INTELLIGENCE SQUARED U.S. DEBATE BRIEFING BOOK

"Cancel Culture is Toxic"

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intelligence² DEBATES

MODERATOR
JOHN DONVAN

DEBATERS

FOR THE MOTION

KMELE FOSTER, POLITICAL COMMENTATOR & CO-FOUNDER, FREETHINK

GARRY KASPAROV, RUSSIAN CHESS GRANDMASTER & PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVIST

AGAINST THE MOTION

ERICH HATALA MATTHES, AUTHOR AND MORAL PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR

KAREN ATTIAH, WASHINGTON POST COLUMNIST

DESCRIPTION

You know the drill. Someone does, or says, something offensive. A public backlash -- typically on Twitter -- ensues. Then come the calls to "cancel" that person, brand, or institution. That usually means the loss of cultural cache, political clout, and often a job or career. While the term "cancelling" has roots in a misogynistic joke, it has come to be one of the most prominent tools of progressive activists. Many see "cancelling" as a modern-day means of holding people to account, calling out injustice, and breaking down ingrained systems of prejudice and exploitation, particularly for the historically marginalized. But others see it differently. They are sounding alarms about the emergence of a new cancel culture where digital mobs police our speech, invade our rights, and even put our physical safety at risk. They argue that cancel culture has created a society ruled by online censorship and eroded our public discourse. Against this backdrop, we ask: Is cancel culture toxic?

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FROM THE DEBATERS

FOR THE MOTION: Kmele Foster

Kmele Foster is a media entrepreneur and political commentator. He is the co-host of The Fifth Column podcast and the co-founder and executive producer of the media company Freethink. Foster was one of the signatories of the Harper's Letter on justice and open debate, alongside more than 150 people, including Salman Rushdie, J.K. Rowling, and Noam Chomsky. He is an outspoken libertarian critic of cancel culture, the Black Lives Matter movement, and political orthodoxy.

ARTICLE: We've Sacrificed Culture to Cancelation
By Kmele Foster | June 17, 2021 | Newsweek

"We have embraced a set of social norms that make us much more likely to engage in mobbings and censure; rather than trying to engage with people and have conversations and engage in public criticism of ideas that we dislike, we attempt to excommunicate people."

AUDIO: 197 w/ Glenn Greenwald, Thomas Chatterton Williams "Hypocrisy, Controversy, Cancellations"
By Kmele Foster | July 27, 2020 | The Fifth Column

VIDEO: Kmele Foster on Why He Opposes Cancel Culture and the Anti-Capitalist Side of Black Lives Matter
By Nick Gillespie with Kmele Foster | July 20, 2020 | ReasonTV

Kmele is introduced at 0:26.

VIDEO: Kmele Foster Reports on the Central Park Bird-watching Incident, Plus Skip Bayless Is Put in His Place
By Van Lathan & Rachel Lindsay, with Kmele Foster | August 12, 2021 | The Ringer

Kmele begins at 7:04.

FOR THE MOTION: Garry Kasparov

Garry Kasparov came to international fame in 1985 as the youngest world chess champion in history. He was 22 at the time and is widely considered among history's greatest chess players. In 2005, Kasparov retired from the sport to devote his time to writing and human rights activism. He is currently chairman of the Human Rights Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes human rights globally and organizes the Oslo Freedom Forum, and chairman of the Renew Democracy Initiative dedicated to global democracy. He is a frequent contributor to major international publications including The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times.

VIDEO: Fight for Liberty: Defending Democracy in the Age of Trump
October 16, 2018 | Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs

Garry Kasparov speaks at 13:50-23:19, 32:16-34:10, 40:54-44:37, 47:28-50:14, 57:50-59:28.

ARTICLE: Garry Kasparov says we are living in chaos, but remains an incorrigible optimist
By Masha Gessen | December 4, 2018 | New Yorker

"I realized that we had to set some of our disagreements aside, because the very framework in which we could have these disagreements was under threat."

ARTICLE: Our Values
Renew Democracy Initiative

"Our founders have worked with concerned individuals across the political spectrum to create a comprehensive document in support of Constitutional democracy worldwide."

ARTICLE: What We Believe About Reality
By Garry Kasparov | June 2, 2021 | The New York Times

"Demonstrating what a good believer in false narratives you are can provide a ladder up in those environments, especially if you rush to display your purity and conformity by accusing others."

