

Article

Fire the Censors! It's the Only Way to Restore Free Inquiry

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Abstract: "Censorship in the Sciences: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," was a remarkable conference presenting a range of views on why free inquiry matters and how to restore it. Unfortunately, speakers dodged the central question: Why should censors stop their bad behavior? Here, I argue that politics often involves coercion. If one side uses coercion and the other does not, we all know who will win. We can only stop organized censorship of teaching, research, and speakers by making such behavior risky, by firing the censors, as they have long fired us. We now lack the power to do so, but over time, with the help of policies created by elected and appointed leaders, we can build the social and bureaucratic infrastructure to *fire the censors and cancel the cancelers*. I conclude with examples of legal and bureaucratic reforms likely to increase the risks faced by censors. If we fail to make their behaviors risky, then both higher education and democracy will succumb to a new dark age. The stakes are that high.

Keywords: free speech; cancel culture; critical theory; higher education; censorship

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In combating DEI, Donald Trump is doing the right thing. In that sentence I just wrote, I almost choked writing the six final words. But it is what I believe. A stopped clock is right twice a day, and it is high time America engaged in an honest conversation about this business called Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

Persuasion, John McWhorter (2025)

Introduction

As 19th-century fictional character Mr. Dooley, created by American journalist Finley Peter Dunne, put it, "politics ain't beanbag," at least in the U.S., nor is it bloodsport. Even

without shedding blood, the work of politics, including higher education politics, involves far more coercion than most of us admit. A question which I asked several times, but which was sidestepped during the *Censorship in the Sciences* conference, quite simply, is: Why should censors stop censoring? Of course, we should give normative reasons why censors should stop bad behavior to engage disinterested parties, unify our own side, to make it psychologically easier for those abusing power to change their behaviors, and to signal that once they do, they will not face retribution so long as they really do change their ways, as President Lincoln and General Grant assured Confederates at the end of the U.S. Civil War (Winik, 2001). Yet we are beyond silly if we believe that reason alone will make them change. Reason must be backed with credible threats of force. A failure to understand this in no small part explains why we are losing. Our opponents have used coercion for decades. So far as I can tell, censors and cancelers have lost no sleep over ruining the careers, and in some cases like that of University of North Carolina at Wilmington Professor Mike Adams, who on being harassed out of his job committed suicide, the lives of others (Lukianoff & Schlott, 2023, pp. 63–68). Supported by many institutions and critical theory ideology, many cancelers act out of a mix of ideology, solidarity, and *self-interest* (Conway, 2024). The first motivation, critical theory ideology, will take years to overcome (Kaufmann, 2024; Maranto, 2025), but the second is already under siege (Chait, 2025). Now, we must take on the third: to save what is left of higher education, we must make reprehensible behavior *risky* behavior. To paraphrase an apocryphal statement by Al Capone, you can get farther with a persuasive argument and a serious threat to fire a censor, expel them, or slash their budget than you can with just a persuasive argument. We must build an infrastructure to make cancel culture risky, very risky – not to physical health but to continued employment. We must make it possible and then standard to relentlessly *fire or demote the censors*.

One-Sided Coercion

Save in the most peaceful politics, if one side uses coercion and the other does not, we know in advance who will win. In perhaps the best scholarly book on the Vietnam War, *War Comes to Long An*, Political Scientist Jeffrey Race (1972) shows that for ideological reasons the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership in Hanoi for years forced its southern adjunct (the National Liberation Front, also called the Viet Cong, or VC) to pursue nonviolent activism rather than armed struggle. During this period in the 1950s, the Saigon government kept killing VC members, who under Party discipline, were not permitted to fight back. As one VC provincial leader Race (1972, p. 110) interviewed put it, “The Central Committee kept calling for political struggle [but] if they had kept that up, where were they going to find cadres to carry it out?” Once the Party gave its southern cousins permission to fight back, the VC rapidly gained ground, and recruits, because it could *win*.

