

The US right claimed free speech was sacred – until the Charlie Kirk killing

by J Oliver Conroy, September 21st, 2025

In the emotionally and politically charged days since the killing of Charlie Kirk, the conservative youth activist who was a close ally of Donald Trump, one statement has loomed large. On Monday, the US attorney general Pam Bondi – the official in charge of the rule of law in America – said that the Trump administration would “absolutely target” those who espouse “hate speech” about Kirk.

Since Kirk was shot to death while speaking to college students in Utah earlier this month, the US has been gripped by a bitter debate about the relation between political speech and violence. Bondi later walked back some of her remarks, in part because of criticism from other conservatives worried about the reframing of “free speech” as “hate speech”. But Trump, Vice-President JD Vance, White House adviser Stephen Miller and other top Republicans have framed Kirk’s death as the consequence of what they claim is unchecked and violent rhetoric, which they blame on the left wing alone.

It is a remarkable turn from prominent American conservatives, who had long complained of a censorious leftwing “cancel culture” but now seem happy to reframe that, too, as “consequence culture”. Many conservatives are now championing a public campaign to get fired from their jobs any Americans who made light of Kirk’s death or disparaged him or his politics in death. Meanwhile, administration officials are proceeding with drafting an executive order for Trump aiming to “combat political violence and hate speech.”

Kirk’s assassination was a “despicable act of political violence, an attack on a figure who built his brand around campus debating, and the outrage, grief, and anger is understandable”, Aaron Terr, the director of public advocacy at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (Fire), said. But instead of recommitting to free speech as a “fundamental value”, the response from many public officials “has been the opposite. They are using the tragedy to justify a broad crackdown on speech,” he said. “They are openly collapsing the distinction between political dissent and political violence, and it sounds like they are laying the foundation for mass censorship and surveillance of political critics.”

According to Veena Dubal, a law professor at the University of California, “It is a signal that not only does this administration not care about the first amendment, they don’t seem to really understand it.”

Conservatives are making arguments similar to the ones that some progressives used to make about cancel culture, Terr noted. “And conservatives at the time, I think rightly, argued that we should think of free speech not just as a legal right, but as a broader cultural value.” Now, Terr said, “many of the same politicians who have long railed against cancel culture are leading the loudest calls for censorship – often using, either explicitly or implicitly, rationales that they’ve dismissed when invoked by the left: ‘This is hate speech.’ ‘This is misinformation.’ ‘This will lead to violence.’

Some conservatives have argued that the late Kirk would not want the right to turn against free expression. “Hate speech does not exist legally in America,” Kirk wrote on social media last year. “There’s ugly speech. There’s gross speech. There’s evil speech. And ALL of it is protected by the First Amendment. Keep America free.”