AGAINST THE MOTION: Erich Hatala Matthes

Erich Hatala Matthes is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wellesley College, who writes about how useful the concept of "cancelling" may be. He is the author of the book, "Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies."
His research and teaching focus on moral and political issues surrounding art, cultural heritage and the environment.

ARTICLE: Cancelled: should good artists pay for bad behavior?
By Ben Luke with Erich Matthes | September 4, 2020 | The Art Newspaper

Erich Matthews introduced at 2:00.

ARTICLE: Professor Erich Hatala Matthes Tackles Morality and Art
By Laurel Stickney | April 25, 2019 |The Wellesley News

"Now, the other context you have to recognize, of course: the Supreme Court in 1982 and the Supreme Court in 2016 – particularly if you go back a little in 2016 before Justice Scalia passed away – were very different courts."

CHAPTER: Immoral Artists
By Erich Matthes | Forthcoming | The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Art

This text is not available yet but will be available on this page when it is published.

ESSAY: Artworld Roundtable: Is Cultural Appropriation Ever Okay?
By Erich Matthes | August 22, 2018 | Aesthetics for Birds

"Whether a particular case is most saliently understood as one of silencing, exploitation, misrepresentation, or offense, what ultimately makes particular instances of cultural appropriation wrongful is the way in which they manifest and exacerbate inequality and marginalization."

ARTICLE: Saving lives or saving stones? Two sides of the same coin?
By Erich Matthes | Heritage in War

"Perhaps the destruction of cultural heritage promotes violence more generally; perhaps it contributes to the dehumanization of certain groups, facilitating their killing, operating in an analogous way to the use of hate speech."

AGAINST THE MOTION: Karen Attiah

Karen Attiah is a Washington Post columnist who writes on issues related to race, international politics, gender, and human rights. As the Post's founding Global Opinions editor, she recruited writers from around the world and won several awards for her work in seeking accountability for the murder of columnist Jamal Khashoggi, including the 2019 George Polk Special Award and the 2019 Journalist of the Year award from the National Association of Black Journalists. She is the author of "Say Your Word, Then Leave" and was a Fulbright Scholar to Ghana.

ARTICLE: Nikole Hannah-Jones's tenure is a victory in a battle that shouldn't have to be fought
By Karen Attiah | July 1, 2021 | The Washington Post

"Hannah-Jones's tenure got rolled into larger debates over so-called cancel culture and so-called anti-critical-race-theory legislation. Really, though, it was a proxy for an important shift in how journalism and its institutions reckon with the long-held idea of objectivity."

ARTICLE: A win for white power at a school board meeting in Grapevine, Tex.
By Karen Attiah | September 22, 2021 | The Washington Post

"As such districts become more diverse, it's clear that the critical race theory canard is part of a new wave from the same old sea of American white supremacy in education."

BOOK REVIEW: India's #FarmersProtests and Nigeria's #EndSars show what happens when governments fear Twitter
By Karen Attiah | February 7, 2021 | The Washington Post

"And in both cases, Twitter is becoming both the battle arena and a potent weapon in struggles between governments and their people."

ARTICLE: The media had a hand in the rise of Trump. It's time to hold ourselves accountable.
By Karen Attiah | January 20, 2021 | The Washington Post

"Our media ushered all this through the door, under the aegis of 'balance' and 'presenting both sides' – as if racism and white supremacy were theoretical ideas to be debated, not life-threatening forces to be defeated."

ARTICLE: Jessica Krug offers a twisted example of white privilege
By Karen Attiah | September 6, 2020 | The Washington Post

"The professional reckoning for Krug has begun. On Friday night, the GWU Department of History released a statement calling on Krug to resign and threatening to move to revoke her tenure if she doesn't comply voluntarily."

GENERAL RESEARCH

BACKGROUND & HISTORY

ARTICLE: 10 Theses About Cancel Culture
By Ross Douthat | July 14, 2020 | The New York Times

"All cultures cancel; the question is for what, how widely and through what means."

ARTICLE: Americans tune in to 'cancel culture' – and don't like what they see
By Ryan Lizza | July 22, 2020 | Politico

"Osita Neanevu, a staff writer at The New Republic, has been making the case that the backlash against cancel culture is overblown. He viewed the survey results as similar to other polls that show the public is often against somewhat scary-sounding things like political correctness and cancel culture in the abstract, but in favor of the underlying ideas in many specific cases."

