

## Cancel Culture: How Canceling Others Cancels Ourselves

America is a nation of ideas. Indeed, the great strength of America is that its willingness to embrace new ideas has allowed it be the innovative dynamo that has distinguished it for most of its history. However, in recent years, the country's commitment to free speech—including uncomfortable speech, or the airing of unpopular opinions—has been challenged as never before by a new movement whereby people are socially and professionally ostracized, even personally attacked, for expressing the wrong sentiments or positions on controversial subjects. This paper argues that Cancel Culture is ultimately immensely destructive to America.

Libel, slander, and defamation should always be discouraged by whatever legal means are available, but destroying careers, and even lives, for venting opinions which others find objectionable is grossly un-American and will ultimately negatively impact all of us. Not least of all, when the right of others to be heard is undermined, or the quintessentially American right to freely express one's thoughts on a volatile matter or subject is undermined, then all of us suffer. The politically popular groups of today will not always be so, and there may soon come a time when they find themselves the subject of the very attacks they launch against others – and all because they have hurt someone's feelings by offering a different perspective that challenges an existing school of thought. By embracing or indulging Cancel Culture, America is feeding a dangerous and volatile intolerance that could easily lead to widespread persecution and abuse. And, just as badly as that, it can lead to a squelching or freezing of the very exchange of ideas that has historically invigorated America and allowed it to stay ahead of global competitors. Openly and freely exchanging ideas, not salving bruised egos by indulging ideologues or irresponsible types who want to bring injury to others, should be the driving focus of American society, and that is why Cancel Culture needs to be repudiated.

There can be no question that Cancel Culture does inflict grave damage upon those who find themselves the targets of it. At the present time, Cancel Culture appears predominantly to attack conservative thinkers who operate in the public sphere (Blair, 2021). But, such a state of affairs can definitely change and, as the winds of political change are often capricious and sudden, it could soon be liberal public figures (or private ones) who find themselves the unhappy targets of cancelling. As it stands, one conservative writer noted at least a dozen prominent individuals who have been recently canceled for expressing unpopular opinions or maintaining unpopular stances on issues (Blair, 2021); of these, some of the most noteworthy cancellations were high-profile actress, Gina Carano, who was fired from the LucasFilms/Disney TV series *The Mandalorian* for her sharp critiques of the contemporary American political scene; Scott Cawthon, the creator of the *Five Nights at Freddy's* video game series, who was forced into retirement for his contributions to the campaigns of Republican political figures; and Kieran Bhattacharya, a former student at the University of Virginia School of Medicine, who was banned from campus for contesting a guest speaker's expansive definition of "micro-aggressions" at a panel discussion (Blair, 2021). To expand upon the troubling cause of Bhattacharya somewhat further, an administrator at the school actually mandated that he get counseling before he returned to class; when Bhattacharya refused this order, he was quickly suspended and barred from returning to campus (Blair, 2021).

If successful, intellectually gifted, and affluent individuals can have their careers or lives upended by Cancel Culture, then one can only imagine the devastating impact of Cancel Culture upon impecunious social media users who lack the resources, access to legal counsel, and general wherewithal to survive the onslaught. While it may be impossible to know precisely how many troubled teenagers (or even children) have been driven to suicide by the madness of Cancel Culture, it is well-documented that being cancelled (be it social medial or

some other platform) can lead to suicide ideation among teenagers, who are especially vulnerable to depression and mental health issues arising from social ostracism because their young minds are still very much in a process of cognitive and emotional/social development (Harger & Wen, 2022). The damage done to our society, and to individuals, courtesy Cancel Culture needs to stop.

Secondly, those who seek to cancel others may eventually find themselves hoisted by their own petard: When a society embraces the cancellation of others for having politically incorrect views, those in the vanguard of the new movement soon find it irresistible to expand their catalogue of victims – or to become victims at the hands of others who have accrued greater political or legal power. Kat Rosenfield (2021) argued recently that many of the victims of “Left-Wing” Cancel Culture are leftists or liberal thinkers themselves: academicians and other signatories to the notorious “*Harper’s Letter*” of July 2020, one which called for a full and vigorous defense of free speech at a time of increasing social unrest, ostensibly saw professional and personal setbacks because of their stance—and all, at least according to Rosenfeld (2021), were liberal. These liberal thinkers and public figures found themselves under attack for expressing a commitment to free speech and to open and robust public dialogue—traditional liberal values, it would seem—because the Cancel Culture mob had outraced them to a new position that decried free speech and protections for those espousing unpopular opinions.

A society is always in flux, and those powerful today may not be so tomorrow. As a consequence, it would seem to behoove Cancel Culture apologists to recognize that they, or those they support, may be the next victims of the monster they unleashed. This should be an even more pressing concern in light of the fact that the rise of social media has made it so much easier for self-appointed censors to collectively attack those who do not share their beliefs (Newport Academy, 2021). One may be an aggressor today, but find oneself a victim

tomorrow – and it does not need to be so. A healthy society recognizes the dangers of Cancel Culture, and works tirelessly against its spread.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, America is a nation which owes its vitality and predominance, certainly in part, to its historic willingness to embrace new ideas and new modes of thinking and being. A nation that is afraid of unpopular opinions, and which cannot tolerate and entertain an unpopular idea before casting it aside, is a nation that will gradually cease to be innovative, cease to be daring and dynamic, and ultimately cease to be free. Ideas are the lifeblood of any robust society, and Cancel Culture is destroying the ability of Americans to have conversations (even arguments) with one another. Over time, almost all ideas and schools of thought will come in for a cudgeling because of Cancel Culture and its imperatives, and this will mean that too many subjects will be off-limits for discussion, and too many discussions will break down in acrimony and the politics of personal destruction. Author and poet Roya Hakakian writes that Cancel Culture attacks a central feature of American society: Its long-time embrace of diversity of opinion, which she maintains has been a key reason why America became a bastion of innovation and entrepreneurship in the first place; to retreat from embracing pluralism and diversity in thought and opinion, Hakakian holds, is to essentially turn on the ideals that made America the nation it became (Mekouar, 2020). A nation that does not allow unpopular ideas or opinions to be expressed is a nation that fears (potential) truth, and fears the idea of people actually thinking for themselves, and considering perspectives that fall outside the conventional narrative.

To close, there is little question that Cancel Culture poses significant dangers to American society. As noted, Cancel Culture inflicts grievous damage upon people whose only sin is to offer a different point of view. Secondly, those who unleash such withering attacks upon others for holding heretical viewpoints, fail to realize that the fusillade may be trained on them someday. And, not least of all, Cancel Culture undermines and enervates the

long-standing American commitment to free speech and to the liberal spread of new ideas and modes of thinking about the world. It would be better for America, and for all those whose lives have been impacted for the worse by Cancel Culture, if it is consigned to the dustbin of history.

## References

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