

STUDENTS  
UNDER FIRE | 4

REJECTING GOVERNMENT  
RETALIATION | 6

FREE SPEECH  
BEACH READ | 10



# ***FIRE QUARTERLY***

SUMMER 2025



## **ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE ... AN INVESTIGATION**

For asking administrators what they did last week, his university accused him of causing “emotional and psychological harm.” | 5



# NEVER A DULL MOMENT

## A MESSAGE FROM FIRE LEGAL DIRECTOR WILL CREELEY

Friends of FIRE,

Summer already? How'd that happen? Time flies when you're having fun and staying busy, I guess. And thanks to your generous support, we're doing both here at FIRE.

Back in the old days — back when FIRE stood for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, back when defending college students and faculty was our sole focus — we'd always talk wistfully about summertime as a chance to finally finish that big project.

Every year, right around when March rolled into April, we'd start telling ourselves hopeful stories about how campus censors would be on summer break, too.

“Once the semester's over,” we'd say to each other with cautious optimism, “things will quiet down. Right?”



Wrong. That summer reprieve never did seem to arrive. New speech codes, new case submissions, new lawsuits, new state laws and federal regulations — one way or another, we always kept busy.

Censorship never took a summer off. So we didn't, either.



And you know what? We got the big projects done anyway. And when we did hit the road to chase the summer a little, we still handled business. I remember trading emails while standing in line for a bucket of chocolate chip cookies at the Minnesota State Fair, proofing letters on a beach in mid-coast Maine, writing up case law at my mom's dinner table back in Buffalo — making it happen!

Those busy summers turned out to be good practice. Because ever since we decided to take on every censor in the country, on campus and off, work's been nonstop. Three years into the new, expanded FIRE, let me tell you: There's literally never a dull moment.

Just look at everything packed into this Quarterly. For old-school FIRE fans, we've got a classic case of campus censorship from Brown and our first-ever Students Under Fire report. For folks thinking about free speech in the AI era — and how to protect it — we can't wait to tell you about our collaboration with Cosmos. Concerned about the administration's crackdown on critics? We'll show you exactly how we're fighting back and why it matters.

And there's so much more: Substack newsletters, the latest from the courts, Greg and Nadine's new book ... there's a lot happening! Like I said, time flies when you're having fun and staying busy.



And speaking of time flying, I'm stunned to realize I'm coming up on two decades of fighting for free expression here at FIRE. I've had the privilege of doing this work since 2006. It's been a true honor — so please let me thank each and every one of you for making it possible.

We work hard every day fighting for principle, and we couldn't do it without you.



# FIRE PARTNERS WITH COSMOS INSTITUTE ON \$1M GRANT SUPPORTING TRUTH-SEEKING AI

Artificial intelligence already drafts our sentences, sorts our inbox, and cues our next song. But the technology is advancing rapidly. Soon, it could determine which ideas ever reach our minds — or form within them. Two futures lie ahead, and the stakes couldn't be higher.

In one, AI becomes a shadow censor. Hidden ranking rules throttle dissent, liability fears chill speech, and flattering prompts dull judgment until people stop asking “why.” That is algorithmic tyranny.

In the other, AI is built to expand the marketplace of ideas and sharpen human inquiry — not replace it. It works as a partner in truth-seeking, surfacing counter-arguments, flagging open questions, and prompting us to check the evidence and our biases. Errors are chipped away, knowledge grows, and our freedom — and habit — to question not only survives but thrives.

To ensure we build AI tools and platforms for freedom, not control, FIRE is teaming up with the Cosmos Institute, an organization dedicated to linking technology and human flourishing, to put \$1 million in grants on the table for developers to design AI tools and applications that further truth-seeking.

In an article for *Reason Magazine* co-authored with Cosmos founder Brendan McCord and Laboratory for Human-Centered AI founder Phillip Koralus, FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff wrote: **“To truly protect free inquiry moving forward, the principles we value must be built into the technology itself ... We want AI systems that help people discover, question, and debate more, not to stop thinking.”**

As new communications technologies arrive on the scene, so will new forms of censorship and suppression. Fortunately, there's an appetite to forge a positive future. One month after our announcement, we received more than 200 applications from developers interested in aligning AI with free speech values.

