



Written by [William P. Hoar](#) on September 5, 2023

Published in the September 25, 2023 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 39, No. 18

Newfangled Witch Burning

While the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects free speech, it doesn't guarantee listeners — and certainly not approving listeners. Too many folks don't understand that latter part. As a result, our land has become widely afflicted with "cancel culture" — a phrase describing how those who are deemed to have acted or spoken in an unacceptable manner are shamed, ostracized, or boycotted, or have had their livelihoods destroyed.



Those who cancel, sometimes as part of a mob action, heard something they didn't like.

As with so many aspects of life today, this phenomenon is seen differently by those on the American Left and Right. Also, not surprisingly, there are many definitions of "cancel culture." "This is a power struggle of different groups or forces in society, I think, at its most basic," says Nicole Holliday, an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, as quoted by NPR.

This definition is what *The Canceling of the American Mind* settled upon (as noted in our advance proof of the book, due out in October): It is "the uptick beginning around 2014, and accelerating [in] 2017 and after, of campaigns to get people fired, disinvited, deplatformed, or otherwise punished for speech that is — or would be — protected by First Amendment standards and the climate of fear and conformity that has resulted from this uptick."

The authors are assuredly fans of the First Amendment — and then some, calling for an invigorated "Free Speech Culture," maintaining that that culture is "precisely what inspired and enabled the establishment of First Amendment."

Whether on the Left or Right, few relish being the target of Cancel Culture (capitalized throughout this book), which is truly a destructive force. It has, as the authors recount with numerous examples, "upended lives, ruined careers, undermined companies, hindered the production of knowledge, destroyed trust in institutions, and plunged us into an ever-worsening culture war."

Even longtime Democratic Party strategist James Carville — yes, that droll fellow who famously counseled, "Drag a hundred-dollar bill through a trailer park, you never know what you'll find" — acknowledges that these days he does not want an ideological pack converging on his case. Carville is among those, of varied political persuasions, quoted in *The Canceling of the American Mind*. He acknowledges:

Wokeness is a problem and everyone knows it. It's hard to talk to anybody today — and I talk to lots of people in the Democratic Party — who doesn't say this. But they don't want to say it out loud ... because they'll get clobbered or canceled.

Thanks to the excesses of Cancel Culture, it's not just pessimists who get to look at life through morose-



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colored glasses.

Great Untruth of Ad Hominem

The Canceling of the American Mind is a sequel of sorts to the 2018 bestselling volume entitled *The Coddling of the American Mind*, written by First Amendment expert Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt about disturbing trends on American college campuses. Haidt provides the foreword for the new book, which, as he summarizes, shows how those maladies have metastasized beyond universities to, among other institutions, journalism, the arts, and public K-12 education, as well as science and medicine.

Both books utilize several verbal handles (perhaps easy to remember, but a bit too shtick-like for our taste) for major points, dubbed “Great Untruths.” For the record, here are the first three: The Untruth of Fragility (*What doesn’t kill you makes you weaker*); The Untruth of Emotional Reasoning (*Always trust your feelings*); and The Untruth of Us Versus Them (*Life is a battle between good people and bad people*). Explanations are helpfully (and mercifully) provided to flesh out such themes. Added to those unwise ways of thinking is a fourth in this volume. As the co-authors note, they are focusing on The Great Untruth of Ad Hominem, which supposes that “*bad people only have bad opinions.*”

Co-author Greg Lukianoff is the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE, formerly known as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), a nonprofit civil liberties group founded in 1999, who has written on free-speech issues for many prominent newspapers. Co-author Rikki Schlott is a New York City-based journalist and political commentator. She is a research fellow at FIRE, host of a podcast, and a columnist at the *New York Post*. From the introduction we learn that Greg (first names are used for the most part) is a 47-year-old liberal; Rikki, 22, is described as “a right-leaning libertarian” (though in another section, we are told that she identifies as a “classical liberal and civil libertarian”). They find faults (and positives) widely on the political spectrum, calling ‘em as they see ‘em. (We do take issue with more than a few of their comments on conservatives and matters such as the “Red Scare” and “McCarthyism,” among others.)

As noted in the acknowledgments and as is apparent throughout, the authors have been assisted considerably by FIRE’s resources and research team.

Among the three major parts of this book — which concentrate on what Cancel Culture is, how it works, and what should be done about it — are case studies (including some cases where FIRE assisted the canceled party). An appendix, one of two, reprints FIRE’s college speech rankings (for 2022). Spoiler: The University of Chicago came in first, with its speech climate being called “good,” while the Ivy League’s Columbia University was ranked last, with an “abysmal” climate.

Ideology Over Objectivity

One of the book’s stronger “case studies” deals with journalism, leading off with the episode that dealt with the June 2020 forced resignation of *The New York Times*’ editorial page editor, a 19-year veteran of that paper. His thoughtcrime? He had permitted the publication of an op-ed piece by a sitting senator on the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Select Committee on Intelligence. The op-ed by Senator Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), called “Send in the Troops,” promoted a show of military force to quell the “civil unrest” that erupted after the death of George Floyd. The issue was certainly controversial, but one need not have agreed with the reaction to publish it.



