Opinion

NCR Voices



Jimmy Kimmel performs in a sketch about the then-upcoming White House Correspondents' Dinner on an episode of "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" aired April 23, 2026. (Disney/Randy Holmes)



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Jimmy Kimmel's joke about the first lady — "Mrs. Trump, you have a glow like an expectant widow" — was in bad taste. The controversy surrounding it, however, exposes not only a great deal of hypocrisy but also the facile way people equate words and deeds in our contemporary culture.

President Donald Trump has called on ABC to fire Kimmel because of the joke, saying it was "something far beyond the pale." This is rich coming from the man who threatened to destroy "a whole civilization" only a few weeks ago, and who noted the death of an outstanding American public servant, Robert Mueller, by commenting, "Good, I'm glad he's dead." Indeed, no one has done more to introduce pugnacious and dehumanizing rhetoric into the bloodstream of contemporary American politics than Trump. And no one person in American society has a greater capacity and responsibility to set the tone of national dialogue than our chief executive.

Ironic or not, and admitting that Kimmel probably should have shared the joke privately, if at all, does the president have a point? Should Kimmel be fired?

The short answer is no. It might be different if he had delivered the joke *after* the White House Correspondents' Dinner and the shooting that occurred there. But Kimmel did the routine two days *before* the shooting at that dinner. And the line about the first lady was set amid jokes about the president's age, not about an attempt on his life.

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More importantly, the calls for Kimmel's firing are routinely conflated with the shooting incident. "Who in their right mind says a wife would be glowing over the potential murder of her beloved husband?" White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said. She compared the joke with the shooter's unhinged manifesto. "This

kind of rhetoric about the president, the first lady and his supporters is completely deranged. And it's unbelievable that the American people are consuming it night after night after night."

There is no connection between what Kimmel said and what the shooting suspect, Cole Tomas Allen, did. And the generic connection between hateful language and actual violence is a lot more tenuous than people suggest. Shouting something hateful in 2026 in the United States of America is not the same as shouting something hateful in 1936 in Germany: Our robust defense of free speech in this country, especially political speech, is well known. Germany had been a liberal democracy for little more than a decade when Adolf Hitler came to power.

It is one of the hallmarks of liberal democracy that we differentiate between speech and action and defend the right of a person to say offensive things. It may not be true, as we were taught as children, that sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me, but the saying speaks to our liberal heritage. I have always been opposed to laws prohibiting hate speech, which were devised by well-meaning but not very bright liberals. Now it is the right that seeks to use the power of the presidency to exercise censorship. As this latest episode shows, hate, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, and powerful people will use infringements on speech to their own purposes. It is those who lack power or who are out of power who most rely on free speech.

People should be kind. Irenicism is a good thing. But kindness and irenicism are not the stuff of humor. Nor do they need constitutional protection. Kimmel should keep his job and those calling for his firing should examine their own role in coarsening the political language of our time.

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