To be clear, those of us fighting for the return of free speech and free inquiry are not in a civil war. Our people lose jobs and friends, not their lives, with rare exceptions like Mike Adams, whose death by suicide was *not* mourned by his cold-blooded critics – who are not the sort of people who should be leading academia. Generally, campus administrators and their activist allies use psychological torture, not waterboarding. Yet the basic dynamic is the same as in the Vietnam wars: if one side uses coercion and the other does not, we all know in advance who will win, because politics ain’t beanbag. In the real world,

normal people cannot afford to join the losing side – the costs are too high. And yes, it is true that Martin Luther King, Jr. refused violence, but his civil rights activism occurred in an unusually nonviolent, democratic society that often rewarded nonviolence and punished violence. Further, white elites knew they could work with either the nonviolent MLK, or Malcolm X, who did threaten violence at times, if only in self-defense. The *possibility* of violence enabled peacemaking, particularly due to Western values encouraging universal rights and empathy across groups. Likewise, Mohandas Gandhi benefited from the fact that 20th-century Britain was democratic, with a free press and public uncomfortable with mass violence against fellow members of the British Empire, even dark-skinned members. Nonviolent tactics could not bring independence in colonies run by Germany, Japan, Spain, or the Aztecs (Smith, 1981; Sowell, 2022).

Those Western, or if you will, British values enshrining universal rights are dead, killed by K-12 education and higher education, and replaced by critical theory (Maranto, 2025) or often, nothing at all (Maranto & Wai, 2020). We can never bring them back unless we show the censors it is in their *interest* to do so. Even when we do not use coercion, we should appreciate those who give us leverage by (nonviolently) doing so. Given his relative isolationism and sometimes reckless actions (epitomized by the runup to the storming of the Capitol in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021), I did not vote for Mr. Trump.¹ Yet on free inquiry, his administration might play Malcolm X to our more moderate MLK, giving the higher education establishment incentives to work with us to prove there are making progress. As Jonathan Rauch (2025; 43 minute, 30 second mark) counseled at this conference, I have no illusions that Mr. Trump is a friend of free inquiry or free speech. That said, as Rauch's fellow *Atlantic* writer Jonathan Chait (2025) reluctantly admits, the 2024 Trump victory, fueled by opposition to wokeness, shook an establishment that permitted and often encouraged rampant censorship by the left. For this, that establishment deserves our contempt. Given their contempt for free speech and free inquiry (FIRE, 2024), I would not oppose higher taxes on the massive endowments of Harvard and Columbia, perhaps redistributing the money to campuses serving the middle and working classes. Indeed, since I proposed this in the first version of this paper, Congress has increased taxes on large endowments, though not redistributed the funds to poorer campuses. Still, this is a partial victory for social justice, not mere virtue signaling.

Can Fear Equity Bring Reform?

For two decades now, those intent on crushing free speech and free inquiry have used coercion, typically in material and psychological ways but augmented with occasional threats of physical violence as reported by Michael Bailey (2025), Jesse Singal (2025), and others at this conference, threats *unreported in the mainstream press, and seemingly never investigated by the FBI*. On both free speech and free inquiry, generally, the mainstream press is *not* our friend (Ungar-Sargon, 2021), but perhaps like the Trump administration, it can be a temporary ally. It seems clear that in the second Trump administration, censorship *of* the right is becoming censorship *by* the right, with

¹ Nor did I vote for the Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, given her years prioritizing equity over equality (Levine, 2024).

universities struggling to keep their government grants by scaling back leftist censorship and disruption, particularly by Jew-haters who themselves often blocked hiring of conservative and especially pro-Israeli professors, and at times even established literal Jew-free zones (Maranto, 2024). Indeed, for institutions like Columbia University and especially Harvard University, the Trump administration began with sensible demands to enforce rather than evade federal law (Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and campus rules against harassment of minorities *including* Jews. Harvard should also follow the law regarding mainly merit-based admissions of students rather than racial quotas limiting numbers of Asians and make some effort to expose students to different points of view rather than punishing all but the most progressive speech and research. By and large, Harvard and Columbia have promised to comply and taken initial steps to do so despite considerable internal opposition. As prominent Harvard Professor Steven Pinker (2025) wrote in *The New York Times*:

The uncomfortable fact is that many [Harvard] reforms followed Mr. Trump's inauguration and overlap with his demands. But if you're standing in a downpour and Mr. Trump tells you to put up an umbrella, you shouldn't refuse just to spite him. And doing things for good reasons is, I believe, the way for universities to right themselves and regain public trust. It sounds banal, but too often universities have been steered by the desire to placate their students, avoid making enemies and stay out of the headlines. We saw how well *that* worked out.

