

June 2, 2017

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write from PEN America, Free Press Action Fund, Reporters Without Borders and the Society of Professional Journalists, organizations devoted to defending freedom of the press and free expression, to urge you to denounce acts of violence, especially by government officials, against members of the news media.

This week, we filed a formal complaint with the Office of Congressional Ethics (“OCE”) asking it to investigate newly-elected Montana Rep. Gregory Gianforte’s physical assault against *The Guardian*’s Ben Jacobs. We fear that the rhetoric employed during your campaign and by the White House—such as referring to the press as the “enemy of the people” and the “opposition party”—is increasingly being translated into aggressive action by public officials against journalists.

In addition to the Gianforte assault, a reporter with the Public News Service, Dan Heyman, was arrested on May 9 in the West Virginia State Capitol after asking Secretary of Health and Human Services Tom Price and Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the president, whether domestic violence would count as a pre-existing condition under the new health care legislation. On May 18 in Washington, D.C., a reporter with CQ Roll Call was pinned against a wall in a public hallway by security at the Federal Communications Commission after attempting to ask a commissioner a question. He was then ejected from the building under threat of force.

While there has always existed a certain amount of tension between the government and the fourth estate, we are alarmed by the growing trend of arrests of and physical attacks on reporters who are simply attempting to do their jobs. We fear that the aggressive criticism voiced by yourself and your White House about the press is eroding basic norms that underpin our free press. Our constitutional guarantees, including protections for free speech and a free press, are not self-executing. They require commitment from all of us, and especially by those entrusted with the awesome power of government.

To that end, we submitted a formal complaint to the OCE urging an investigation of the Gianforte assault and a referral by the OCE of the allegations to the full House Committee on Ethics for an investigation and, we hope, disciplinary action. We copy that complaint here.

We have also sent a letter to the House Committee on Ethics itself noting its obligation under Committee Rule 18(e)(2) to launch an investigation, or submit a report to the full House explaining why the committee has not taken action, within 30 days of any member being charged with any crime, including misdemeanor assault, as in the Gianforte case. We copy that letter here as well.

In advance of Congressional action, however, we ask that the White House reaffirm its commitment to press freedom in the United States. A formal statement by the president denouncing political violence of any sort, including against members of the press, and an affirmation of our shared values would, we believe, significantly dampen any license public officials may currently harbor to strike a reporter merely for asking a question. A clear and unequivocal rejection of attacks on the press would be welcomed by political officials on both sides of the aisle, and is a necessary corrective to the corrosive atmosphere created by your earlier rhetoric.

Please do not hesitate to contact Gabe Rottman, PEN America's Washington Director, at grottman@pen.org or 202-808-3514, with any questions. He can be reached by mail at 1015 15th St. NW, 6th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Sincerely,

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PEN America

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cc: Rep. Susan W. Brooks, Chairwoman, House Committee on Ethics
Rep. Ted Deutch, Ranking Member, House Committee on Ethics
Omar Ashmawy, Staff Director & Chief Counsel, Office of Congressional Ethics

Encls.