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Altercation: There Is a Cancel Culture, and It's the Right That's Advancing It

From banning books to dictating curricula, Republicans are the real cancelers, not that the MSM recognizes that.

BY ERIC ALTERMAN APRIL 15, 2022



DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD/TAMPA BAY TIMES VIA AP

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis displays the signed Parental Rights in Education bill during a news conference at Classical Preparatory School in Shady Hills, Florida, March 28, 2022.



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Today we turn, yet again, to the conundrum of “cancel culture.” Take a look at [the books that were most targeted to be banned according to the American Library Association](#). What do they have in common? Virtually all deal with the lives of Black and LGBTQ people (plus one about a Native American). These efforts surged in 2021.

Now examine the facts presented in this *New York Times* article on recent legal restrictions placed on “[classroom instruction, youth sports and health care](#)” in red-state [America](#). These efforts focus on two issues. The first is “efforts to restrict transgender youths’ health care and participation in girls’ sports.” According to the Human Rights Campaign, a record 79 anti-transgender bills were introduced into various state legislatures in 2021. This year, that number is already 140. And yet we’re only at the beginning of this story. The Republican National Committee recently promised to continue to focus its efforts to oppose “attempts to force conversations around sex and transgender issues on our youngest children.”

The second major conservative cancel culture campaign, being pushed especially by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, is aimed at [prohibiting classroom instruction](#) about “sexual orientation and gender identity in some elementary school grades.” According to [a Washington](#)



Post report, “His press secretary and national conservatives are attacking foes of the bill, formally known as the Parental Rights in Education measure, for allegedly promoting ‘grooming’ children by exposing them to teaching on sexual identity to ‘separate’ them from ‘a normative sexual and gender identity,’ according to the American Conservative’s Rod Dreher, who labeled Democrats the ‘party of groomers.’”

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Let us take a moment to note that the *Post* reports these crazy comments as if they were completely normal, sensible political observations, without further need of explication, much less alarm, as well as the fact that, as *The Atlantic*’s Olga Khazan explains [here](#), sex ed is the opposite of grooming. Alas, MSM reporters long ago decided not to allow reality to interfere with their dogged commitment to bothsidesism.

Now, it is one thing to say we cannot be certain about the age at which students should be instructed about complex issues about sexuality and identity, issues that have likely arisen as long as there have been people. And it is also understandable that both parents and students would have complicated, perhaps conflicting, feelings about how to handle the issue of transgender participation in sports. But the conservative push is not really about addressing these issues. It is about (a) exploiting the discomfort they raise among parents with dishonest scare tactics and made-up stories and (b) shutting down all discussion that might imply acceptance of such discussions, or even encourage tolerance among the previously prejudiced on matters of race and sexuality.

These goals have long been arrows in the conservative quiver. What is new is the discovery, post-Trump, of how far the right can take them and how cooperative the



mainstream media will be with their “both sides” reporting on these and related topics.

In his new book, which will likely soon be assigned reading in Tennessee public schools, lunatic playwright David Mamet “complains about the ‘plandemic’ coronavirus lockdowns, decries ‘the Left’s anti-Trump psychosis’ and suggests that it was Democrats and the media who threatened ‘armed rebellion’ in the event that their preferred candidate lost the 2020 election.” He then told Fox that “teachers are inclined, typically men because men are predators, to pedophilia.” But if you think Mamet lost his metaphorical marbles only recently, well, “Think Again.” (Ahem. That was the name of my CAP media column, but I see that it is missing from the archived version.)

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The right is far more guilty than the left of the crime of “cancel culture,” and yet they have successfully crafted a narrative that makes them out to be the victims.

For some historical perspective, I recently came across this fascinating story put up online in a blog published by the Yale Daily News. The extremely long, historically focused article begins with a speech made at the late-2021 National Conservatism Conference by J.D. Vance, whom it accurately describes as “the former ‘Never Trump’ conservative who, over just a few short years, has metamorphosed into a lib-owning pugilist running for Senate in Ohio.” According to Vance, “universities do not pursue knowledge and truth—they pursue deceit and lies.” The piece followed that with coverage of a



conference celebrating the career of William F. Buckley, sponsored, ironically, by the William F. Buckley, Jr. Program, a generously funded student organization founded in 2010 by Lauren Noble '11, who still serves as executive director. The program's stated mission, the article reports, is to "promote intellectual diversity on Yale's campus." That gathering featured John Burtka, president of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, who had also spoken to the "National Conservatives" with Vance. Burtka helpfully explained, "We must wield the state ... I want to wield political power to fire bad professors and academics who are brainwashing children and harming their education."

