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Thune breaks with Trump admin over Tylenol, government role in free speech

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Senate Majority Leader John Thune acknowledged reports from scientists who have long rejected the link between the pain-reliever and autism. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

Senate Majority Leader [John Thune](#) broke slightly with the Trump administration Wednesday, splitting from the GOP on government regulation of free speech and recent warnings linking Tylenol to autism.

In an interview with CNN's "Inside Politics," Thune condemned the "coercive use of government" in regulating TV programming and said such decisions "ought to be made by the companies" after ABC temporarily pulled "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" from the airwaves last week. Kimmel's show went back on the airwaves Tuesday night, though major station groups Nexstar and Sinclair preempted the show.

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"As a general matter, my view is that the government ought to stay out of the free speech marketplace unless there are clear violations that violate laws that are in place to protect the American people," he said.

The comments are Thune's most stark rebuke of the Trump administration's moves last week to crack down on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show. Kimmel's comments on conservative organizer Charlie Kirk's death set off a wave of criticism, with FCC Chair Brendan Carr threatening to act against ABC and its affiliates if they continued to air the show. Trump on Tuesday posted to social media threatening to sue ABC for choosing to continue airing the program.

"If he wants to pursue litigation, obviously that's his prerogative," Thune said of Trump's threat to ABC. "But again, my view is when it comes to the FCC, when it comes to governing authorities and governmental power, it shouldn't be used in a coercive way when it comes to the First Amendment."

Thune acknowledged broadcast companies on public airwaves operate with "a higher level of responsibility" and have "certain standards" of truth and facts, noting he believed Kimmel's comment was inappropriate and questioned its accuracy. But he maintained that government bodies shouldn't interfere with broadcasters' First Amendment rights.

"I'm a big believer in the First Amendment and free speech," Thune said. "And I think that any decisions that are made with respect to programming ought to be made by the companies."

Thune also questioned the Trump administration's recent announcement linking Tylenol use in pregnancy to autism in children, saying he was "very concerned" about potential fallout from the announcement. He acknowledged reports from scientists who have long rejected the link between the pain-reliever and autism, saying "science ought to guide these discussions."

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"There are studies out there that they reference," he said of the announcement. "But again, I think there are an awful lot of people in the medical community who come to a different conclusion about the use of Tylenol. My view is we ought to be very guarded in making broad assertions and make sure that they are well grounded in science and medicine and where we're taking the consultation advice of experts in the field and ensuring that these things are all well documented."

Other Republicans have also expressed alarm following Trump's announcement about Tylenol on Monday, with GOP Sen. [Bill Cassidy](#) saying [the warning would leave pregnant women](#) with no options to manage their pain.

Thune, when asked what he could do to push back on Health and Human Services Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr. to change the public discourse, pointed to recent checks from Congress on HHS, like Kennedy testifying before the Senate Finance Committee earlier this month. Thune suggested there should be oversight in assessing medical warnings like the Tylenol announcement and to ensure the decisions are rooted in research.

"There needs to be accountability, and there needs to be transparency in this decision-making process, and ensure that it is governed by science," he said.



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