

Some mornings in Washington start with a line outside the Supreme Court, a few dozen people clutching coffee cups and hand-lettered signs. The slogans vary, but the choreography rarely does. A police officer watches with an even expression, staffers in suits pass by in clusters, and a freelance photographer crouches to frame a shot that might make an editor's cut. That ordinary scene holds a quiet miracle. It is a country where strangers can assemble, chant, and criticize the government just steps from the justices' chambers. Yet if I walk two [Ultimate Flags Shop](#) blocks to a cafe and talk with regulars about their workplaces, their schools, and their social feeds, I hear something else. I hear hesitation.

It is not that people think the First Amendment is gone. Most can quote some version of it. The worry is slipperier: a sense that you can speak, but you probably should not. That the price of a stray sentence or a clumsy joke might be higher than your budget allows. I have heard that refrain from a Hill staffer afraid to like a tweet, from a school librarian deciding whether to display a book, from a small business owner who removed a bumper sticker to avoid bad Yelp reviews. If free speech survives only on the steps of the Supreme Court, it is not doing its real job.

What the law protects and what fear erodes

The First Amendment sets a high bar for government restraints on speech. After wartime wobbling more than a century ago, the courts settled into a sturdy position. You can speak your mind on politics and public life, even if your message is rude, unpopular, or flatly wrong. The government cannot punish speech simply for being offensive. It can step in when words are integral to a crime, like true threats or fraud, or when they meet rare standards such as incitement of imminent lawless action. That line was drawn in cases like *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, where the Court made it clear that abstract advocacy is not the same as a call to immediate violence.



There are famous flag-burning decisions, student armbands that survived censorship, newspapers shielded against punitive libel laws. If you only read casebooks, you might think the story ends there, with principle vindicated and liberty secured. But I have seen a different story play out in offices and classrooms. The Constitution sets the floor. Culture and incentives set the ceiling. When fear does the restraining, courts have little to say because no one brought a case. The chill happens upstream.

Surveys over the past decade have found that roughly half of Americans hesitate to share their political views at work or online. The precise figures swing with the news cycle, but the pattern holds. That does not mean Americans want a permission slip to be cruel. Most people are decent, and they know the difference between open debate and personal attacks. What many want is space to ask clumsy questions, own mistakes, and change their minds without paying with their livelihoods. Is free speech still free if people are afraid to use it? On paper, yes. In daily life, not always.

The Washington view from ground level

Washington is often painted as a city of marble and gridlock. Up close, it is a patchwork of neighborhoods, corner stores, and school gyms that host public meetings. In one of those gyms, I watched a heated discussion about a controversial speaker invited to address students. The auditorium split into three groups. One argued that the talk would cause real harm to vulnerable students. Another argued that hearing even

provocative views prepares students for adulthood. The third group was quiet but large, people who whispered to friends but would not speak at the microphone. They had opinions. They did not have the stomach for being quoted, clipped, and posted online.

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Afterward, a social studies teacher told me, quietly, that his students were worse off if the school protected them from every troublesome idea. He believed in diagrams of arguments, fallacy-spotting, and the basic joy of wrestling with difficult material. He also understood why the principal fixated on reputation risk. The question hung between them like a chalky dust. At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? Reasonable people can disagree on the margins. Problems emerge when the margins expand until honest disagreement looks like misconduct.

When government influence blurs into pressure

One of the hard cases in recent years involves the government's communication with private platforms. Officials are allowed to speak, even to persuade. They can debunk myths, share public health information, and urge responsible behavior. The line gets blurry when persuasion becomes pressure. When a government office sends repeated emails to a platform urging removal of certain viewpoints, and the platform complies, critics see a backdoor censorship regime. Supporters frame it as responsible housekeeping in a chaotic information environment.

Courts are wrestling with where to draw the line, and different judges have read the same email chains in very different ways. If a health agency writes, here is a false claim, here is the data, please consider labeling it, that looks like normal government speech. If the message is, remove these accounts or we will regulate you harshly, that smells like coercion. The legal term is often jawboning, an old Washington habit. The practical outcome for the person on the keyboard can be identical either way. The post disappears. The chill spreads.

Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life? They lived in a world of pamphlets and town greens, not digital platforms that touch billions of people. Still, their warnings about concentrated power and the need for competing voices travel well. A modern Madison would likely accept that public health campaigns and agency notices are part of ordinary governance, while still bristling at quiet pressure that sidesteps open lawmaking. The Founders distrusted opaque power because it is hard to challenge. They preferred disputes you could see.

