

A Crime Report, a Lawsuit Threat, and Free Speech

A nonprofit questioned a White House crime claim, and the president threatened to sue for \$5 billion.



A scale in front of courthouse steps stands between research papers and a city street.

President Donald Trump threatened to sue a Washington, D.C., **nonprofit** group for \$5 billion after it published a report questioning one of his crime claims, according to Associated Press reporting published by PBS NewsHour. The group, the Center for American Progress, said Trump's use of the National Guard in several cities did not cause violent crime to fall. The National Guard is a military force that can be called up by state or federal leaders during emergencies or special missions. The group refused to take back its report.

The dispute matters because it is about more than one report. It asks a civics question: What happens when people outside the government criticize the government's claims? In class, that connects to the First **Amendment**, the part of the Constitution that protects speech, the press, religion, **assembly**, and **petition**. It also connects to data, because the argument is partly about how to read crime numbers and decide whether one event actually caused another.

The Center for American Progress is a think tank, which is an organization that studies public is-

sues and argues for policies. The AP described it as left-leaning, meaning its ideas usually fit more with liberal or Democratic positions. Its report, published July 13, said violent crime was already going down in the cities the administration focused on. The report concluded that the National Guard deployments had no measurable effect on violent crime trends. In other words, the group argued that the timing did not prove the policy caused the drop.

Trump's lawyer sent a letter demanding that the group **retract** the report. To retract means to publicly take back something that was published. The letter said the report made false and harmful statements about Trump and warned that he could sue for **defamation**. Defamation is a false statement that damages someone's **reputation**. The nonprofit's leaders answered that the report was based on their reading of crime data, and they said they would not withdraw it.

The legal question is not simple. People and organizations can be sued if they spread false claims that seriously harm someone. At the same time, American law gives strong protection to de-

bate about public officials, especially when the debate involves government policy. Kevin Goldberg, a First Amendment expert at the Freedom Forum, told the AP that threats like this can be used to pressure critics to back down, even before a court decides anything. The source also noted that Trump has often threatened lawsuits against people or organizations he sees as opponents.

For someone in middle school, the big idea is not whether this think tank is right or wrong. The big

idea is how a country should handle disagreement about facts. If leaders make claims, researchers and reporters may test those claims with **evidence**. If critics make unfair claims, public figures may try to defend their reputations. A healthy system has to make room for both things: strong **criticism** and responsibility for truth. This story shows how hard that balance can become when money, power, public safety, and politics all meet in one argument.

Written from reporting by PBS NewsHour.

THINK IT THROUGH

1. When a public official says a report is false, what should matter most before a lawsuit is filed: protecting reputation, protecting criticism, or testing the evidence in public?

2. If crime drops after a policy begins, what kinds of evidence would help prove whether the policy caused the drop or whether something else did?

3. Do large lawsuit threats make public debate more honest, or can they make people afraid to speak? Defend your position with trade-offs.

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T E L T S E T O G C D D A D V T T A
Y E S R T V T A A T W L A A E T N D
S N M T O I L O O L L A O P M U I P
I A T S O D E I P A Y W F A M L N L
E T A I V E N S R E T S E R N M N R
X A F S S N P L J V T U E I O Y P V
I E G E S C E O R M W I O I N H R T
I O A A M E N D M E N T T A P E C H
T N S H T S M Y R C P T A I R N I T
T T X Y N M O B I W R U E I O N E D
S S S E F I A E L R N I T D F N I E
A T M E R T S S E Y E P T A I U R I
T N I D W A I E R S T T J I T S C A
N O E D P R L N W E W C R E C I E E
E M C A H N D H D E F A M A T I O N
N O U H H N H N P U C T M N C E S N
N I P E T E E M T I S N A I M T L M
S T E O C P A I O T E A A C A T S S

AMENDMENT

ASSEMBLY

CRITICISM

DEFAMATION

EVIDENCE

LAWSUIT

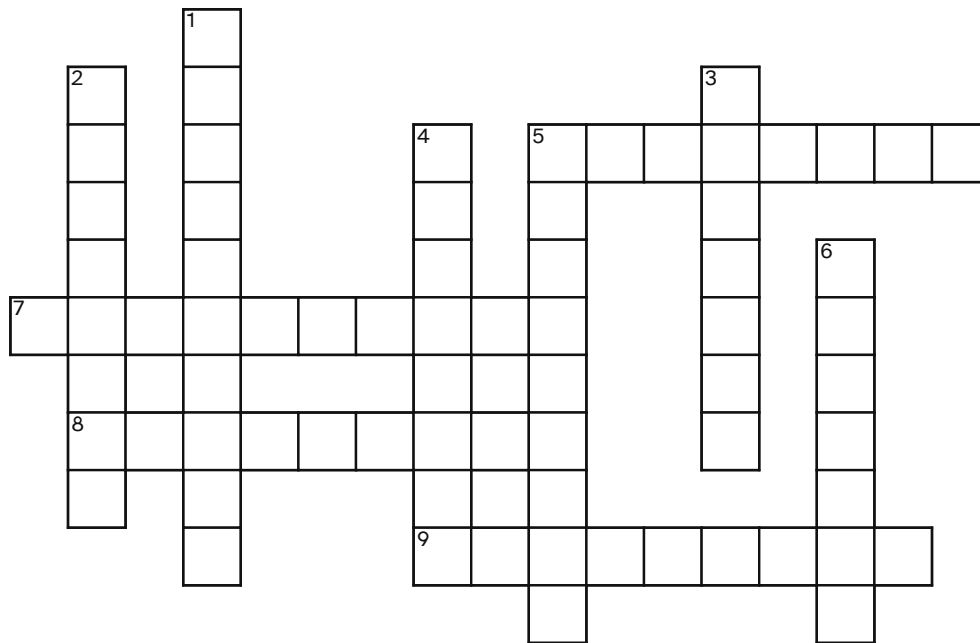
NONPROFIT

PETITION

REPUTATION

RETRACT

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ACROSS

- 5 Freedom to gather peacefully for a shared purpose
- 7 False claim that damages someone's good name
- 8 Comments that point out problems or show disapproval
- 9 Organization that uses money to support its mission

DOWN

- 1 General opinion people have about someone or something
- 2 Facts or materials that help prove something is true
- 3 Publicly take back a statement
- 4 Formal request made to a government leader or authority
- 5 Numbered change or addition to the Constitution
- 6 Legal case asking a court to settle a dispute

Where this came from

This article was written for 3andB from the reporting below. It is not a reprint — the wording is ours and the facts are theirs.

PBS NewsHour

“Trump threatens lawsuit against nonprofit that questioned whether National Guard plan lessened crime”

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<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-threatens-lawsuit-against-nonprofit-that-questioned-whether-national-guard-plan-lessened-crime>

WHAT IS IN THIS PACKET

The article and its discussion questions, a word search, and a crossword.

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