The future of free speech is tied to the future of AI, and as with all free speech matters, you can expect FIRE to be on the forefront, defending your rights.



## AHEAD OF THE CURVE

**FIRE staffers are putting our free speech expertise to work to understand how AI and its regulation stands to impact your expressive rights:**

- We worked with Morning Consult to conduct a poll of American voters on their attitudes about AI and its relationship to free speech.
- We sponsored a *Free Press*-hosted debate in the heart of Silicon Valley between leading public intellectuals who considered whether truth can survive the age of AI.
- We helped kill AI regulations that threatened expressive rights in Virginia and Texas.

# STUDENTS UNDER FIRE REPORT REVEALS FIVE YEARS OF CAMPUS CENSORSHIP

**“Speech restrictions are like poison gas: they seem like a good idea when you’ve got the gas and a deserving target in sight. But then the wind shifts and blows the gas back on you.”**

FIRE’s first Students Under Fire report opens with this quote from former ACLU Executive Director and FIRE Advisory Council member Ira Glasser, and it’s easy to see why.

The efforts by colleges and universities across the United States to investigate, censor, or punish students for their expression reveal how censorship of one side paves the way toward censorship of the other — until no one feels free to speak their mind.

Drawing on incidents documented in FIRE’s Students Under Fire Database over a five-year period, the data detailed in this report reveals troubling trends.

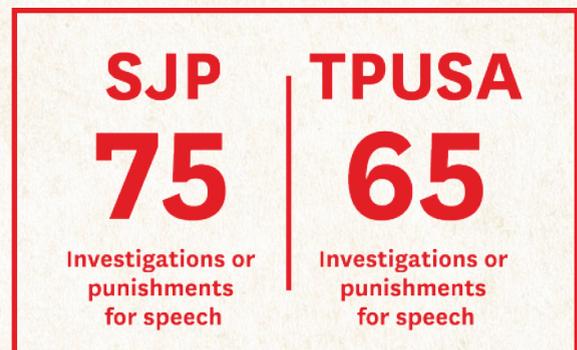
- **FIRE recorded 1,014 instances where students or student groups were targeted or penalized for their speech by either administrators or student governments.** That’s nearly double the number of faculty incidents recorded in FIRE’s study looking at faculty censorship during the same timeframe.
- **And the censorship comes from both political sides of speakers:** 476 incidents came from would-be-censors from the left of the speaker, while 337 came from the right of the speaker. The remaining 201 controversies were either politically ambiguous or apolitical.

From 2020 to 2022, students were often targeted by their peers on their left for things they said about race. From 2023 onward, administrators took a more active role in suppressing student speech on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly that of pro-Palestinian student groups. Government officials and politicians also became more involved in efforts to suppress student speech during this time.

Among other examples, the report recounts the case of Mimi Groves, a white student from Virginia who lost her spot at the University of Tennessee after a years-old video resurfaced in which she used a racial slur as a teenager. Although she had since apologized and expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement, public backlash — fueled in part by political activism and social media — prompted the university to pressure her to withdraw.

**The incident illustrates how the consequences of student expression, even expression made years earlier, can be life-altering and disproportionate, especially when institutions react to public outrage rather than uphold free expression.**

Whether targeting left-leaning students advocating social justice or right-leaning students supporting President Trump, the trend is clear: Censorship is not confined to one side of the aisle. It reflects a growing campus culture that prioritizes appeasing public or political pressure over protecting the rights of students to speak freely.



## **WHAT DO STUDENTS FOR JUSTICE IN PALESTINE AND TURNING POINT USA HAVE IN COMMON?**

Absolutely nothing — except for being repeatedly targeted for their speech over the past five years. SJP was the most targeted group, facing 75 investigations or punishments for expression. TPUSA was the second-most, with 65.

# INVESTIGATED FOR AN EMAIL?

**FOR LOOKING INTO ADMINISTRATIVE BLOAT, HIS UNIVERSITY ACCUSED HIM OF CAUSING “PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM.”**

Echoing efforts by the federal government’s Department of Government Efficiency, Brown University student journalist Alex Shieh individually emailed Brown’s 3,800 administrators for an article he was working on, asking them what they did in the past week. Two days later, Brown targeted him with an investigation.