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The editor, James Bennet, certainly did not, and said so in a public response (which noted that the *Times* had published articles written by “terrorists with blood on their hands”). But the paper’s woke-infected staff went ballistic, and wouldn’t relent, arguing, among other comments, that its publication “puts Black @NYT staff in danger.” Bennet had to go.

The book does go into more detail. It was more than two years before Bennet went public on the incident, then commenting in part, “I was so bewildered for so long after I had what felt like all my colleagues treating me like an incompetent fascist.”



(wildpixel/iStock/Getty Images Plus)

Following Bennet’s forced departure, another editor and writer from the opinion department also resigned, quite publicly. Liberalism, insisted Bari Weiss, “is under siege by a new illiberal orthodoxy that has taken root all around.” And, she went on, “cancellation is this ideology’s most effective weapon. It uses cancellation the way ancient societies used witch burnings: to strike fear into the hearts of everyone watching.”

Readers should be aware that this is decidedly not a “right-wing” book, but the fact that many of those on the Left are so prominent among both victims and commentators may well make it more useful for conservatives. It becomes an admission against the liberal establishment’s interests.

No Lack of Cases About Heretics

Individual cases of canceling attacks are the backbone of the book. While the authors maintain that those on the Right are as equally at fault as those on the Left, most of their effective examples show otherwise.

In a Covid-19 “case study,” for example, we see how the president of Levi Strauss & Co. got canceled because she wouldn’t stop exposing how American children were being harmed by school lockdowns. The leftist mob called her a racist and a eugenicist, among other charges (she is, we read, the mother “of mixed-race children”). Eventually, she was shown the door, with an offered \$1 million severance payment that was dependent on her signing a nondisclosure agreement. Jennifer Sey turned down the payout and resigned, writing, “In return I get to keep my voice.”

Also on the Covid/pandemic front, we are reminded about how the canceling crowd was sicced on, among others, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya (a Stanford professor of economics and health research policy), as



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well as epidemiologists from Harvard and Oxford, who signed the Great Barrington Declaration. They dared to disagree with the broad lockdown policies and were set upon for straying from putative truths. Social media critics piled on, as did a coordinated strike from officialdom. Bhattacharya was “targeted,” the authors recall,

by the director of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins. In an email to Dr. [Anthony] Fauci [director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases], Collins responded to the declaration by describing Bhattacharya and his co-authors as a group of “fringe epidemiologists.”... He proceeded to call for a “quick and devastating published takedown” of the authors and their findings.

Bhattacharya didn’t forget, later reminding the public via social media, “Almost impossible to overstate how wrong so many news corporations were on the science of covid: lab leak as conspiracy, efficiency of lockdown, harmlessness of school closures, recovered immunity, toddler masking, vax mandates. A perfect record of anti-science failure.”

Of course, language continues to be under assault. *The Canceling of the American Mind* has examples of this, too. You might have missed this one if you are not a regular reader of *Nature Human Behaviour* — which decided in 2022 how to police research in the future. The new policy, we read, “will publish research based not solely on scientific validity, but on whether it might cause ‘harm’ to protected groups.”

Hmm. Here’s another scientific observation. Considering such geniuses as the above, we think that it’s possible that intelligent life might be found on several planets in our solar system someday — perhaps including the Earth.

Argument Tactics, Potential Solutions

When it comes to squabbles in social media — a wellspring of Cancel Culture — that is a place where Left and Right both employ certain favorite tactics. The authors break some of these down. They refer to this part as the “obstacle course.” These include “whataboutism,” described as “Defending against criticism of your side by bringing up the other side’s alleged wrongdoing.” Also there is “straw-manning” — “Misrepresenting the opposition’s perspective by constructing a weak, inaccurate version of their argument that can be easily refuted.” There are more.

Other sections delve into what the authors call the Right’s “Efficient Rhetorical Fortress” and the Left’s “Perfect Rhetorical Fortress.” In the latter category, we find various reasons why you can dismiss the arguments of people on the Right without even dealing with the accusations. These become “barricades.” Is the speaker in question conservative? Don’t worry then. How about his race? Sex? Sexuality? The book has the actual statistics for the resultant slivers of “palatable voices.”

There’s also a major section about solutions. Whether the authors’ answers are as interesting (or practical) as the problems they list is debatable. Each chapter here could be a book on its own. There’s a five-step plan for parents, with these being the jumping-off points: “Revive the Golden Rule”; “Encourage free unstructured time”; “Emphasize the importance of friendships”; “Teach children about differences”; and “Practice what you preach.”

At the root of the book is a call to re-embrace Free Speech Culture, with norms guiding the laws. To



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reinforce that, the authors reach back to comments by Judge Learned Hand in 1944 when he was on the U.S. Court of Appeals. (FIRE excerpts his “Spirit of Liberty” speech on its website.) “I often wonder,” said the judge, “whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts.” As he emphasized, “Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”



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