ARTICLE: The Long and Tortured History of Cancel Culture
By Ligaya Mishan | December 3, 2020 | The New York Times

"It's instructive that, for all the fear that cancel culture elicits, it hasn't succeeded in toppling any major figures – high level politicians, corporate titans – let alone institutions."

ARTICLE: How 'cancel culture' quickly became one of the buzziest and most controversial ideas on the internet
By Rachel E. Greenspan | August 6, 2020 | Insider

"… people tend to call out cancel culture itself as a negative movement, suggesting that the consequences of cancellation are too harsh in minor instances or represent rushed judgement in complicated situations. Others have criticized that *criticism, saying cancel culture doesn't exist."*

ARTICLE: 'Cancel culture' seems to have started as an internet joke. Now it's anything but.
By Christopher Brito | April 5, 2021 | CBS News

"The phenomenon we now know as cancel culture actually had innocuous beginnings before it morphed into a mechanism that can turn a person or a brand into a pariah in a matter of tweets."

ARTICLE: What is cancel culture? Everything to know about the toxic trend online.
By Brooke Kato | August 31, 2021 | New York Post

"Cancel culture – the phenomenon of promoting the 'canceling' of people, brands and even shows and movies due to what some consider to be offensive or problematic remarks or ideologies – isn't all that new."

ARTICLE: Can we cancel 'cancel culture?'
By Dino Sossi | July 2, 2021 | The Conversation

"Cancel culture is 'promoting the "cancelling" of people, brands, and even shows and movies due to what some consider to be offensive or problematic remarks or ideologies.' This phenomenon has exploded due to social media's amplifying powers, society's deep divisions and difficulties redressing longstanding inequities."

ARTICLE: Why Brands Need To Pay Attention To Cancel Culture
By Kian Bakhtiari | September 29, 2020| Forbes

"Over the past few years, 'cancel culture' has entered the mainstream lexicon, thanks to social media. Fast forward 2020, the term has become central to public debate across politics, culture, and media."

'THAT LETTER' AND RESPONSES

LETTER: A Letter on Justice and Open Debate
July 7, 2020 | Harper's Magazine

"The democratic inclusion we want can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides."

LETTER: A More Specific Letter on Justice and Open Debate
July 10, 2020 | The Objective

"In reality, their argument alludes to but does not clearly lay out specific examples, and undermines the very cause they have appointed themselves to uphold."

ARTICLE: Artists and Writers Warn of an 'Intolerant Climate.' Reaction Is Swift.
By Jennifer Schuessler & Elizabeth A. Harris | July 7, 2020 | The New York Times

"Mr. Williams said the letter was very much a crowdsourced effort, with about 20 people contributing language. Then it was circulated more broadly for signatures, in what he describes as a process that was both 'organic' and aimed at getting a group that was maximally diverse politically, radically and otherwise."

ARTICLE: An Open Letter on Free Expression Draws a Counterblast

By Jennifer Schuessler | July 10, 2020 | The New York Times

"Three days after an open letter signed by more than 150 cultural luminaries darkly warning of a growing 'intolerant' climate stirred intense response on the internet, another group issued a counterblast on Friday accusing them of elitism, hypocrisy and complicity in the bullying they decry."

PROMINENT EXAMPLES

ARTICLE: Donald Trump is the king of cancel culture
By Mehdi Hasan | June 30, 2020 | The Washington Post

"But here's the hypocrisy: Donald Trump has embraced 'cancel culture' his entire life. I cannot think of another politician, or public figure, who has spent more time trying to 'cancel' critics than the thin-skinned former reality TV star in the Oval Office."

ARTICLE: Fired After Calling 911 On A Black Bird-Watcher, Amy Cooper Sues For Discrimination
By Merrit Kennedy | May 27, 2021 | NPR

"Amy Cooper, a white New York woman who called police on a Black bird-watcher in Central Park last Monday, is suing the company that swiftly fired her over the controversial incident."

ARTICLE: Failure to Communicate
By Colleen Flaherty | September 8, 2020 | Inside Higher Ed

"Patton said he emailed the entire program to apologize and apologized again the next morning. 'I was willing to look at whatever I could do, personally and organizationally, to help the students and their classmates heal,' he said, adding that he's since learned that past students may have had similar concerns."

