

OPINION: Arming teachers is a terrible idea

During my junior year of high school, two trench-coated outcasts murdered 13 people and injured 23 more at Columbine high school in Colorado. This being in the pre 9/11 days, violence of this sort—especially at a school—was unheard of. That news cycle felt like it lasted months, and there was a palpable sense that we had all lived through an era-shaping moment.

And in a way we had. Much like 9/11 marked the beginning of a period in which “terrorism” and “threat levels” became commonplace, Columbine ushered in an era where schools were seemingly in a sadistic lottery, each wondering if their building might be the next to metamorphose into a war zone. Since that April morning, school shootings have become so normal that depending on bodycount they often don’t make it above the fold in newspapers.

Visit a news site and scroll down and you’re liable to see “3 dead in school shooting in Anywhere, USA.” These events are no longer rare. They have become ordinary.

Following these tragedies, people take to social media to diagnose the problem and proffer solutions. Debates ensue until the fervor dies down, and we lapse into normalcy until the next school shooting. One of the solutions which has been floating around is to arm teachers.

The argument is if teachers have guns, a rogue would-be murderer would either think twice or be stopped cold by their Smith & Wesson-toting math teacher.

This is a profoundly dangerous idea for a number of reasons. To start, the introduction of a loaded gun into any altercation axiomatically makes it a life and death situation.

I've been teaching for thirteen years and have been called upon to break up fights and skirmishes many times. If a teacher has a gun on them, intervening in a fight is no longer an option. They could become incapacitated or overwhelmed. The gun could be removed from the holster or fired inadvertently. There are teachers in their 50s and 60s and there are high school students in their physical primes.

It wouldn't be difficult for someone with bad intentions to take the weapon by force. Some nefarious individual who otherwise wouldn't have had access to a gun could now see opportunity resting on their librarian's hip. There is also the risk that a teacher could accidentally shoot an innocent student or staff member in an attempt to bring down an attacker.

The possibilities for a mishap would rise exponentially with the increase of firearms. This "solution" also relies on the assumption that with training any person would be able to perform in a high-pressure situation. This is simply not the case. There are reports of highly trained police and military personnel who haven't fared well in firefights or situations. And those are people who chose those careers and have trained for years.

I'm to believe that a career teacher, after a few hours at the range, is going to be able to subdue a live shooter? (We're teachers; if we wanted to be police officers, we would've gone to the academy.) There's a reason we put such stock in the word "hero." Heroism and bravery and decisiveness are rare. Not everyone can thrive in nightmarish circumstances where lives hang in the balance. To put it another way: giving someone a rope doesn't make them a cowboy.

I don't know what the answer is to gun violence in schools. Perhaps it's going to take a variety of measures—greater gun control, expanded background checks, mental health awareness, greater security like metal detectors, surveillance, alarms,

and guards. But the answer is absolutely not flooding schools with dozens of loaded guns and hoping lifelong educators can transform into Dirty Harry at the first sign of trouble. In the battle of risk and reward, the risk is too high and the reward too unlikely. Arming teachers would be a decision destined to backfire.

OPINION: In Defense of the First Amendment

In a letter to his army just prior to the end of the Revolutionary War, George Washington stated the importance of any person being able to voice their opinion, especially when the stakes are high. "... if Men are to be precluded from offering their sentiments on a matter...reason is of no use to us—the freedom of speech may be taken away—and, dumb and silent we may be led, like sheep, to the slaughter."

It's not an accident that the freedom of expression was enshrined in the very first amendment to the Constitution. The Founding Fathers were aware of the importance of such a protection, especially after being oppressed by the British, whose sedition laws could land a person in court or prison. For them, this guarantee was foundational. As Ben Franklin phrased it, there can be "no such thing as public liberty, without freedom of speech."

When the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, America was one of only a few countries to offer such a freedom. For centuries throughout the world, the legality of speech was what the nearest authority happened to think it was. Even today, there are over a dozen nations with various levels of

censorship—including places where things like criticizing the government or blasphemy can get you killed.

The simple, unambiguous edict that congress shall make no law “abridging the freedom of speech” is one of the things that has made the U.S. a beacon of liberty and an example of what a just and free society might look like. Today, however, this most basic of human rights is at the epicenter of a political struggle. One extreme is using it as a cloak from under which they can spread disdainful and incendiary messages; the other is taking hammer blows to it in the name of justice. Radical movements—the vile and the virtuous—will come and go, but there must be a concerted effort to understand the First Amendment, and resolve to defend it.

