

Conservative newspapers must not succumb to cancel culture

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"Newspapers have turned into colleges. Boardrooms have turned into colleges. Graceless corporate pseudo-macho American sports have turned into colleges." The quote comes from Mark Steyn's July 27 obituary of Mike Adams, the 55-year old University of North Carolina, Wilmington, professor who, long shunned by his colleagues and vilified by students for his spirited political heterodoxy, apparently took his own life days ago shortly before an edict of forced retirement came into effect. Newspapers turning into colleges is my particular concern. A lot of the young staffers in journalism today are graduates of colleges like UNCW, where they learned from their Marxist professors that politically incorrect discourse of the kind Mike Adams specialized in is a form of violence to those bonded by intersectional victimhood. During their campus years, these acolytes are groomed to cultivate a sense of chronic grievance aligned with a high prey impulse gussied up in the guise of social justice activism in order to deliver the hard moral lesson of cancellation to the purveyors of this violence. Students quickly learn how easy it is to prevent visiting speakers from speaking. Then they discover that with organized mobbing they can make life so miserable for even tenured professors that their targets prefer to resign rather than soldier on as martyrs. It becomes so miserable that it can, as we have just seen, lead to the ultimate in self-cancellation. Who can blame them for believing that real life will simply be a continuation of a structure in which they call the shots on what is and is not permissible discourse? And it has indeed continued. As Philadelphia Inquirer editor Stan Wischnowski editor discovered when he was forced to resign for approving the headline, "Buildings Matter, Too." As senior New York Times editor James Bennet discovered when he ran an op ed by junior senator and Trump ally Tom Cotton that staffers disapproved of, forcing his resignation. As conservative Andrew Sullivan discovered when his heterodox views on critical theory expressed in his New York Magazine columns clashed with staffers and parent company Vox's party line, ending in his departure. Finally, and most shockingly, New York Times opinion columnist Bari Weiss walked away in protest over sustained internal bullying related to her pro-Israel views. Her resignation, which she self-published as an open letter, revealed the depth and gravity of the problem. One of her more trenchant observations was that the paper had become "a kind of performance space" because, although "Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times... Twitter has become its ultimate editor." One might say the same of many other left-leaning publications in both the US and Canada. But what about self-branding conservative newspapers? They are few in number, and beating against strong, often irrational progressive currents. Can they withstand the cancel-culture ethos in which many of their millennial and Gen Z ranks were molded? One thinks of O'Sullivan's Law, named after British journalist John O'Sullivan, who was the National Post's editorial mentor in its debut months, "Any organization or enterprise that is not expressly right wing will become left wing over time." The Wall Street Journal offers a case study in their response to a staffer shot across the bows. Last week, 280 reporters, editors and other employees of the WSJ sent a letter of complaint to the newspaper publisher, Almar Latour (purposefully leaked), citing concerns, both factual and ideological, about the Journal's opinion section. The signers did not ask that any regular opinion columnists be fired, but they did include a specific beef against a frequent guest writer, citing a June opinion piece by Heather MacDonald of the American Enterprise Institute, titled "The myth of systemic police racism," which attracted a great deal of attention. (The epidemiology of racism in policing is a longtime specialty of MacDonald; she also writes extensively on this issue for the conservative City Journal Magazine and elsewhere.) They argue that the MacDonald piece "selectively presented facts and drew an erroneous conclusion from the underlying data." They said the piece caused pain to their employees of colour, and that the Journal should "raise Opinion's standards so that misinformation about racism isn't published." Essentially, they were requesting that MacDonald be blocked from further appearances in the Journal's opinion section. On July 23, the Journal's editorial board responded with "A Note to Readers." They began by reassuring concerned readers that the letter would not cause any change to "our principles and content." They said they would not respond in kind to the letter signers because anxieties afflicting employees in the news department "aren't our responsibility." They went on to comment on the inevitability of the "wave of progressive cancel culture" arriving at the Journal, "as it has at nearly every other cultural, business, academic and journalistic institution." But, they state firmly, "we are not The New York Times. Most Journal reporters attempt to cover the news fairly and down the middle, and our opinion pages offer an alternative to the uniform progressive views that dominate nearly all of today's media." The Journal's opinion pages "will continue to publish contributors who speak their minds within the tradition of vigorous, reasoned discourse. And these columns will continue to promote the principles of free people and free markets, which are more important than ever in what is a culture of growing progressive conformity and intolerance." Bravo! The Journal passed the O'Sullivan test with flying colours. Clearly these are turbulent times for

all conservative outlets. But allowing the junior tail to wag the corporate and editorial dog is a recipe for disaster. Appeasement of strident voices is a tempting option, but it never ends with a single spiked column or a single scapegoat firing. This WSJ editorial should be posted on the office walls, and inscribed in the sinews, of every conservative publisher in North America.