ARTICLE: Cancel culture punishes Goya Foods over pro-Trump remarks; calls for boycott land with a thud
By Tammy Bruce | July 15, 2020 | The Washington Times

"It may be less visually dramatic, but it is still the mob, and they still seek to destroy and punish anyone who dares to get in their political way."

ARTICLE: Dr. Seuss Books Are Pulled, and a 'Cancel Culture' Controversy Erupts
By Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris | March 4, 2021 | The New York Times

"The beloved author's most famous books, like 'Green Eggs and Ham,' were untouched, but his estate's decision nevertheless prompted a backlash and raised questions about what should be preserved as part of the cultural record."

ARTICLE: Harvey Weinstein timeline: How the scandal unfolded
April 7, 2021 | BBC News

"Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein has been found guilty of two counts in his sexual assault trial, more than two years after the first allegations against him emerged."

LETTER: Resignation Letter
By Bari Weiss

"Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor. As the ethics and mores of that platform have become those of the paper, the paper itself has increasingly become a kind of performance space."

ARTICLE: Is Gina Carano a victim of social media cancel culture - as Hasbro cancels action figure
By Peter Suciu | February 16, 2021 | Forbes

"For months there had been a strong movement on social media that called for Carano's firing, and it was last week that Lucasfilm and its parent company Disney finally responded."

ARTICLE: Dave Chappelle refuses to be cancelled
By Joe Concha | October 17, 2021 | The Hill

"There won't be any mass cancellation of Netflix accounts. In fact, Netflix will likely gain subscriptions, because what's hot or trending on Twitter calling for boycotts and cancellations look much worse than they ever really are."

ARTICLE: J.K. Rowling accused of transphobia after mocking 'people who menstruate' headline
By Doha Madani | June 7, 2020 | NBC News

"Rowling has previously been accused of promoting transphobic ideas on social media and is sometimes referred to as a 'TERF,' or a trans-exclusionary radical feminist."

DEALING WITH CANCELATION

ARTICLE: What to do when you've been cancelled
By David Scullion | July 21, 2020 | The Critic

"Making it harder for the mob to remove somebody from employment for expressing an opinion means you make it harder for them to get the dopamine hit when they're successful... You're altruistically doing them good too: it's not just self-preservation."

ARTICLE: The Mental Health Effects of Cancel Culture
By Lindsey Toler | April 30, 2021 | Very Well Mind

"Like bullying, if you've been canceled it can make you to feel ostracized, socially isolated, and lonely. And research shows that loneliness is associated with higher anxiety, depression, and suicide rates."

ARTICLE: Coming back from cancel culture means self-reflection, experts say: 'The Twitter Mob is Us'
By Lawrence Yee | June 16, 2021 | The Wrap

"Of course, self-reflection and owning one's truth takes time – often with the help of crisis managers. Social media may demand an immediate reaction, but that may only make things worse."

GUIDE: When Cancel Culture Comes for You: A Toolkit for Responding
Heterodox Academy

"We offer some suggestions for how the different parties concerned – faculty who are targeted, colleagues of those under attack, and administrators being pressured by denouncers to take swift action – can navigate attempts to silence and condemn someone."

FOR THE MOTION

ARTICLE: The New Puritans
By Anne Applebaum | August 31, 2021 | The Atlantic

"There are currently no laws that shape what academics or journalists can say; there is no government censor, no ruling-party censor. But fear of the internet mob, the office mob, or the peer-group mob is producing some similar outcomes."

ARTICLE: New Anti-Cancel Culture Group "Unsilenced Majority" Launches
May 17, 2021 | Unsilenced Majority

"Today, a new grassroots conservative advocacy organization launched to oppose cancel culture and fight back against the woke mob and their enablers. The Unsilenced Majority will speak for

an emboldened majority of Americans who recognize the imminent threat that cancel culture poses to the United States."

ESSAY: Resisting Cancel Culture: Promoting Dialogue, Debate, and Free Speech in the College Classroom
By Nadine Strossen | November 2020 | American Council of Trustees and Alumni

"In a nutshell, a free expression culture seeks to further debate and discussion. The opposite is true of cancel culture, which instead seeks to end discussion, or at least to truncate it, by summarily dismissing certain ideas – or even certain speakers – as ineligible for inclusion in the exchange."

ARTICLE: What Is Cancel Culture?
By Evan Gerstmann | March 22, 2021 | Forbes

"But cancel culture is very real, pervasive, and powerful. Just because Republicans have picked it up as a slogan doesn't mean that it doesn't exist."