Freedom of Expression, while a glorious concept, is not absolute. Over the years, the Supreme Court has examined ways in which this *carte blanche* of public language can have ramifications. With a utilitarian spirit, these judges have imposed restrictions; all of which weighed the right to speak versus the rights and safety of others. Among the handful of caveats are “fighting words,” obscenity, threats, defamation, supporting terrorism, and words that could incite violence or endanger the public.

Unfortunately, there is a degree of ambiguity in these decisions (none perhaps more so than Potter Stewart’s obscenity standard—“I know it when I see it”). For example, hate speech —which is protected—seems similar to fighting words or words designed to incite. Recently, with the reemergence of Neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan, there have been protests and gatherings where this nebulous distinction is back under the microscope. Should vast groups be able to congregate and spew racist garbage in public? What if they’re doing it while armed and marching with torches? Or at night near a predominately black Church? We can see how quickly the situation gets murky.

In instances like these, there needs to be a broad range of appropriate speech—which we must allow, and a line over which demonstrators cannot cross. People ought to be able to gather peacefully and say whatever they like. Whether anyone else agrees with or likes what they have to say is immaterial. As Noam Chomsky said, “If we don’t believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don’t believe in it at all.”

Words may be protected—even the most hateful ones—but actions, as they say, speak louder. The circumstances in some instances, like Charlottesville, shift the situation onto different terrain. The crucible of a mob with flags, torches, slogans, weapons, combined with the time and place, make it reasonable to conclude that some speech and assembly are purposeful provocations.

Charlottesville was not about the free exchange of ideas, it was a demonstration—possibly even a warning. This manner of speech should be outlawed—or at the very least confined to private areas.

One point worth noting is that the First Amendment protects civilians from government interference with speech. But when the government shirks their responsibility or otherwise allows what many consider dangerous, some take matters into their own hands. Several activist groups have marshaled considerable crowds to oppose and drive back these dirty relics from the Jim Crow era.

The motivation is understandable: for decades America has been taking steps to exterminate racism, and much like other infestations, when vermin reappear so brazenly on the kitchen floor, it’s only natural to want to destroy them before they lay eggs and spread. When these counter-protesters stand against the volatile, racist rantings of an angry mob, it is difficult to see their efforts as anything other than heroic. And it’s all too easy to overlook their methods.

The problem, however, is the noble desire to shield people from hatred and to subdue what might be considered evil has repercussions. First, who decides what speech should be prohibited? How do we know exactly what is inappropriate? How much force is allowed when fighting a perceived enemy? There is a disconcerting level of subjectivity in play.

Sure, it's easy enough to denounce Nazis and White Supremacists—especially when they are behaving violently—but mob mentality circumvents reason; crowds respond viscerally, lose control, and ride emotional waves to unseen shores (and the tide of public opinion can turn back the other way at any moment). In the process of fighting for the marginalized, these groups are slowly tightening the noose around the first amendment. They are, in other words, throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Not every instance of protest has been of the anti-nazi variety. There have been a slew of demonstrations on college campuses which have held events featuring conservative firebrands. Mobs destroyed property at UC Berkeley when Breitbart's Milo Yiannopoulos was slated to speak. Later, the school canceled Ann Coulter because they feared similar outbursts. These were seen as victories on the far left. They managed to silence the views of their enemy—the alt-right.

This type of behavior is egregious and embarrassing and should be repudiated by everyone, especially liberals. It is nothing more than the militant stifling of opposing views.

Peaceful demonstrations and shows of solidarity are one thing, burning down or even threatening to shut down campuses is another. People like Milo, Coulter, Limbaugh, Tomi Lahren, or Sean Hannity do espouse some political beliefs that we may find repugnant, but the answer is not to respond with Molotov cocktails, fists, and bottles of urine. Allow them to speak, let their views stand naked, and reasonable people everywhere will see them for what they are. Defeat them with rational

argument. Considering the left generally prides themselves on being the more intellectual side, this should be both easy and enjoyable.

When we stop speech by force we galvanize the other side, allow them to play the victim, validate their message, and appear intellectually weak in the process. When the initial response to any opposition is to sling the most virulent words in the arsenal (bigot! racist!), we generalize, devalue the meaning of those words, find ourselves at a loss when we encounter the real thing, and end the hope of any productive conversation.

If we resort to these tactics we are setting fire to more than campuses or cars, we are setting fire to the only sacred thing in our secular government: the Constitution.

When true evil presents itself, everyone should vehemently oppose it—often by any means necessary. But we can't assume all who aren't in line with our views are evil. Allow people to speak, understand their positions, and then dismantle them. But never restrict peaceful expression by force, for then Freedom of Speech is only available to whomever has the bigger mob.