Brown told Alex it was reviewing his emails based on allegations that he had caused employees “emotional and psychological harm.” The university also claimed Alex “misrepresented” himself by saying he was a reporter for the independent student publication *The Brown Spectator* — which he was. Even more confounding, administrators demanded that Alex “return any confidential information,” warning that his access to university data systems could be restricted, without telling him what confidential information they believed he published.

**Universities can’t use chilling investigations as fishing expeditions: Brown’s effort to get Alex to substantiate its assertions against him flipped the disciplinary process on its head.**

FIRE wrote the university in April, explaining that its misrepresentation charge was farcical, that its refusal to provide Alex with any evidence violated its due process promises, and that its handling of the investigation suggested it was retaliating against student journalists.

“Brown’s investigation into Alex Shieh betrays its expressive and due process promises,” the letter said. “If Brown wishes to make a case against Shieh on other grounds, it must either provide him with the basic elements of due process it promises, producing actual evidence showing he violated a specific rule or aspect of university policy, or drop that charge as well.”



We also launched a Take Action campaign, through which almost 1,000 free speech advocates like you urged Brown President Christina Paxton to drop retaliatory charges against Alex and quit investigating student journalists for protected expression.

The university took note. After initially refusing to rescind the charges, it dropped the misrepresentation charge. Shortly afterward, the saga ended once and for all when, after another letter from FIRE, Brown found Alex and *The Spectator* not responsible on all charges.

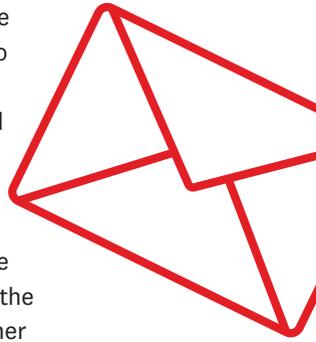
This decision benefits not only Alex but all students at Brown, who can now report on university affairs without fear of administrative retaliation. It also confirms what FIRE has argued for years: **Student journalism is not grounds for disciplinary action.**

---

“The charges against me were pure retaliation, and so flimsy not even their own reviewers could find me guilty. This ruling is a win for free speech at Brown, but this fight should never have been started.”

**- ALEX SHIEH,  
BROWN UNIVERSITY STUDENT**

---



# REJECTING RETALIATION

NO MATTER THE TARGETS, GOVERNMENT RETALIATION VIOLATES THE FIRST AMENDMENT.

In 2013, when President Obama’s IRS targeted the tax-exempt status of conservative groups like the Tea Party based on their politics, that was wrong. In 2023, when the head of New York’s Department of Financial Services threatened banks and insurance companies over their work with the NRA, that was wrong, too.

Critics were right to worry that these violations of the First Amendment would pave the way for future abuses of power. Now that the shoe is on the other foot, that future has come to pass.

**During President Trump’s first four months in office, the administration has:**

- Filed lawsuits against media companies like CBS and ABC for what it believes was unfavorable coverage of the president.
- Gone after law firms with sanctions for representing clients or causes Trump opposes.
- Engaged in lawsuits against individuals, like the Iowa pollster and FIRE plaintiff J. Ann Selzer, for incorrectly predicting a win for Harris in her state.

Perhaps most concerning is the assault on our nation’s universities — particularly Harvard. FIRE has long criticized Harvard for failing to uphold free speech in policy and practice, and we’ve advocated serious changes. The Trump administration wants to change the status quo too, but its heavy-handed actions toward the university stand to chill speech in higher ed, not save it.

First, the administration demanded that Harvard conform to the government’s preferences regarding hiring, admissions, and even curricula under threat of losing federal funding. Then, when Harvard pushed back, Trump retaliated by pulling \$2.2 billion

in federal grants, revoking Harvard’s ability to enroll international students, and threatening to eliminate the school’s tax-exempt status.

The Department of Homeland Security also demanded Harvard produce audio and video footage of all protest activity involving international students over the last five years, a sweeping fishing expedition that reaches protected expression.