Unfortunately, maybe as a negotiating tactic, the Trump administration went beyond those initial steps to freeze or withhold federal grants *before* going through the legally mandated Title VI processes which give campuses a reasonable time to show improvements. Harvard is having to borrow money at non-ideal rates and impose cutbacks as a result. The Trump administration also (in my view inhumanely) blocked visas issued to foreign students and demanded the power to micromanage personnel policy. Predictably, Harvard sued, temporarily blocking most of these secondary moves in court, though Congress did increase taxes on large university endowments, even as President Trump asked the Internal Revenue Service to end Harvard's tax-exempt status. Thus, the Trump administration has made it risky, very risky, for Harvard to evade reform (Pinker, 2025; Shockey, 2025).

In short, as Lee Jussim and I point out (Jussim & Maranto, 2025), Trump administration efforts played an initially justifiable and useful role reforming elite campuses, but has gone beyond this to impose *fear equity*. In recent years, centrist and conservative professors feared being canceled by the left. Those fears remain, now joined by fears from those on the left that they will be canceled, or at least have their grants canceled, by federal officials to their right or by university administrators acting on their behalf. *Now everyone is afraid; hence, fear equity*. This may be a necessary phase in campus reform, since it gives the institutional left which dominates higher education *incentives* to embrace the First Amendment (protecting freedom of speech) in a way it has not for years. At this conference, Greg Lukianoff (2025; 12 minute, 55 second mark) mentioned the irony that pro-Hamas activists who sometimes committed violence and often (roughly 100 times) canceled Jewish speakers from speaking are now proclaiming their own free speech rights. Legacy media like PBS will not report

their surreal hypocrisy,² but others will. To be clear, I will defend the free speech rights of Jew-haters even while castigating their views. However, I will never defend higher education “leaders” who create or enable conditions where it is dangerous to counter antisemitism with reason. After suitable hearings where they have their say, such “leaders” should be demoted back to teaching sophomores three days a week at 9:00 a.m., with massive pay cuts and ridicule, because they lack the values and temperament to lead a college or university. This would strongly disincentivize cancelers and is not as harsh as it sounds. After all, we are not talking about the real violence faced by civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, much less the VC. The troubles we (including me) face are not generally life-threatening, though Michael Bailey (2025) and others questioning trans activism have endured death threats, as he described at the conference. (Michael deservedly won Heterodox Academy’s 2024 Courage Award.) More typically, we risk jobs, promotions, grants, speaking gigs, scheduled courses, and honors. Those are not nothing and may resemble the sanctions faced by same-sex marriage activists just a few decades ago, to use a hopeful example that Jonathan Rauch (2025, 38 minute mark) suggested at the conference. (Relatedly, see Rauch, 2021).

All that said, Jonathan Rauch himself (2025; 36 minute, 35 second mark) succinctly stated our obstacles. Our opponents have a 30-year head start:

The problem has been that for the last 20 or 30 years the forces that have been organizing around the principals that I have bemoaned...have now done the organizing, they have now done the institutionalizing, they now own the big chunks of the of the bureaucracy, they owned the general counsel’s offices in the Biden and Obama administrations, they ran the Education Department’s civil rights division. The answer is to counter institutionalize. Individuals cannot do that much but groups can do a lot...You need to go back and within the context of your own institutions you need to organize countervailing power, and believe me that works. When I started on gay marriage back in 1994, 1995, it looked like a hopeless cause, and I am now married, to a man, that man is here, it’s not even controversial. Guys, you need to do that, but you need to figure it out.

Earlier, in the same talk, an exasperated Rauch (2025; 24 minute, 30 second mark) asked:

Why have professors, especially tenured professors, allowed their core prerogatives to be leached into the hands of bureaucrats, of lawyers, human resources people, DEI people, communications people? Why have they allowed that to happen...until the professoriate decides that no professor is answerable to a midlevel HR bureaucrat and that those bureaucrats will not even be empowered to investigate those matters involved in academic freedom, until you guys decide to take that power back, nothing will happen.