We are in a war of ideas, and in this war free speech can be perilous, but as Thomas Jefferson once said, "I prefer dangerous freedom to peaceful slavery."

Building bias: How social

media closes minds

The Internet and Social Media have provided humankind with the tools to be the most informed and connected generation that has ever lived. At a moment's notice, a person can access the whole of humanity's intellectual achievements, speak directly to another individual across the world, and then watch a video on YouTube of cats playing piano.

In the halls of cyberspace people can improve themselves in just about every conceivable way, or they can—as T.S. Eliot phrased it—be “distracted from distraction by distraction.” Yet, this virtual community has not produced the sort of E-utopia that one might expect would arise from limitless knowledge, communication, and interconnectivity. In fact, it seems to have produced the opposite. In a world with everything at our fingertips, we're finding ways to keep civil discourse and all manner of progress at arm's reach.

One of the key features of social media is its customizability. One can build their own virtual space, replete with their favorite websites, preferred channels, and select friends. There is almost total autonomy in the content that passes across the computer screen. Naturally, people choose what is most familiar and comfortable. From an ideological standpoint, they will furnish their cyber dwelling with likeminded news outlets. On sites like Facebook many people will either delete or unfollow friends and acquaintances with divergent points of view (all too often people will denigrate the close-mindedness of, say, Trump supporters in a post where they declare that they will unfriend anyone who supports him. Irony can be difficult to detect for some).

The problem with this selectivity is a person creates a cocoon for themselves, in which they only encounter safe and agreeable content. The news outlets will share similar posts,

as will friends and family, thereby cementing their preconceived notions and offering no challenges whatsoever. They, in effect, create a sterile groupthink, devoid of any contention. This is not a good way to develop a well-rounded view of the world or current events.

Over time, the bias becomes calcified to the point where the appearance of a different opinion seems perverse or absurd. This phenomenon runs both ways and drives apart the political poles, producing opinions that are beyond the pale and certainly beyond compromise.

For example, conservatives might have a feed comprising Alex Jones and Breitbart-esque commentary on how Hillary Clinton is the Devil Incarnate and belongs in a maximum security prison. Liberals scroll past link upon link documenting Trump's many off-color remarks and have him pegged as a one-dimensional villain.

In that scenario, any valid points or policy prescriptions from either candidate are drowned by the partisan white noise that pervades these websites. Instead, people will linger in the intellectual prisons of their own creation. This makes a change of mind nearly impossible.

The best thing to do is to reevaluate your own piece of cyber real estate. Build a place with a variety of perspectives. Familiarize yourself with the positions of your ideological foils. Know their stances better than they do, and begin your arguments from there. Read. Learn.

Grow. Don't dwell in some myopic land where you're spoon fed red meat from comfortable sources. Gather as much information as you can. Be informed. Cyberspace is a seemingly endless world of knowledge; we might as well not stand in one place.

OPINION: An objective look at the benefits and drawbacks of using Drone Surveillance

There's a new ethical issue emerging concerning the use of drones by police to monitor certain crime-riddled areas. It is yet another iteration of the age-old battle between rights and security. Just when we think we have a firm grip on the limits of our constitution, new technology is unleashed that forces us to search for first principles all over again. One has to imagine in the next few years, cases concerning the scope of drone surveillance will fall at the feet of the Supreme Court. For now, let's look at the issue.

The case against this manner of invigilation is simple: allowing authorities to monitor cities from the air moves us ever closer to a police state. From there the arguments can roll down the slippery slope – they could arrest us for jaywalking! Littering! Rolling stops! The humanity!

Flippancy aside, there is something slightly unnerving about a perpetual eye-in-the-sky watching your every move. Even when a person is making all of the right decisions, it is still disconcerting to live in a fishbowl where someone somewhere can observe you at any time of day. This does seem to fly in the face of certain American values – namely freedom from a restrictive and overbearing government.

The other concerns are hyperbolic. Police would not be using this impressive technology to uphold fringe laws or chase down litterers or minor traffic offenders. That would be a most egregious misappropriation of taxpayer funds.

The other problem is that these drones would reliably be perusing areas comprising high numbers of people of color. There may be statistical information that supports their use in these areas, but the cry of profiling would be loud and –at least in terms of perception – warranted.

While the concerns are legitimate, there are also benefits to drones. They would enable police to stakeout dangerous criminals or parts of town without needlessly putting officers in harm's way. The only difference between an inconspicuous vehicle parked with binocular-wearing detectives and a video-equipped drone is that in the former scenario, human lives are at risk. Drones would provide a safe way to gain information that prosecutors could use to get nefarious people off of the street.