These actions ignore legal processes that protect against political bias and governmental overreach, flying in the face of the rule of law. They also abuse the authority of elected office, turning our government into a weapon that can be used to punish whoever isn’t currently in power.

**“Whatever Harvard’s past failings, core campus rights cannot and will not be secured by surveillance, retaliation, and censorship,”** said FIRE Legal Director Will Creeley.

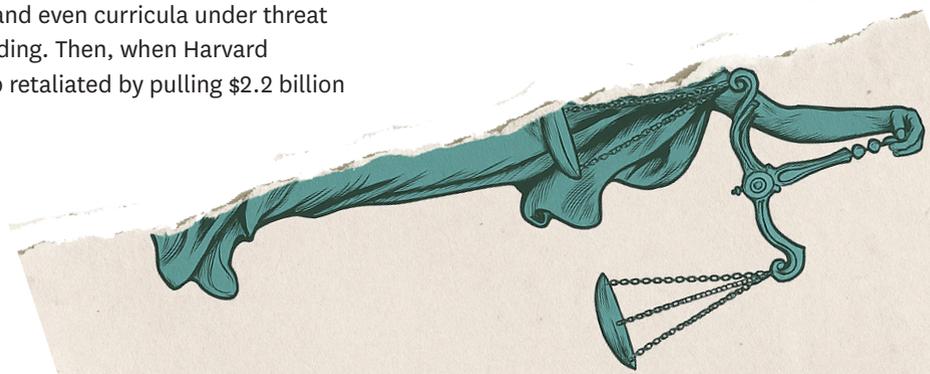
FIRE has taken a consistent, principled stand against actions like these for decades. We will continue to do so going forward, no matter who’s in power.

---

“More than two decades of protecting free speech on college campuses has taught me many things, and one of them is that the sword is always double-edged. That’s why we need to fight its improper use, no matter which way it’s slicing.”

**-GREG LUKIANOFF, FIRE PRESIDENT AND CEO  
(PUBLISHED IN THE ATLANTIC)**

---



# ‘LET’S TALK’ PROGRAM KEEPS CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS CONSTRUCTIVE

The practice of free speech requires more than legal protections — it requires a culture where people are willing to engage with challenging ideas. Yet too often, students and faculty on college campuses hesitate to speak openly for fear of attracting controversy or backlash.

FIRE’s “Let’s Talk” program is designed to change that. By equipping students with the tools to navigate difficult discussions, Let’s Talk fosters a campus culture where open dialogue feels rewarding by teaching evidence-backed techniques for engaging in dialogue across differences.

Last school year, Let’s Talk visited nine campuses: Bucknell, Oregon State, Boise State, Rutgers, Georgetown, UT Austin, USF, MIT, and Northwestern. Each event featured a two-part structure: a First Amendment “know your rights” presentation, followed by a civil discourse workshop to put those rights into practice.

The Let’s Talk event at Boise State University drew strong interest from students, faculty, and administrators, who gathered for a discussion on education policy in the wake of a new piece of state legislation that had just been signed by Idaho’s governor.

As groups debated whether the government should fund school-choice programs, voices rose in animated dialogue. Every breakout group had at least one person who disagreed with the rest — but all agreed the conversation was worthwhile.



“These events aren’t just about the valuable conversations that happen in the moment. They’re also about building lasting relationships, identifying campus leaders, and creating the momentum needed to sustain free speech in the long run.”

– WILL HARRIS,  
FIRE STRATEGIC CAMPAIGNS ASSOCIATE

## FREE SPEECH FORUM CONNECTS YOUNG LEADERS

In June, FIRE held our second annual Free Speech Forum. 200 motivated high school students from across the country came together at American University to participate in a week of interactive workshops, keynote speeches from big names in the free speech movement, and new connections with fellow free speech advocates. From meeting Daryl Davis and Mary Beth Tinker, to visiting the Library of Congress, to making new friends during activity sessions, this summer event left students with memories to last a lifetime.



# WINNING THE SLAPP-FIGHT

**Good news for Texans who like their speech free. Three bills that would have gutted speech protections under the Texas Citizens Participation Act are officially dead in the water.**

At the start of the 2025 legislative session, FIRE teamed up with the Protect Free Speech Coalition — a broad coalition of civil liberties groups, news outlets, and other organizations that support free speech in Texas — to fight these bills. The TCPA protects free speech by deterring frivolous lawsuits, known as SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation), brought simply to silence citizens who speak out.