What Jonathan fails to note is that those midlevel bureaucrats have power in ways the most steadfast opponents of same-sex marriage, Christian fundamentalists, did not.

² For example, the March 10, 2025 episode of the *News Hour*, which (I believe properly) criticized Trump crackdowns on pro-Hamas activists, but failed to interview Hamas critics or report any concerns reasonable people might have about those individuals’ behaviors canceling others. This is all too typical.

Save at marginal places like Liberty University, opponents of same-sex marriage lacked institutional power. They did not run your tenure and promotion committee, nor your HR department. They could not dispense grants. They did not write state education standards as critical theorists now often do (Maranto, 2025), nor decide what books appear in libraries, though at times their allies did influence that (Ravitch, 2003).

This makes our work far harder. We are opposed by vast bureaucracies, who know the law better than we do, have allies in the permanent federal bureaucracy, have massive resources to pick us off one at a time, get key support from Democratic party officeholders and the mainstream news media, and who will change the criteria for continued employment at a moment's notice, sometimes, as San Jose State University anthropologist Elizabeth Weiss (2024) found, without notice, *because they lack ethics*. Jonathan's answer is for us to band together. Jonathan argues that if united, 30 professors can change any campus. If one professor gets called racist, that's a tragedy, but when 30 are, few take it seriously. To me, the problem here is that the censors are better organized. What if 30 critical theorists, occupying key parts of the bureaucracy and with the support of the general counsel's office, strike first? Or what if they are behind the scenes organizing students, but careful to keep their footprints light, as Greg Lukianoff (2025; 18 minute, 15 second mark) says many DEI officials do?

Overcoming the Obstacles to Reform

My answer is threefold. First, Jonathan is right: those of us who support free speech and free inquiry must organize everywhere, all at once. *We must seem much bigger than we are*. We should puff up organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), Heterodox Academy, and the Academic Freedom Alliance to seem like a powerful vanguard more likely to help rather than hinder one's career. We must change perceived self-interest. (For my part, I am among the very few professors doing peer-reviewed research using FIRE data *and* am now starting a new Heterodox Section of the American Political Science Association.) Thirty, or even ten professors really can make a difference on any campus if they have external allies. Moreover, if, as Donald Downs (2025) argues, some of them teach courses about the First Amendment and Western civilization, then we can create student allies. Of course, academic departments and administrators might not schedule such courses unless board members or elected policymakers make them, as the Trump administration now seems to be doing; hence, though Jonathan doubts politicians will do more good than harm, we need political support. Without it, our cause is hopeless.

Yet even politicians will not be enough without countervailing bureaucratic power off campus, which indeed can be created by policymakers (AKA politicians). As Shep Melnick (2018) details in his devastating *The Transformation of Title IX*,³ Rauch is right to complain (as quoted above) that the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Division is a lawyered up, determined opponent of free speech – albeit one in the process of being DOGED by the Trump administration. (DOGE, the Department of Government

³ "Title IX, enacted in 1972, prohibits sex-based discrimination in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. As Melnick (2018) details, the Obama U.S. Department of Education broadened interpretations of discrimination to enable punishment of subjectively offensive speech, including teaching biological rather than more expansive gender theory definitions of sex.

Efficiency, gets *some* things right.) Countervailing power on campus can only work if it enjoys countervailing power in state capitols and Washington. The U.S. Department of Education needs a First Amendment division to counter other parts of the department which undermine free speech. More importantly, since the Eisenhower years (1953–61), the bipartisan U.S. Civil Rights Commission and its 50-state advisory committees have issued reports and held hearings to safeguard our 14th Amendment civil rights. (I serve on the Arkansas committee.) Today, we need a bipartisan U.S. First Amendment Commission with state level affiliates to highlight our rights to speak freely, petition government, and practice the faiths we choose, countering DEI and other anti-freedom bureaucracies on and off campus. Free speech activists on campus are outnumbered and outlawyered, and as noted, the mainstream press will rarely cover us sympathetically. Without important bureaucratic allies, free speech and free inquiry are too risky. Like helping the VC in 1959, normies will avoid such risks.