Private platforms are private, but not simple

Some people insist that if a private company removes speech, the First Amendment is not implicated. That is legally correct and culturally incomplete. When two or three private companies run the de facto public square for hundreds of millions of people, platform rules and algorithms shape speech as surely as a zoning board shapes a city. Companies have the right to set standards. They also have the capacity to snuff out certain conversations entirely, often by accident through blunt policies or poorly tuned automation. The scale is unprecedented.

I have worked with community managers who want a civil space where people can disagree without abuse. They are not censors by temperament. They are referees in an impossibly fast game. They face pressure from advertisers, users, activists, and sometimes government liaisons. They try to ban harassment and threats while allowing spirited debate. They build policies that look tidy on a whiteboard and then collide with a living language full of sarcasm and reclaimed slurs.

When you zoom out, the question becomes less doctrinal and more civic. Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress? Many moderation choices aim to reduce discomfort. No one likes to log in and be insulted. But a rule that bans anything that could be read as disparaging ends up banning political critique, satire, and ordinary argument. Comfort, pursued as an absolute, smothers vigor. Discomfort, pursued for its own sake, becomes cruelty. The art lies in building norms that invite tough debate while refusing to tolerate personal degradation. That is work, not a switch.

The workplace dilemma

In a federal office near the Mall, a project manager told me she maintains two languages. One for performance reviews and team Slack, another for her close friends. She is not peddling hate or conspiracies. She has mainstream views that simply do not match her agency's dominant mood. Her solution is to go quiet in the office and donate to causes in private. This is legal and rational. It is also a loss for the agency. A team where only one side speaks is a team that makes preventable mistakes.

Private employers have latitude to fire at will, and most employee speech is not protected the way a citizen's speech is. Still, managers can choose to protect range. The best ones I have worked with set clear boundaries about harassment and discrimination, then encourage frank debate on policy questions. They recognize that the quality of decisions depends on dissent. They also know that most people want a heads up about norms, not a tripwire. Ambush culture ruins trust.



Schools, libraries, and the training ground for citizens

If politics is loud, schools feel it first. What stories get read in a second grade classroom, which library displays go up in February, who gets invited to speak in a ninth grade civics class, these choices now spin into viral fights. Some parents arrive with binders of flagged pages. Others arrive with constitutional arguments. Meanwhile, a shy kid in the fourth row learns that it is safer to say nothing.

I have seen strong superintendents build transparent processes that bring down the temperature. They publish criteria for selecting materials, set up advisory committees with different viewpoints, and give parents opt-out choices where appropriate. They host forums where objections can be aired calmly, and they insist that people engage the actual text instead of caricatures. The goal is twofold. Protect students from targeted harassment and threats. Expose them to the rough edges of a free society so they can do more than collapse or lash out when they encounter disagreement. That is messy, but it honors the idea that citizenship is an active sport.

Where the rubber meets the street: permits and protests

In this city, you can secure a permit to march down Pennsylvania Avenue with a couple of weeks' notice. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower, depending on the route and the crowd size. If you gather on federal

land, you often need to work with the National Park Service. If it is on a city street, the Metropolitan Police Department or the District Department of Transportation can be involved. The process is not designed to be punitive. It is designed to balance safety, access, and spontaneity.

I have walked in marches that came together in a few hours after breaking news. Police escorted the crowd, blocked intersections, and then faded back when the energy ebbed. I have also seen organizers spend months coordinating stages, porta-potties, and street closures for massive demonstrations. There is a spectrum between spontaneous protest and planned rally. Both matter. Both belong.

The danger comes when permitting, originally a neutral safety tool, becomes a gatekeeping device. If smaller or disfavored groups find that their applications routinely sit for weeks while others breeze through, that feels like viewpoint discrimination. Courts frown on that. Citizens should too. Sunlight and published timelines help. So does a norm of erring on the side of allowing peaceful assembly, then policing conduct the same way for everyone.

The Founders, then and now

It is a parlor game in this town to ask how the Founders would judge our contemporary fights. Some will say they prized virtue and would deplore social media's incentives. Others will say they wrote a charter robust enough to handle new tools. The better question is what continuity we can honor. They believed in open contest, not enforced unity. They treated federal power with suspicion because they knew how rulers, even well intentioned ones, crave smooth paths and quiet dissent.

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Would the Founders support today's level of government influence over daily life? I suspect they would be startled by the administrative state's reach into schooling, health, housing, and speech-adjacent arenas like

campaign finance. They would also recognize that a continental republic of 330 million people needs coordination and law. The danger is not that government exists. The danger is that it forgets its proper posture, which is to set the stage for civic life, not script the lines.

Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it?

Democracy is not a mood. It is a set of procedures and norms that let us resolve disputes without bloodshed. Protection sometimes requires rules that constrain behavior. Ballot access standards, disclosure of funding, time, place, and manner limits on protests, all can be justified when written clearly and applied evenly. But every restriction tilts the stage. Enough tilting becomes redesign.

