers and actors were blacklisted, harassed and even imprisoned for their words.

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Our Constitution was written precisely to protect the kind of speech that powerful people dislike. As Supreme Court Justice William Brennan [wrote](#) in the landmark 1964 decision *New York Times v. Sullivan*, "Debate on public issues should be uninhibited [and] it may well include vehement... attacks on government and public officials." That includes jokes — especially ones about presidents and politicians.

It's not that, before he returned to office, we didn't know Trump hated being mocked. This is the same Trump who, as president in 2019, [slammed](#) "Saturday Night Live" for ridiculing him "over and over." At that time, Trump threatened "SNL" with a criminal probe and [asked on Twitter](#), "Should Federal Election Commission and/or FCC look into this?" According to a 2021 report, he apparently [even asked the Justice Department](#) to look into the matter.

Now, in his second term, Trump is done asking questions. We saw that on Sept. 17 when Federal Communications Commission Chair [Brendan Carr](#) publicly [demanded](#) that ABC impose some form of punishment on late-night host [Jimmy Kimmel](#) over a joke he made of which the Trump

administration didn't approve. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way," Carr [warned the network](#).

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In response, ABC suspended Kimmel, which prompted Trump to take a victory lap. "Great News for America: The ratings challenged Jimmy Kimmel Show is CANCELLED," the president [wrote on Truth Social](#). From there, he called on NBC to fire their late-night hosts, Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers.

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Yes, the president of the United States was cheering that a comedian with whom he had long sparred was being suspended. Then again, this is the same Trump who [was overjoyed](#) when CBS announced earlier this year that [Stephen Colbert](#) — another performer who has used comedy to call out the president's actions and policies — was not being renewed in his job as the network's late-night host. Trump [wrote](#) on social media, "I absolutely love that Colbert got fired," adding, "His talent was even less than his ratings."

It was only due to a massive backlash, which included consumers boycotting ABC's parent company Disney, that caused the network to reverse course and reinstate Kimmel. But the message was still sent loud and clear to comedians nationwide: Jokes that upset Trump could come with a price.

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That message is working. According to [PEN America](#), artists and performers across the country report a growing climate of self-censorship, with many avoiding political humor altogether. The chill is real — and deliberate.

When a wealthy, successful and famous comedian like Kimmel can potentially lose his job over a joke, every other comedian, particularly the ones without wealth or fame, knows they could be next, quietly let go or cancelled with no repercussions.

This is especially true for comedians of color, and it's the climate that comedians performing in our 22nd annual comedy festival are now navigating.

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Being the nation's longest-running Arab American comedy festival, we've always had unique challenges. Events beyond our control — and often beyond our borders — have impacted our events. Early in the Gaza war, the owner of a comedy club where we had long held the festival

expressed concern about “security issues.” However, never have our comedians feared that their jokes about the president could cost them work — or even get them deported.

Comedy is the canary in the coal mine for free speech. This is a threat to every person’s freedom of speech, and to democracy itself. If they can silence comedians today, they can silence journalists, teachers, and activists tomorrow.

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Each comedian in our festival will need to make their own choices as to content. Some don’t have the privilege of risking their livelihood or legal status. But those who were born in the United States like me have a level of privilege that we plan to use. We’ll keep doing what we’ve always done — using humor to tell the truth.

Comedy has always been democracy’s pressure valve, and laughter has always been its proof of life. As long as there are comics with a mic and audiences willing to laugh, Trump will never win his war on comedy, or on free speech itself.

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