

[Transcript] The Realignment / 416 | Rikki Schlott: The Cancel Culture Debate After the Hamas Massacre

Marshall here, welcome back to The Realignment.
Quick note before I dive in, in case you missed it,
Sawger and I published an expanded Q&A and recap episode
on Sunday focused on Israel, Gaza, and Hamas.
We'll publish bi-weekly recap slash Ask Me Anything episodes
on Sundays moving forward,
so that'll be a great way of building out this new format
and bringing Sawger back into the show.
To listen to the full version of the episode,
subscribe to The Realignment Supercast
at realignment.supercast.com
or click the link at the top of the show notes.
Onto today's episode, my guest is Ricky Slott,
co-author of The Canceling of the American Mind,
Cancer Culture Under Runs Trust,
and Thorentis All, but there is a solution.
Ricky's co-author, Gregor Lukyanov,
is the president of FIRE,
one of the country's premier free speech organizations.
He previously came on the podcast back in December 2021,
so you can check out his perspective there.
That said, there's a decent chance
you're wondering, Marshall, really,
an episode about cancel culture, what is this, 2019?
And you know what, that's actually a pretty fair response.
I put this out during the episode,
we definitely got a bit oversaturated
with cancel culture discourse,
but as Sawger and I discussed
during that past weekend episode,
now is the perfect time to discuss the phenomenon.
We are past the 2010s, hyper-aggressive mob driven era,
and everyone is clearly trying to find where we've ended up.
As we saw in the reaction to the student orgs
who issued statements, essentially condoning Hamas's acts
of terrorism in Israel, cancel culture
isn't just a left-wing instinct or phenomenon.
Personally, I come down on the side of articulating
the idea that we can rightfully condemn
people getting fired over 10 year old tweets
and move on from unthinking mobs,
group think and cowardly employers.
It really was the central feature of the 2010s dynamic,

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while also recognizing that adult law students can suffer consequences for their actions. I'd say my biggest disagreement with Ricky is the idea that we can treat the rest of society with the norms of good faith, idea-centric discussion that ideally is focused on and featured on college campuses. Now, obviously campuses and higher education leaders hypocritically failed in their duty to maintain these values and dynamics, but that doesn't mean that an employer shouldn't refuse to hire a junior associate who demonstrates catastrophically bad judgment with the statements that came out over the weekend. So I think all this is a really fascinating thing to put together and I think, once again, as a society, we are clearly not going to remain in the 2010s era, but I also do not think we are going to go all the way in the fully libertarian direction of essentially believing that everything is a debate. Everything's up for grabs and there basically could be no tie of your expressed viewpoints and your employment, education, or another statuses. Hope you all enjoyed the conversation and I definitely would love to hear what you think, especially as we build out these recap and discussion episodes you can email us at realignmentpod.com or leave a response on the Supercast website. Ricky Schlatt, welcome to the realignment. Thanks so much for having me, pleasure to be here. Yeah, I'm glad to chat with you. It's a really interesting moment to have a conversation about cancel culture, not just because for the past year or so, it's been clear that the narrative around cancel culture has kind of shifted in a couple of different ways, but obviously this is coming out of the week where a bunch of incidents on American campuses kind of took the cancel culture discussion in a different direction. So let's just start at a very basic level. Love to hear your definition of cancel culture. Yep, so we define cancel culture

as attempts to de-platform or punish people
for their speech starting in 2014 onwards
when it seems to have taken
certainly a different medium than historically
it may have in the past with social media
and also just the culture of conformity
and of self-censorship that arises from all those attempts
because I think it's important to note
that every single cancellation that does take place
obviously reverberates in the community around it
and has a lot of unspoken consequences
of just self-censorship and the lack of willingness
to tread the same ground
that someone else may have been canceled for.
So I was gonna ask you about this
because specifically in the book,
the two of you argue that cancel culture
is a new phenomenon
and obviously we could bring up McCarthyism in the 50s,
other aspects of conformity in American history
but I feel as if in your definition,
the key differentiator is the social media aspect, correct?
Is that how you would differentiate those two eras?
Yeah, I mean, I think that that social media
and the way that, I mean,
there's a lot of different impacts of social media
on a liberalism and censorship.
I mean, I think it gives it an element of permanence
because it's always in the public record.
It's far more universal.
So if someone on some random campus gets tarnished
or pulled down, you know,
that might be something that is relevant to their community
but now it has global implications.
But I think, yeah, I mean, we think that cancel culture
has been able to take hold in the form that it has
and with the kind of grip that it does
because it's almost like it's the memeification
of something that that is very successful and replicable
and on social media, it's a really great way
to pull down your opponents
without actually having to engage with them
in any way period.

