



Cancel culture comes for the moderates

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The increasing tendency to interpret obviously sarcastic metaphors of violence as if they were real threats makes me want to kill somebody. Am I in trouble because I wrote that? That would be silly, wouldn't it?

If you read that sentence as an actual call for violence, you are at best a careless reader. It's an obviously insincere, satirical claim about my state of mind. It doesn't call for anyone to do anything. Does it mean that I'm threatening someone? Who?

The pressure to cancel people because they have violated vague and unpredictable norms has claimed its latest victim in Will Wilkinson, who was vice president for research at the Niskanen Center, a libertarian think tank, and who (tenuously) remains a New York Times contributing opinion writer. His firing is particularly depressing, because Niskanen has been one of the most useful sources of independent, contrarian policy analysis. It was started by Cato Institute refugees who were disaffected with the Institute's dishonest climate change denial. They thought, correctly, that libertarianism properly understood does not allow businesses to harm others, as the fossil fuel industry does. For Niskanen to join the cancellation bandwagon is a major disappointment.

Here's what happened. After the inauguration, some conservative writers complained that although Biden called for unity, he proposed policies that Republicans could never agree to. "'Aha! Biden proposes policies I dislike. HIS CALL FOR UNITY IS A LIE!!!" is all the forlorn conservative mind can seem to muster. Sad," tweeted Wilkinson.

Soon after, he followed up with the line that got him fired: "If Biden really wanted unity, he'd lynch Mike Pence."

He quickly deleted the tweet and issued an apology. "Last night I made an error of judgment and tweeted this. It was sharp sarcasm, but looked like a call for violence. That's always wrong, even as a joke. It was especially wrong at a moment when unity and peace are so critical. I'm deeply sorry and vow not to repeat the mistake." He later locked his account from public viewing.

It was too late. The Niskanen Center declared: “we draw the line at statements that are, or can in any way be interpreted as condoning or promoting violence. As such, the Niskanen Center has, with a heavy heart, parted ways with Will Wilkinson.” He is also evidently in danger of losing his New York Times position. A Times spokesperson said, “Advocating violence of any form, even in jest, is unacceptable and against the standards of The New York Times. We’re reassessing our relationship with Will Wilkinson.”

Was Wilkinson “advocating violence”? To answer that question, one must look at his words, in context. That is the way to understand any use of words. If we take his statement literally, it addressed only one person. Can anyone reasonably understand the sentence as a serious proposal that Biden engage in homicidal violence against Pence? Is there even a smidgen of danger that Biden would accept such an invitation? Niskanen might perhaps be proposing a fuzzier standard, condemning statements that “can in any way be interpreted as condoning or promoting violence.” Perhaps that means that a statement is intolerable if it can be taken, however unreasonably, as condoning violence by anyone on the planet. It is hard to believe any use of language could satisfy that standard.

It ruins jokes if you have to explain them, but Wilkinson tried: “My ill-advised tweet was meant as a tart way to drive home the exasperating bad faith of those whose own divisive rhetoric and repetition of lies about election fraud facilitated the mob attack on the Capitol, where pro-Trump rioters built a noose and called for Pence's head.”

Wilkinson is an acute and original thinker who defies familiar political categorization. For instance, in February 2020 he offered a defense of Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s presidential candidacy from the right, arguing, in the teeth of the common view that she is a Sanders-style leftist, that Warren in fact was advocating the core ideals that once animated the moderate Republican Party.

The firing has produced a new wave of ridicule. Journalist Robby Soave: “Wilkinson's case is a classic, textbook cancelation: excessively harsh, drastic disciplinary action in response to one dumb tweet that would otherwise likely have been forgotten in a matter of days.” Ezra Klein: “no one, anywhere, thinks he was actually advocating for violence. This is actual cancel culture, by the people who claim to condemn it.” Radley Balko: “it would just be the perfect closing to the Trump era if the only public figure to suffer any real consequences for fomenting violence over the last two months is Will Wilkinson, for an obvious goddamn joke.” Yale Law Professor Scott Shapiro: “niskanen (v., reflexive): To act reasonably, but ruin in all with one act of cowardice.”

In the history of cancel culture, it’s hard to find a case where, after an inappropriate firing, an employer had the courage to admit that it had acted rashly and rehire the victim. Perhaps it’s only possible in this case because Wilkinson is so prominent. Still, one has to start somewhere. Here is a genuine opportunity for Niskanen, once again, to be contrarian and break new ground.