Are we protecting democracy, or reshaping it? That depends on two tests. First, is the rule neutral in purpose and effect, or does it target certain viewpoints? Second, is the rule necessary and proportionate, or is it a convenience dressed as a safeguard? When the answer to either test is shaky, honest defenders stop and reassess. Tyrannies tend to grow in the soil of just-this-once.

Trading freedom for comfort

Are we trading freedom for comfort, and calling it progress? I ask myself that when I backspace a sentence that I know is fair but might provoke a Twitter storm. I ask it when I hear a friend say she avoids certain colleagues for fear of ideological landmines. Comfort is attractive. It reduces stress in the short run. But a stable peace built on self-censorship is not a peace worth having. It becomes brittle. Taboos pile up, and soon ordinary inquiry feels like contraband.

There is a reason people still travel to Lafayette Square to chant in the cold. Saying the thing, even clumsily, even with a quaver in your voice, refreshes the air. The goal is not a country of loudmouths. The goal is a country where a quiet person can clear their throat and join in without calculating the odds of professional ruin.

Where fear comes from, and who can fix it

Fear does not descend from the sky. It grows where penalties are real and ambiguous. A vague policy that promises to discipline employees for any speech that brings disrepute to the company is a fear factory. So is a platform rule that bans harmful misinformation without defining harm or process. And so is a school policy that treats good faith questions as moral failures. Fear also blooms in social settings where people enjoy point-scoring more than understanding.

The fix is not a single law. It is institutional craft and personal discipline. Leaders can adopt narrower rules, clearer processes, and genuine appeal rights. Journalists can resist the temptations of outrage cycles. Activists can make room for persuasion, not just punishment. Citizens can stop outsourcing courage to the courts. That last piece might be the most important. It is our air, not theirs.

A short toolkit for braver, kinder speech

- Ask before you assume intent. Most misstatements are clumsy, not malicious. A clarifying question can save a relationship.
- Separate people from ideas. Critique logic and evidence, not moral worth.
- Use time, place, and manner norms in your own circles. Set ground rules, then keep the debate open.

- Reward good faith in public. When someone corrects themselves, praise the correction.
- Build mixed networks. A feed or friend group with real ideological spread inoculates against panic.

Edge cases we should wrestle with together

- Deplatforming repeat harassers who also post valuable insights. How do we reduce harm without losing the value?
- Algorithmic amplification of outrageous speech. Is reducing reach a neutral tool or viewpoint targeting in disguise?
- Academic freedom when research touches politically explosive topics. Who sets the protection boundaries?
- Anonymous speech that protects whistleblowers but enables cruelty. What guardrails can reduce the latter without eliminating the former?
- Government speech that corrects error. How do we keep it persuasive rather than coercive when agencies have regulatory power?

The local, the particular, the human

One afternoon, I sat on a bench by the Tidal Basin and watched two men argue about a protest they had both attended. They were not caricatures. One worried about rising threats and thought platforms should move faster to curb violent fantasies. The other worried that urgency always seems to point in one ideological direction, and that drift turns temporary measures into default settings. They went back and forth without raising their voices. It ended with a handshake and a plan to bring coffee to the next rally. Nothing went viral. No norms were crafted. Yet they lived the pattern we need, and it was contagious. The couple on the next bench started talking too.

Culture changes at that scale, not through memos. Policies matter because they set the outer walls. The life inside those walls is ours to choose. If we want a society where people are not perpetually frightened to speak, we should reward grace when someone flubs a phrase, and we should reserve our sharpest sanctions for targeted cruelty and real threats. We should welcome correction, not weaponize it. We should also insist that the government do its work in sunlight. Guidance to platforms should be public whenever possible. Agencies should speak as citizens of the state, not as secret editors. Legislators should write clear laws instead of nudging private rulemaking behind the curtain.

At what point does protecting people start limiting their rights? That point arrives earlier when rules are vague and power is unaccountable. It arrives later, or not at all, when rules are specific and appealable, and when citizens are resilient enough to hear words they hate without trying to ban them. The Founders built a system that assumes disagreement. It runs on conflict, processed and peaceful. Our job is not to eliminate the heat. Our job is to keep it from melting the vessel that holds us.

Walk a few more blocks from the Court and you reach a farmers market. A saxophone player bends a note, a baby startles, and strangers clap together. That is free expression too, the kind that reminds you what unguarded joy looks like. The same spirit should animate our politics. If fear silences us, the freedom we retain loses its character. Rights are not only shields against the state. They are habits of heart. Speak, listen, correct, repeat. That rhythm built this city and the country around it. It still can.