ARTICLE: Is Cancel Culture Effective?
By Nicole Dudenhoefer | Fall 2020 | University of Central Florida

"But in other instances where certain behaviors may be more questionable than seriously problematic, deeper thinking, which requires time and effort, about the person and issues is required but rarely happens."

AGAINST THE MOTION

ARTICLE: The Great Hypocrisy of Right-Wingers Claiming 'Cancel Culture'
By Kali Holloway | March 19, 2021 | The Nation

"What these put-upon conservatives are really pissed about isn't censorship or cancellation. It's consequences*."*

ARTICLE: So you're being held accountable? That's not 'cancel culture.'
By Margaret Sullivan | January 31, 2021 | The Washington Post

"You can call that cancel culture if you want. I call it responsibility. The good news is that, in America, we get to argue about it."

ARTICLE: Is 'Cancel Culture' Really Just Long Overdue Accountability for the Privileged?
By Dana Brownlee | July 1, 2021 | Forbes

"Let's face it–if we were all judged by our worst moment, we'd likely be unemployed (or worse). But on the other hand, much of what seems to be increasingly labeled as 'cancel culture' may just be long overdue accountability for the lite and powerful who have grown accustomed to the tacit immunity that often accompanies wealth, power and celebrity."

ARTICLE: Cancel Culture is Chaotic Good
By Chi Luu | December 18, 2019 | JSTOR Daily

"Time will tell how this newly acquired power will work, but rather than simply discount cancel culture as yet another misguided millennial invention, it's good to be aware that it's always been a necessary part of our lives."

ARTICLE: Why we should cancel the phrase 'cancel culture'
By Max Boot | March 16, 2021 | The Washington Post

"But that is part of the struggle to establish new norms of behavior in a multicultural country where women and minorities, quite rightly, will no longer put up with the kinds of abuses to which they have been subjected for so long."

REALITY OF CANCEL CULTURE

ARTICLE: Why we can't stop fighting about cancel culture
By Kali Holloway | March 19, 2021 | The Nation

"If canceling someone usually doesn't have much measurable effect, does cancel culture even exist? Or does the very idea of being canceled work to deter potentially bad behavior?"

ARTICLE: Cancel Culture Is Not Real – At Least Not in the Way People Think
By Sarah Hagi | November 21, 2019 | Time

"That means racist, sexist, and bigoted behavior or remarks don't fly like they used to. This applies to not only wealthy people or industry leaders but anyone whose privilege has historically shielded them from public scrutiny. Because they can't handle this cultural shift, they rely on phrases like 'cancel culture' to delegitimize the criticism."

ARTICLE: When Republicans Attack 'Cancel Culture,' What Does It Mean?
By Danielle Kurtzleben| February 10, 2021 | NPR

"…for discourse to be inclusive, some speech has to be excluded. And that idea is bound to get some people very angry in a country that deeply prizes free speech but does not agree on what 'free speech' means."

CANCEL CULTURE AND THE INTERNET

ARTICLE: The 'cancel culture' war is really about old elites losing power in the social media age
By Nesrine Malik | July 13, 2020 | The Guardian

"This is why, no matter how unpleasant the online world becomes for me personally, I could never condemn or deny the importance of social media. It is still pretty much the only way certain marginalized voices can be heard."

ARTICLE: Illiberalism isn't to blame for the death of good-faith debate
By Lili Loofbourow | July 12, 2020 | Slate

"This climate won't be reasoned with. But what I think is largely responsible for this phenomenon they're observing–without understanding–is Twitter. And the internet at large."

ARTICLE: A Different Way of Thinking About Cancel Culture
By Ezra Klein | April 18, 2021 | The New York Times

"But many of the people who participate in digital pile-ons that lead to cancellation don't want to cancel anybody. They're just joining in that day's online conversation… They aren't trying to get anyone fired. But collectively, they do get someone fired."

STATS, STUDIES, & ACADEMIC

ARTICLE: Americans and 'Cancel Culture': Where some see calls for accountability, others see censorship, punishment
By Emily A. Vogels, Monica Anderson, Margaret Porteus, Chris Baronavski, Sara Atske, Colleen McClain, Brooke Auxier, Andrew Perrin, & Meera Ramshankar| May 19, 2021 | Pew Research