

When Right Cancels Right



HEN YOU HEAR the phrase “cancel culture,” what immediately comes to mind? If you follow the online discourse, you’re likely to think it’s one of the intolerant products of “Wokeness.” It’s the culture of the new Left asserting its dominance in the academy, the media, and pop culture.

There’s no question that left-wing intolerance is real. There’s no question that progressive shame campaigns have destroyed reputations and careers. But cancel culture isn’t exclusively left-wing. Though it’s difficult to quantify, it may not even be mainly left-wing. There is a cancel culture on the Right.

In August 2021, my friend Daniel Darling appeared on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* to discuss why he chose to get the Covid vaccine. He was there to discuss a piece he wrote in *USA Today* called “Why, as a Christian and an American, I got the Covid vaccine.” In neither the piece nor the television appearance did he condemn Americans

who made a different choice. In fact, he went out of his way to note that institutions had failed America, and he refused to shame anyone who declined to get the vaccine.

Within days, he was out of a job. Darling was the national spokesperson for National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), an “international association of Christian communicators.” Darling’s sin was violating an alleged policy of neutrality on the vaccine (an organization official had previously praised Covid vaccines as “stunningly effective,” but the NRB president later wrote that the organization “stays neutral”). Darling lost his position after refusing to accept a demotion and sign a statement admitting to insubordination.

America’s conservative Christian broadcasters are keenly worried about cancel culture. Spend any time watching or listening to Christian media, and you’ll hear an outpouring of concern about Woke censorship. Yet the NRB was all too willing to cancel one of its own.

Let’s turn to another conservative institution that’s focused on progressive intolerance—Fox News. My *Dispatch* colleague Chris Stirewalt worked at Fox for a decade and was a key part of the team that called election results. That’s the team that called Arizona for Joe Biden, disrupted Trump’s victory narrative on Election Night, and infuriated the former president and his supporters.

In his new book, *Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back*, he writes, “I got canned after very vocal and very online viewers—including the then-president of the United States—became furious when our Decision Desk was the first to project that Joe Biden would win the former GOP stronghold of Arizona in 2020.”

Fox disputes Chris’s story. It told the *New York Times*, “Chris Stirewalt’s quest for relevance knows no bounds.” Yet the termination reeks of cancellation. It fits the classic pattern. A public figure infuriates a segment of an organization’s base, and the organization reacts by terminating the offending employee.

Sometimes, however, cancel culture doesn’t require an actual

termination. Instead, relentless cruelty can make life so intolerable within institutions that its victims thus choose to leave. And so it was with Beth Moore and Russell Moore (no relation), two of the most prominent members of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's largest Protestant Christian denomination.

They had both publicly opposed Donald Trump, the candidate of choice for the overwhelming majority of Southern Baptists, and they both were outspoken about condemning sexual abuse within the SBC. They demanded reform and accountability. And they endured years-long campaigns of scorn and harassment.

By 2021, they were done. They publicly left the denomination. In a letter that Russell Moore wrote more than a year before he resigned his position as head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the SBC's public-policy arm, he described being "attacked with the most vicious guerrilla tactics."

If you think conservative cancel culture is reserved for policing conservative institutions, think again. It's leaking into the academy as well. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) maintains a "scholars under fire" database that recorded 537 attempts since 2015 to target scholars for their constitutionally protected speech.

There's no question that the Left leads the way in academic cancel culture. Most attempted cancellations have come from the Left—a statistic that makes sense when one considers that the American academy is an overwhelmingly left-wing institution. But while fewer come from the Right, they are responsible for most of the cancellation attempts that included violent threats.

That last part is crucial. While threats of violence and acts of violence are hardly confined to the Right, they are spreading across the Right. Writing in *The Dispatch*, Georgetown University professor Paul Miller compiled some deeply disturbing data:

Death threats to congressmen doubled by May of last year, compared to the year before. "These are not one-off incidents,"

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according to *Vox*, "surveys have found that 17 percent of America's local election officials and nearly 12 percent of its public health workforce have been threatened due to their jobs during the 2020 election cycle and Covid-19 pandemic," respectively. Reuters tracked more than 850 individual threats against local election workers by Trump supporters last year, up from essentially zero in previous elections.

In some instances, the threats are so pervasive and terrifying that they fundamentally alter the lives of their victims. In June, an election worker named Ruby Freeman testified before the January 6 Committee and described what it was like to find herself at the center of a right-wing conspiracy theory that centered around false claims of mishandled ballots in Fulton County, Georgia.

"I've lost my name," she said. "And I've lost my reputation. I've lost my sense of security—all because a group of people...scapegoat[ed] me and my daughter, Shaye, to push their own lies about how the presidential election was stolen."

Even at the most grassroots level, a culture of intolerance pervades the Right. I'm thinking of a good friend, a longtime Republican and staunch Trump supporter who suddenly realized he could no longer remain a county GOP chairman simply because he had publicly condemned the violence on January 6. He didn't even condemn Trump. Simply condemning the attack itself was too much for his grassroots GOP friends. He had no choice but to resign.

"Cancel culture" is a term that's famously hard to define. There's

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an element that's reminiscent of the late Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart's frustratingly vague definition of obscenity—"I know it when I see it." When we hear about a reasonable person facing extreme social sanction or termination for expressing mainstream views, we immediately think "cancel culture."

