

Barbara Kay: Mike Pence's dining preference is 'rape culture'? By that flimsy standard, what isn't?

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Steve Helber/ Associated Press
Vice President Mike Pence, accompanied by his wife, Karen, waves after speaking at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., Oct. 12, 2016.

Some years ago Tal Nitzan, a sociology student at Hebrew University and an ardent anti-Zionist, used her Master's thesis to explore how Israel's "racist" soldiers use rape as a weapon of terror and intimidation. There was only one problem. Once she began her research, she could not find a single documented case of rape by an Israel Defence Forces soldier of a Palestinian woman.

Undeterred, Nitzan simply turned her original thesis upside down and came to the exact same conclusion: the soldiers were still racist and still bent on humiliating Palestinian women — by *refusing* to rape them. Nitzan wrote: "The lack of military rape merely strengthens the ethnic boundaries and clarifies the inter-ethnic differences — just as organized military rape would have done."

It sounds silly, I know, but her thesis won a departmental prize. And I could not help but think of Nitzan's non-rape-as-rape theory when I read Ashley Csanady's indictment of American vice-president Mike Pence as a representative of "rape culture."

Pence is an evangelical Christian and a teetotaler. Last week it was revealed, based on a profile written a full 14 years ago, that [Pence "never eats alone with a woman other than his wife and that he won't attend events featuring alcohol without her by his side, either."](#)

He won't attend events featuring alcohol without her by his side

Reaction was predictably partisan. Conservatives either approved his uxoriousness and the seriousness of his commitment to traditional family values, or pronounced that it was nobody's business how he conducts himself socially. Liberals mocked him mercilessly for his old-world prudery. But Csanady went totally off the polemical grid when [she wrote: "At its core, Pence's self-imposed ban is rape culture."](#) Her "reasoning" is that if Pence is too scared to be alone with another woman, then he is perpetuating a superannuated sexist stereotype of women as "over-sexed" and "a wellspring of possible sin."

This is an assumption Csanady has no right to make, especially with so little evidence. There are numerous other possible explanations she overlooked in her rush to cram the anecdote into a social-media friendly insta-thesis. His wife may have trust issues he accommodates out of love. Or, as I tweeted, maybe he is simply ensuring he is never the victim of a false allegation of impropriety, which can easily happen to a man in the public eye. Perhaps he's simply shy.

One thing we have learned since the story broke last week is that Pence's policy of not dining with women staffers is no reflection on his treatment of them. A former press secretary to the House Republican Conference who worked under its then-chairman Pence, Mary Vought, published a defence of him in the Washington Post. She writes that Pence's dining policy "was never a hindrance to my ability to do my job well," and in fact she "excelled at my job because of the work environment (he) created from the top down." Vought worked side by side with Pence in meetings, where her "proposals and suggestions were always valued as equal with those of my male counterparts." Vought is now the president of her own consulting firm. Also of note: she mentioned that Pence wasn't in the habit of dining alone with male staff, either, preferring to race home at the end of a work day to eat with his family.

Is *that* rape culture, too?

I won't belabour Csanady's foolish attempt to Nitzan-ize Pence, and by extension all conservative Christian men who willingly hold themselves to behaviour standards Csanady finds silly or unnecessary. She has been punished enough in the slew of negative comments following her piece online, and on Twitter.

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What I would hope is that Csanady takes this lapse in her application of critical thinking as a teaching moment and leverage for some serious self-interrogation. She might ask herself first if, as a new reader might reasonably infer from her Pence column, she holds a bias against conservatives and evangelical Christian men with traditional views and anyone closely associated with Donald Trump. It is of course her personal right to hold this bias. But her next question should be: If so, have I exploited my personal bias as a justification to rush a hasty analysis of a man's entire personality and worldview online, based on a handful of policy positions (distasteful, perhaps, to Csanady, but entirely within the political and cultural mainstream) and one anecdote from over a decade ago, buttressed by zero additional reporting or verification?

Words have meaning. A term like rape culture — a concept I have criticized, in its common application in North America — also has a clear, generally understood meaning. Torturing definitions to suit a flimsy thesis deprives words and descriptive terms of not just their power but that very meaning. If "rape culture" can mean literally the exact opposite of non-consensual sex, or extreme fidelity to one's spouse, then it means nothing. Not exactly what a real rape victim wants to read.

No woman has ever accused Pence of abusive personal behaviour, and he has, as we have learned, helped those he is in a position to mentor. He has, by all appearances, a happy marriage and a stable family life. There are no whispers of personal misconduct around him, as it so often the case with men in high political office.

Where's the crime here? There is none. There is only an imputed thought crime cut from whole ideological cloth. Well, the French have an expression for Csanaday's projection: honi soit qui mal y pense.

Journalists must put polemical integrity first and ideology second, if they are to win public respect in credible publications. Like Nitzan, Csanady did not follow the evidence to a logical conclusion. She allowed a foregone conclusion to dictate the "evidence" even as those actually in a position to comment with authority rejected the assertions she (and others) rushed to make. In a journalism environment increasingly based around a rush to stake out "clickable" terrain fastest and first, these things happen. But they are not to be encouraged, or repeated.

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kaybarb@gmail.com

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