The first bill, HB 2988, would have eroded the TCPA by removing its provision of mandatory attorney fees for speakers who successfully get a SLAPP dismissed. The other two bills — SB 336 and HB 2459 — would have made it easier for SLAPP filers to run up their victim’s legal bills before the case gets dismissed, thereby putting pressure on victims to settle and give up their rights.

All three bills are now officially dead. That means one of the strongest anti-SLAPP laws in the country remains intact and Texans can continue speaking freely without fear of ruinous litigation.



---

“Texas did the right thing here by rejecting these bills. Free speech shouldn’t just be for those who can spend a fortune defending themselves against frivolous lawsuits.”

**- CAROLYN IODICE, FIRE LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY DIRECTOR**

---

# UNRESTRICTED READING



---

“FIRE’s letter, citing case law backing First Amendment freedoms, made a big difference in our successful fight to keep a newly-formed regional library in western NC from limiting the library director’s freedom of speech.”

**- SHARON WINTERS, RETIRED LIBRARIAN AND TOE RIVER VALLEY RESIDENT**

---

**A regional library in North Carolina is getting off to a freer start thanks to FIRE’s efforts.**

Earlier this year, Mitchell County, Avery County, and the Town of Spruce Pine negotiated a draft agreement to establish the Toe River Valley Regional Library System. That agreement contained several concerning provisions that restricted the rights of both library patrons and the future library director.

First, the agreement contained an unconstitutionally vague and viewpoint-discriminatory ban on materials that “violate standards for community decency.” Second, the agreement banned the library director from involvement in “party politics” or “discussion or debate of political issues,” even when the director is off the clock. Third, the agreement banned displays dealing with political, social, or religious topics, but did so in a way that potentially could have applied to displays created by the public, not just the library’s own displays.

With the help of advocates on the ground, FIRE urged the town and counties to revise the agreement. And just a few short weeks after we stepped in, the municipalities removed or revised all of the concerning provisions before voting to approve the final agreement.



# TROUBLE FOR *TINKER* STANDARD IN NEW ENGLAND



Massachusetts middle school student Liam Morrison

In 1965, students Mary Beth Tinker, John Tinker, and Christopher Eckhardt wore black armbands to school to protest the Vietnam War. They weren't disrupting anyone, but the school suspended them anyway.

In *Tinker v. Des Moines*, the Supreme Court ruled that this violated the students' First Amendment rights, and it set a standard that would go on to protect K-12 expression for years to come: **Students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."**

In May, that standard came under threat for over a million students across New England when the Supreme Court declined to review a case involving a Massachusetts middle schooler. Liam Morrison's public middle school banned him from class for wearing a shirt that read, "There are only two genders." When he taped "CENSORED" over the original message, the school banned that, too.

According to *Tinker*, schools cannot censor student speech absent evidence that doing so is "necessary" to avoid "substantial disruption of or material interference with school activities" or an "invasion of the rights of others." A few years ago, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the *Tinker* standard and emphasized that it's a "demanding" one.

Yet when Morrison and his parents, represented by the Alliance Defending Freedom, brought suit against

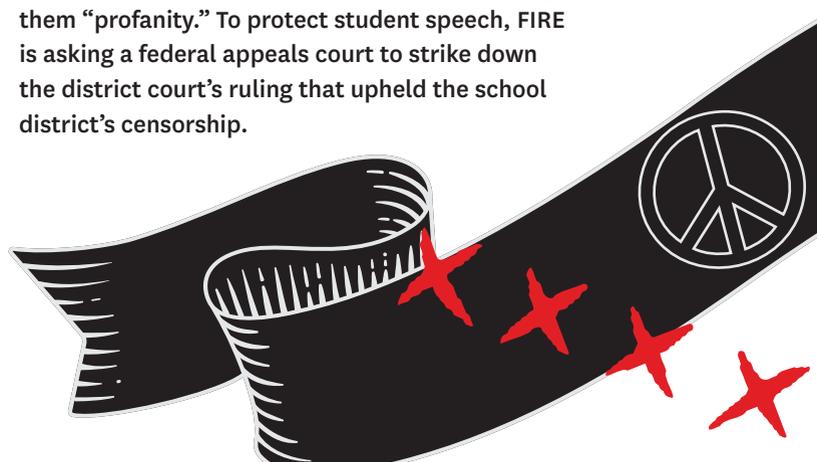
the school and the town for violating his freedom of speech, the First Circuit disregarded settled law to uphold the school's censorship, misapplying the *Tinker* standard.

