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Don't be afraid of cancel culture

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"People who are in the ideas business - such as college professors and opinion editors - should not complain when ideas suddenly become hot properties."

David Von Drehle is an author and columnist for the Washington Post. In the following viewpoint, Von Drehle examines the effect "cancel culture" is having on journalism. While acknowledging that some opinion writers and editors have faced professional consequences for publishing controversial opinion pieces, he contends that free expression is still very much alive. Von Drehle highlights a controversial essay written by Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) as an example of lazy writing that fails to stand up to scrutiny beyond a generic defense of intellectual diversity. He identifies the need to challenge opinions for their intellectual honesty. Von Drehle concludes that cancel culture may result in better ideas with broader appeal instead of stiff ideologies that impede progress.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. For what reasons does the author reject the validity of Tom Cotton's New York Times essay?
2. How does the author use writer Andrew Sullivan's career as an example of effective writing?
3. Do you agree with the author's contention that "cancel culture" does not threaten freedom of expression? Why or why not?

Byline: David Von Drehle

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A couple of weeks ago, I wallowed past the milestone that allows me to withdraw money without penalty from my IRA, so I guess I'm officially old. Now, I tick all of the toxic boxes: old, white, male, centrist. So I think I'm supposed to be alarmed by "cancel culture."

This is the phenomenon, especially pronounced on college campuses and inside the New York Times, by which folks on the left side of the political spectrum draw attention to views of which they do not approve and attempt to, well, "cancel" the expression of those views.

Thus, opinion writer and editor Bari Weiss was canceled from the Times by what she described in a widely read resignation letter as open hostility from her colleagues and lack of support from the top. Also this year, veteran journalist James Bennet, then-editor of the Times's opinion pages, was "canceled" from the same institution for publishing an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., advocating military intervention in the streets of U.S. cities.

There are many more examples: professors called to task for their research, speakers shouted down during campus appearances and so on. If you are interested, you can easily find them on the Internet. Yet - while reserving the right to change my position should the tumbrel come for me - I'm not sure this is the Khmer Rouge moment that it's made out to be.

Is free expression truly under attack in the United States? This is a nation where a loutish lad can say just about any offensive thing that pops into his head and grow up to be president. We have a glut - not a dearth - of free expression; the Internet is lousy with it. One pines for a national day of silent contemplation.

People who are in the ideas business - such as college professors and opinion editors - should not complain when ideas suddenly become hot properties. We live in a time of passionate intensity, an emotional and intellectual condition more fun to imagine than to experience. Thomas Paine lived in such an era. He described it as "the times that try men's souls."

One must be sharp to compete in such a market. Or, switching metaphors: If you want to sail in troubled seas, your ship needs to be watertight. When cancelers target an essay or scholarly paper or tweet, the author could listen and learn. Gee, I never thought of it that way. Thank you for broadening my perspective. Or the author could demonstrate the truth and good faith of the statement under attack. It isn't enough, in these times, to shrug and say: Get over it. It's just an idea, and ideas don't really matter; they don't do real damage. They only melt snowflakes.

The Cotton essay is illuminating here. The senator's call for troops in the streets was a lazy piece of work. It cherry-picked historical precedents that, on examination, didn't bear weight and elided important constitutional issues. It was heavy on anecdote; evidently watching TV is what passes for research in Cotton's office. It punched at strawmen and assumed facts not in evidence. Arguably, it saw print only because it served unrelated agendas of both author and publisher. Cotton wanted a pithy Fox chyron to further his presidential ambitions; the Times seeks token voices from the right as drapery for its left-leaning nature.

People who have devoted so little genuine thought to making a case are not credible when they appeal to intellectual diversity as a defense. That's like saying "eat your peas" without first bothering to cook them.

Which brings me to Andrew Sullivan, the prominent writer and editor who was sort-of-canceled by New York magazine recently. Evidently, Sullivan's freethinking conservatism made him an easy mark for cost-cutters at the liberal publication.

In his long, risk-taking career, Sullivan has produced some things I strongly disagree with. But there's a lesson to the canceling left in his work. This conservative is the author of some of the most impactful social justice writing of the past half-century. Sullivan's brilliant advocacy for marriage equality began when even the gay rights movement was not prioritizing marriage. His work revolutionized the debate, shifted the frame and led directly to a more equal society.

He achieved this by reaching beyond the echo chamber, writing not for people who agreed with him but for people who thought they didn't. People like me - and there were a lot of us in the 1990s. Quite by surprise, we were changed, and ultimately the United States was changed, by the power of Sullivan's argument.

To me, that is the value of genuine intellectual diversity. It brings us to better solutions. The test of the cancel culture should be whether it brings us better ideas - or just fewer.

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