

The Trump Administration and the Media

By Jim Ross

Prof. Ross is on sabbatical in China where he is giving lectures on the Jewish diaspora and doing research at the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall.

Donald Trump's charge that the press is the "enemy of the people" resonated here in China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the phrase was used to condemn intellectuals, foreigners, and anyone who did not blindly parrot Mao Zedong's slogans. It cost millions their lives, destroyed families, and left China isolated from the world. Now the United States faces its own isolation.

Trump's attack on the news media is already having stark consequences for the United States and its relationship with other nations. Trump joins dictators in Venezuela, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, and Turkey in their contempt for a free press. His words recall Mao Zedong as well as Josef Stalin and Richard Nixon.

As journalists, it is our duty to expose this new emperor with no clothes. The First Amendment not only protects freedom of the press but also obligates the news media to question authority, break down stereotypes, and shine light on the darkness. It is always startling for me to see how compliant the press is here in China; few dare to question government policies or ask tough questions of government officials. There are some exceptions. A website called the China Daily News, a Chinese version of The Onion, ran a story last week about the ghost of Mao wandering Beijing in search of his lost ideology.

But dissent is rarely tolerated for long. The New York Times, Google, YouTube, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website are blocked here. Any website that uses words such as Tiananmen—the site of pro-democracy protests that were brutally repressed in 1989—is automatically blocked by the Great Firewall. I could never imagine such repression in the United States—until now.