The First Circuit's recent decision replaces *Tinker*'s "substantial disruption" test with a far more permissive one. Now, in thousands of public schools, student speech that is "reasonably interpreted" to "demean personal characteristics" and thus "reasonably forecasted to poison the educational atmosphere" can be censored even if it doesn't target any particular student.

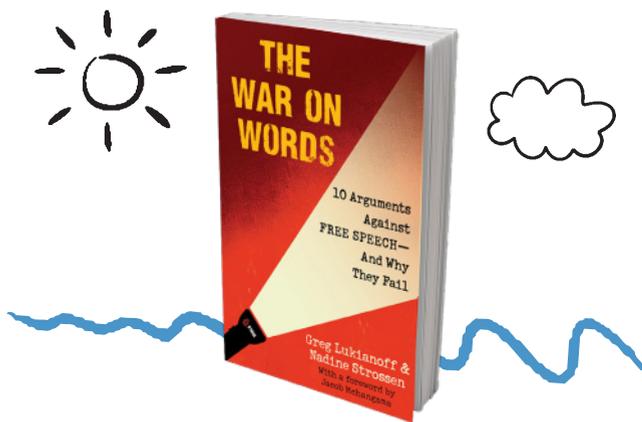
That isn't just a bad ruling. It's a dangerous one. The prohibition on viewpoint-based censorship is a cornerstone of our First Amendment. Without it, the concept of free speech loses much of its meaning.



**DEFENDING STUDENT SPEECH:** FIRE Chief Counsel Bob Corn-Revere and Supervising Senior Attorney Conor Fitzpatrick stand outside the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals before oral arguments in *D.A. v. Tri County Area Schools*, a case involving a Michigan middle school that ordered students to remove "Let's Go Brandon" sweatshirts, deeming them "profanity." To protect student speech, FIRE is asking a federal appeals court to strike down the district court's ruling that upheld the school district's censorship.



# FREE SPEECH BEACH READ: 'THE WAR ON WORDS'



Think censorship makes us safer? Think again.

FIRE President and CEO Greg Lukianoff and FIRE Senior Fellow and former ACLU President Nadine Strossen have devoted their careers to debunking pro-censorship arguments, and now they're out with a book compiling their most compelling arguments for free speech.

In "*The War on Words: 10 Arguments Against Free Speech — And Why They Fail*," Greg and Nadine expertly dissect ten claims that proponents of speech restrictions regularly assert, such as: "Words are violence," "Free speech is right-wing," and "Hate speech isn't free speech." In lively, clear, and persuasive prose, they examine the flaws in these assertions and shed light on what we lose when we forfeit our fundamental rights.

Published by Heresy Press, the concise volume includes an introduction by FIRE Senior Fellow and author of "*Free Speech: A History from Socrates to Social Media*" Jacob Mchangama, who brings historical and international context to the topic.

At a time when political attacks on free expression are mounting from both the right and left, this book is a valuable resource for all who seek to understand and defend the right that is central to both individual liberty and our democratic self-government.

# FIND FIRE ON SUBSTACK

Whether you're a free speech devotee, legal eagle, or just trying to keep up with the chaos of campus discourse, FIRE has a newsletter for you.

## **Expression** ([expression.fire.org](http://expression.fire.org))

Where we go beyond the headlines, taking you into the fight to defend the First Amendment and bringing you the stories that shape free speech in America. *Expression* also offers regular contributions by FIRE fellows Jacob Mchangama and James Kirchick, as well as the *Free Speech Dispatch* and the "So to Speak" podcast.