They could also gather information when crimes are committed. Instead of a loud, noticeable helicopter circling overhead, small, robotic planes could accumulate intel about hot spots in certain communities following criminal activity.

In a world where adding more police officers becomes difficult due to budget restraints, drones offer more coverage and a versatile set of eyes to help fight crime at a lower price.

But that comes at a cost.

Is there a way to balance the pursuit of a safe society with the maintenance of a just one?

One answer could be to work certain legal language into any bill regarding drones. Perhaps drones can only be used in particular circumstances or with a warrant. Or perhaps any peripheral information procured by a drone would be inadmissible in court. There are already a number of exceptions to the 4th amendment concerning search and seizure, many of which would be relevant to cases concerning drones. Undoubtedly this would be difficult and contentious ground to tread.

Then of course there's the argument that drones would be surveilling public areas, which do not fall within a person's right to privacy. If a citizen is doing something illegal in (as legalese would have it) "plain sight" they are subject to the law of the land. Drones would not be invading privacy per se; they would simply be expanding the scope of "plain sight."

The reflexive condemnation of surveillance drones is based on the notion that case-by-case usage could give way to a world where these robots plague the skies like locusts, and everyone is worried that they will slip up and be apprehended. Of course this totalitarian 1984 ish scenario is avoidable. But if this technology is utilized sparing and effectively, with safeguards against any potential 4th amendment violations, then it is something we should consider.

OPINION: Colin Kaepernick and Freedom of Expression

Author Salman Rushdie, whose novel *The Satanic Verses* earned him death threats from the Muslim world in the 1990s, defended free speech by saying, "What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist."

San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick offended millions by sitting down during the National Anthem at a preseason game. His refusal was an attempt to shed light on what Kaepernick views as oppression and discrimination directed toward people of color.

Whether or not one agrees with the animus behind his boycott, one thing is certain: Kaepernick reopened conversation about

some pressing issues and inadvertently revealed something upsetting about the manner in which people respond to free expression.

It is not an accident that the very first amendment of the Bill of Rights is the one which guarantees freedom of speech. This was something the Founding Fathers saw as paramount to the creation of a free and just society. It is one of the rights which separates our country from some of the more backward and restrictive nations around the world. Ben Franklin encapsulated the salience of this edict when he stated, "Without freedom of thought there can be no such thing as wisdom, and no such thing as public liberty without freedom of speech."

Simply put: this liberty is foundational to everything America symbolizes.

Kaepernick's complaint about injustice is an important issue in and of itself, however the outrage over his actions over the past few days has been telling. The people who are angry are dichotomized into two distinct camps. The first takes umbrage at his refusal and makes points, typically concerning hypocrisy or a failure on Kaepernick's part to scrutinize specific instances of violence.

They argue that a black man who is making millions has audacity to denigrate the country which proffers such an opportunity (a weak argument—it implies that having money automatically precludes a person from being able to speak out about social issues). They also believe that—based on his tweets—he demonstrates a tendency to generalize about instances of police violence. Whether they are right is immaterial here. The thrust is that, while they may find the act repugnant, they are at least providing reasons to repudiate it.

The other faction simply hates Kaepernick. There are a wealth

of people who have created an ad hominem parade, leveling at him with every opprobrious insult they can muster. People have burned his jersey. Others have called for his release from the 49ers. To put it another way: one group contests the “why” while another wants to restrict the “what.”

This is wrong.

The latter group needs to understand that Kaepernick (and everyone else for that matter) has the right to act or speak out in ways with which the majority of people may disagree.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the National Anthem or the flag or the Pledge of Allegiance.

Love of country is not compulsory. Neither is patriotism. Nobody needs to say the pledge or stand for the anthem. People can dislike, and still appreciate, things about their country. If there are topics that are off-limits, then there is no such thing as Freedom of Speech.

Once again, there are some important points to mention that will be lost on people who hear something mildly anti-American and fly into an apoplectic rage. The right to criticize aspects of our country is not only allowed, but it is necessary. There are places in the world where such denunciations land a person in jail or in the clutches of the executioner. If a person, especially one with a vast platform, decides to voice their disapproval with the country, they must be allowed to do so.

Unfortunately such criticism is anathema to many Americans—most of whom are quick to preach the importance of other constitutional amendments. There is, for them, no situation where one can or ought to condemn the U.S. This view runs counter to everything entailed in the First Amendment.

If you think Kaepernick is wrong for not standing, that’s fine. After all, Colin was seeking a reaction, and, since he’s

entered the marketplace of ideas, he deserves to have his actions critiqued. But remember that disagreement must come second to the staunch support of a person's right to express themselves.

As Noam Chomsky said, "If we don't believe in free expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all."