I'm partial to Yale professor Nicholas Christakis's definition of the term. In a Twitter dialogue, he described cancel culture as "1) forming a mob, to 2) seek to get someone fired (or disproportionately punished), for 3) statements within [the] Overton window."

There were "extra points," he said, if the "'mob' willfully misinterprets" the original statement or "narrows" the window "beyond all recognition."

The term "cancel culture" is distinct from conventional legal censorship—the kind of government action you see in university speech codes or public-school-library book bans. Instead, it tends to refer to excessive and punitive *private* action. It's when individual citizens try to close the marketplace of ideas.

The Overton window is a common online term for what is deemed the legitimate range of public discourse. Cancel culture enrages and alarms Americans not because they're particularly focused on letting *anyone* say *anything* without consequence, but because they're afraid that even the most mainstream of conversations can now trigger an intolerable online ordeal or perhaps even derail their careers.

Outright white supremacy and explicit antisemitism are outside the Overton window. As a result, few people weep when an anti-semitic, Holocaust-denying, racist such as Nick Fuentes loses access to Twitter. But think of the cancel-culture examples above. Is vaccine advocacy beyond the pale? How about opposition to Donald Trump? Or making an early, accurate call of election results? Is it too much to condemn the MAGA riot on January 6?

Why is it that segments of the American Right (and Left) react against even mainstream speech with extraordinary ferocity?

The answer lies in the dynamics of political polarization, but with an important twist. Note that in many of the cancel-culture incidents above, the cancellation is fratricidal. They represent Right-on-Right aggression, with radicals taking aim at perceived disloyalty. Likewise, many of the most famous left-wing cancellations were aimed at fellow leftists.

For example, the progressive data analyst David Shor lost his job as a response to left-wing anger when he noted that race riots tended to diminish support for Democratic candidates. When Keith Christiansen, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, resigned after posting a defense of monuments on Instagram, he was hardly a Fox News conservative. He'd been at the Met for 43 years.

When I was researching my book *Divided We Fall*—which makes the case that American polarization is so profound that it risks splitting the nation—one of my most illuminating conversations was with Rachel Brown, executive director of Over Zero, an organization founded to study and prevent "identity-based violence." Rachel told me that in times of extreme polarization, radicals often target so-called in-group moderates with greater ferocity than that reserved for the other side.

The reasons make sense, on reflection. First, in-group moderates represent a far more immediate threat to any radical enterprise than out-group opponents. The in-group moderate is often speaking to the same constituency as the radical, and the battle for hearts and minds of a party or an institution is immediate and tangible.

Second, in-group moderates are vulnerable in a way that out-group opponents are not. While there are certainly examples of Right canceling Left, and Left canceling Right, the reality is that when out-group opponents attack, allies tend to rally in support. Thus, as we've seen, a conservative can be "canceled" by the Left yet see his power and stature only rise on the Right.

But when Right cancels Right? Or Left cancels Left? Then, the danger to your reputation and career is far starker. The Left won't truly embrace conservatives who remain conservatives, and the Right won't embrace progressives who remain progressives, so when in-group moderates face persecution from their own tribe, the result can be a sense of overpowering isolation and vulnerability.

The pressure to conform or to switch sides entirely can be overwhelming. We are, after all, built for community, and when we lose one community, it's entirely natural to seek out another—often as an act of sheer self-preservation.

Third, in-group moderates often trigger a visceral sense of betrayal. On the Right, terms such as "RINO" or "grifter" signal that a person has divided loyalties, that he can't fully be trusted or that he's ready to sell out his friends to the highest bidder, or for a dash of elite approval.

The result is a toxic environment in which internal debate is stifled, dissent is greeted with outrage, and increasing numbers of individuals feel as if their careers and public reputations depend on public conformity to radical demands. Yes there are those who possess a public profile big enough that they're able to lose a job and land on their professional feet—like Dan Darling, Chris Stirewalt, Russell Moore, and Beth Moore—but often at great personal cost.

Those who don't have the same profile, meanwhile, live with a heightened sense of vulnerability. They know that even their most precious relationships are at stake. Fathers will turn on sons. Friends will turn on friends.

Moreover, one can feel at the mercy of forces beyond one's control. The more polarized our politics, the less tolerance for internal

dissent. And who among us has the power to depolarize our politics? The end result is a collective-action problem. Individuals make rational decisions either to fall silent or fall in line. After all, is it really worth the pain to speak up? Especially if you can't see your words making an impact?

But the collective effect of those countless individual decisions is plain to see—on both the Left and the Right. Millions of more moderate voices step back. The radical voices surge forward, and even though most Americans are deeply discontented with our polarized discourse, their concerns remain unvoiced, and unvoiced concerns are by definition unheard. The radicals reign.

What is the solution to right-wing cancel culture? It's the same as the solution to left-wing intolerance. Reform has to come from within. Right has to reform Right, and Left has to reform Left. And that means that the in-group moderates have to find their voices. They have to confront the scorn and the threats and respectfully but firmly make their dissent known.

Cancel culture feeds on its own victories. It is drained by its defeats. There is no better way to end intimidation than by refusing to be intimidated. The collective action has to reverse—away from individual retreat and toward individual advance. There is no path toward free expression and a healthy discourse that doesn't require personal courage.

There are few challenges more difficult than confronting friends, but absent those respectful confrontations, the tolerant voices will fall silent, and the public square will be lost to the radicals who are tearing this country apart.

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