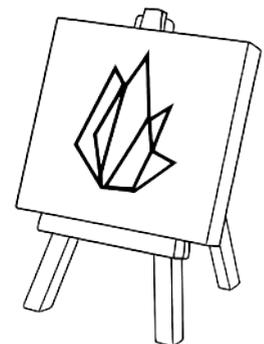
## **The Eternally Radical Idea** ([eternallyradicalidea.com](http://eternallyradicalidea.com))

FIRE CEO and President Greg Lukianoff's blog, where he writes about freedom of speech and other issues related to civil liberties, higher ed, and technology.

## **First Amendment News** ([thefirstamendmentnews.com](http://thefirstamendmentnews.com))

A weekly blog and newsletter about free expression issues by First Amendment scholar and retired law professor Ronald K.L. Collins.

**Subscribe now to join the fight — and the conversation.**



**Purchase your copy today!**

**Ember Club members receive a complimentary copy as part of their benefits!**



# DONOR SPOTLIGHT: RICH THAU



I support FIRE because I've seen how essential free speech is to my work tracking public opinion. As someone who has moderated more than 1,000 focus groups across nearly 25 years, I know that if adults feel intimidated, it's hard to accurately gauge how they view the current state of affairs.

While I've yet to sense that focus group participants withhold opinions out of fear (they're paid and willing, after all), a worsening climate of "opinion intolerance" worries me. Five years ago, the Cato Institute found that 62% of Americans believed the political climate prevented them from saying what they believed for fear of offending others.

Have things improved since then? I haven't seen fresh polling on that exact question, but based on FIRE's recent data, we're still a long way from a free speech golden age. If we've entered one, I must've missed it.

I also support FIRE because it defends public opinion professionals who share their research with the media and the public — even when the results are unpopular. No one — not students, professors, journalists, podcasters, or pollsters — should be maligned for reporting what they've uncovered.

Finally, I support FIRE because it avoids partisanship while defending America's constitutional order — most importantly, the First Amendment. In an era of growing polarization, FIRE stands on principle and opposes any effort to undermine Americans' right to free speech.

In addition to financial contributions, I've been donating my services running focus group "dial tests" to help hone FIRE's messaging. I hope other donors will think creatively about how else they can support this fantastic organization.

## JOIN FIRE'S EMBER CLUB

As a valued member of FIRE's Ember Club — a distinguished group of our closest allies and investors who contribute \$2,500 or more each year — Rich plays a critical role in advancing our mission.

Ember Club members ensure that we have the means to get the job done.

In recognition of this commitment, we welcome Ember Club members into FIRE's inner circle, offering exclusive opportunities designed to keep them informed and connected to the impact of their generosity. These opportunities include:

- Personal updates on the issues you care about
- A distinctive Ember Club lapel pin
- Invitations to events and meetings with FIRE staff
- Recognition in FIRE's Annual Report *(with your permission)*
- Print copies of our latest reports and publications
- Signed copies of FIRE-authored books

Of course, the greatest benefit is knowing that your support helps FIRE move swiftly and boldly to protect free speech on campus, in the courts, and in our culture.



**To learn more, contact Ashley Adams, FIRE's senior director of development, at [ashley@thefire.org](mailto:ashley@thefire.org) or 215-717-3473.**



P.O. Box 40128  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
T: 215.717.3473  
www.thefire.org

@thefireorg

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
PAID  
Permit # 50  
West Chester, PA

# DEFENDING FREE SPEECH — AND HAVING FUN DOING IT.



LET FREEDOM RING: FIRE CELEBRATED FREE  
EXPRESSION AT THE SOMEWHEREFEST MUSIC  
FESTIVAL IN WICHITA, KANSAS.



JEREMY AND CHRISTY HORPEDAHL JOIN THE FREE SPEECH  
MOVEMENT — AND HAVE THE MEMBERSHIP CARD TO PROVE IT.



FREE SPEECH GOES INTERNATIONAL: FIRE SENIOR DIRECTOR OF  
COMMUNICATIONS DANIEL BURNETT BRINGS FREE SPEECH SPIRIT  
ON VACATION TO THE STRAIT OF GILBRALTAR.

**Bringing your FIRE swag on vacation?  
Take a pic and tag us on social media!**