The more than 7,000-word article then traces conservatives' efforts to control both speech and thought by doing everything they could think of—just as Buckley did—to undermine liberal education. (As another Yale conference speaker, Michael Knowles, noted, "Today, so many people invoke William F. Buckley Jr. as this wonderful, moderate, anodyne-type figure who was so open-minded to everyone.' Alas, he insisted, 'this would have been news to William F. Buckley Jr.,' who 'hated academic freedom' and 'did not support the open society.'")

There is a lot more in this piece, which is understandably focused on the history of the issue as it relates to Yale, where the right's success has been mixed at best. But the conservative efforts to remake the university into a place that hews to its distorted precepts are growing in power as elected officials appear ready to take up the challenges laid out for the movement in the speeches described above. The *Times* recently reported on [a project undertaken by Hillsdale College](#), a refuge for far-right quasi-academic quacks dedicated to battling "progressive" and "leftist academics" to build a national charter school network. So far, it has succeeded



in creating 24 schools in 13 states. Recently, however, Gov. Bill Lee of Tennessee invited the college to start 50 such schools, using public funds—that is, charging taxpayers to make their kids more ignorant and misinformed, and almost certainly more malevolent, than before they went to school; and to do so every day.

This is, of course, a great way to advance indoctrination for a party that pledges itself to inculcate ignorant, malevolent tropes among its young people, especially if that same party undermines honest elections in its state at the same time to its own advantage. But here is my question: How is it possible that the words “cancel culture” are among the most potent weapon of hysterical right-wing hucksterism when applied to liberals when these very Republican accusers are, far and away, its most potent purveyors. This accuser-as-perpetrator phenomenon is the case with many issues, the most obvious being voter fraud. The right is far more guilty than the left of the crime of “cancel culture,” and yet they have successfully crafted a narrative that makes them out to be the victims and sold that narrative to the public, via both the mainstream media as well as their own.

Why are liberals so damn bad at politics in this country? And why does the MSM respond only to right-wing working of the refs, but never to that of liberals and left-wingers? (I have some ideas, but not much space left.)

Irony alert: Former AIPAC spokesman Josh Block once accused me of antisemitism when I argued that some right-wing supporters of Israel were trying to get the United States to attack Iran. Who's the antisemite now, boychik?

I used to live on St. Marks Place in the East Village, and despite the people who occasionally peed on my



doorstep, I was proud of my block's history. It had been home, in the past, to both W.H. Auden and Leon Trotsky. It was also once the red-hot center of Ukrainian exile culture, as *New York* magazine reports this week. One holdover, where I spent a great deal of time, was the restaurant Vaselka, founded in 1954, and purveyor of always, um, interesting and often unpredictable Ukrainian food. It is still there, right down the street from a club I have come to appreciate, even though I've long retired to the Upper West Side. That place, called Pangea, was also there back then. It has been around for more than 30 years, hosting an extremely eclectic brand of entertainers. Back in November, I caught the act of a fun, all-female Tom Waits cover band with the wonderful name Vicki Kristina Barcelona. Last week, I saw the often imitative, but always inimitable, Tammy Faye Starlite doing a new show that was so much fun and so weird I cannot really describe it well enough to do justice to it. In the past, Tammy has starred as her own versions of Nico, Marianne Faithfull, and Marianne's ex-boyfriend Mick Jagger, in the surprisingly great "Mike Hunt Band." Now she has created her own character she calls "Tamar," a nutty Israeli legend in her own mind, who puts on a show called "Yesterday, Today and Tamar!" She describes it as "Ashkenazi-textured Europop," and believe me, you will never hear "Nights in White Satin" the same way ever again (should you wish to). Here's more on Tammy—and here are some videos—but I also want to note that Pangea only survived the pandemic because of a GoFundMe effort by its supporters in and around the neighborhood—not one of whose contributors, I'm betting, is a groomer, much less a pedophile.



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