Once we have allies, we must devise campaigns to cancel the cancelers. When professors or students come under fire for reasoned speech, those doing the canceling must face tough questions from free speech bureaucracies, governing boards, student activists (whose complaints can overwhelm bureaucratic systems), and if we can somehow make them interested, legacy media. Censoring someone must become a serious black mark on a résumé rather than an accomplishment. That might be easier than it sounds because employers are learning that activist censors do not make trustworthy (or efficient) employees. Censors who are in positions of authority must be demoted or terminated, because they lack the *character and judgment* to lead. Until we make censorship riskier than supporting free speech, we will continue to suffer a free speech recession, and increasing polarization as society divides into the haves who censor, and have-nots who cannot – who instead seek revenge at the ballot box.⁴ This is no way to run a truth-seeking university, or a liberal democracy.

One of the saddest moments in the wonderful *Censorship in the Sciences* conference came when Greg Lukianoff noted that it is incredibly rare for censors to face consequences. With the rise of DEI bureaucracies often dominated by critical theorists (Maranto, 2025), campus censorship has become a routinized process, with DEI bureaucrats training, organizing, and then hiding behind censorious students. As Lukianoff (2025; 18 minute, 15 second mark) noted, when a conservative judge invited to speak at Stanford was shouted down, the deanlet who orchestrated the affair was fired only because, unusually, she insisted on being the star of the show, reading a prepared statement on cue.

We must disrupt censors' routines. Suppose whenever a cancelation event occurred, those on and off campus faced sharp questioning about what happened and why, done in such a way as to pose serious reputational and occupational risks? Suppose a federal agency investigated the disruptions, just as the U.S. Department of Education routinely

⁴ Jonathan Chait (2025) argues that leftist censors could take control of university and other bureaucracies with relative ease, but the secret ballot enabled normies to get revenge in the 2024 election. He further argues that liberals have learned their lesson – this, I doubt. Indeed, one of the activists he interviewed regretted only that they had censored others before having attained sufficient power for “enforcement,” a telling term. Censors – left and right – have not learned that their behaviors are antidemocratic, and often don't care. Authoritarians on the right and critical theorists on the left *oppose* liberal democracy (Conway, 2024). If they suffer serious disincentives, as I recommend, perhaps that will change.

investigates alleged Title IX transgressions? Or when – urged by the National School Boards Association and the Biden administration – the FBI investigated unruly parents at school board meetings?⁵ Suppose those shouted down by cancel mobs could sue their tormenters who, if administrators, *no longer enjoyed qualified immunity*? I'm just saying.

At least some of this must be enabled by legislation. The poorly named but substantively sound *End Woke Higher Education Act* passed by the U.S. House in fall 2024 would have strengthened free speech on campus. The Republican bill prohibited ideological litmus tests in faculty hiring and institutional accreditation, protected the rights of faith-based groups to determine their membership, and assured that speech limitations could not be selectively enforced, as when conservative speakers must pay “security fees” not applied to pro-Hamas speakers (Knott, 2024). Only four House Democrats voted yay. (In fairness, the bill's name implied trolling Democrats, not broadening support.) Representative Burgess Owens (R, Utah) is in the process of sponsoring similar legislation in this session of Congress, which in my view should include creation of a U.S. Department of Education First Amendment division, and a U.S. First Amendment Commission.

Additional tactics are to be determined, to be detailed in customs but also in laws passed by Congress and interested state legislatures, and executive orders by presidents and governors. The important thing is to lay the groundwork to *cancel the cancelers, to punish their bad behavior*. If we fail to do this, then higher education, and America, are doomed to fear and mediocrity. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, we will enter a new dark age, made all the longer by the lights of perverted science and bureaucracy. Yes, the stakes are that high.

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⁵ To its credit, in almost every case the FBI either found no lawbreaking, or only misdemeanor level potential offenses best handled by local law enforcement. We can only pray the Trump FBI will show similar restraint and professionalism in investigating those the administration dislikes.

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