And so we think that social media has really allowed it, allowed a liberalism to take an even more insidious and mobish form than perhaps it has been able to in the past. Yeah, and your usage of meme there is really interesting because as folks know, meme isn't just like a, you know, cartoon or a GIF online. It's a term coined by Richard Dawkins. So it's the rapid spread of an idea or a concept across people and obviously on social media and Twitter that could really spread really quickly. So I actually would like to ask though, I'll put this slightly, why shouldn't people with bad or dangerous ideas be either censored and I don't mean censored by the government. I just mean, if I hold Nazi-like ideas, I think it's completely compatible for liberalism, for me to be shunned, not hired by people in the community. I wouldn't want my kids going over to the house of like the Nazi house, even if like the actual children of the Nazi were perfectly nice at school. What is the matter with that at a basic level? I mean, I think the real question is what kind of society do we wanna live in and is it a society in which we attach people's ideas to their character and their core person or a society in which we believe in engaging with viewpoints, even ones that we might find condemnable. It doesn't necessarily mean that you need to be best friends with somebody who has a completely divergent viewpoint of yours, but especially in institutions that are knowledge producing, I think that there's a real benefit to allowing discourse to exist as it does. I think social media and especially the social media age has demonstrated that canceling people and throwing them off of platforms or quarantining them into different smaller crevices where bad ideas can fester is actually something that potentially radicalizes people, makes them even more extreme in the first place.

And I think it's a, I mean,
canceling people and banishing them
to the corners of infringes of society
is something that I think only perpetuates polarization.
It makes people even more extreme.
I mean, we actually, we have data from the NCRI
and I think it's the National Contagion
or Network Contagion Research Institute,
which I should get in my head a little bit better,
but it basically, there are a group of researchers
who've been able to determine that every time
there was a mass ban of fringe accounts
and alt-rate accounts on Twitter,
that there was a consistent pattern of massive upticks
of people moving to platforms like GAB
that are more extreme and more insular.
And I think it's an important demonstration of the fact
that get censoring and shunning bad views
does not make them go away.
It just makes them faster.
It makes them go underground.
I think sunlight is the best disinfectant.
And I mean, certainly there's freedom of association
and there's, as a private employer,
you have every right to associate yourself
with whatever employee you so choose,
but I think that we should err on the side
of removing this kind of like intractable sense
that your views define you as a person.
Because I think we've all changed and I think that
if you wanna live in a society
where we can actually have important conversations,
it's a matter of allowing viewpoints to be aired
without forever ruining people's reputations
and I prefer to live in that kind of world personally.
You know, it's interesting because
as I'm thinking kind of my own definition of like,
what's just like the worst case of cancel culture?
It's really the weaponization of platforms
in a way, especially to people who we can describe
like as civilians.
So like we're not talking about podcasters or YouTubers
or people who make a living or even academics,

people who like live in the realm of ideas,
but just like a normal person said something on Twitter
10 or 12 years ago, that then is discovered,
that then is then amplified and that then is used
in a weaponized way.
Cause I just, I guess, and obviously like,
we should disagree or we disagree.
I do think though that there are just some ideas
that like do define you.
So if I'm a Nazi in the year 2023,
I think that idea actually does define me as a person.
And I feel as if arguing against that kind of sets this up
for people who I think use cancel culture in bad faith ways
to basically say, all we're saying is Nazis shouldn't be,
Nazis should be socially censored by the community.
And I think they're actually saying something much worse
than that, but as a baseline level,
I think it's fair to say that.
Yeah, I mean, I think that also the question though,
does become the subjectivity of saying, I mean, of course,
we're talking about extreme examples here,
but as soon as you, as soon as you adopt a culture
where people are torn down unceremoniously,
the Overton window of acceptable viewpoints shrinks
and shrinks and shrinks,
especially in a place like a college campus to the point
where you have people that are getting canceled
for ridiculously innocuous things.
So I think that, you know, the often a slippery slope
is defined or referred to as a fallacy,
but I don't think that in the case of censorship,
that's actually the case.
I think that there is a very slippery slope
and the more that attaching viewpoints to people's person
takes place, the more fear and conformity takes place.
And then the smaller and smaller and smaller,
the realm of acceptable viewpoints becomes.
And I think, you know, an example that was so shocking
in 2015 was Nicholas and Erica Christakis at Yale,
where there was an edict that came down
from a student government board of some sort saying,
be careful, this was back in 2015,
be careful about what Halloween costumes you wear

because it could be offensive to someone.
And Erica Christakis wrote a really level headed email
about how like maybe we just shouldn't as a school
be censoring what young adults who are at one of the best
schools in the country are doing and saying
and allow them to work that out for themselves.
And if they're offended to, you know,
have a conversation about it
and not have some weird like university sanctioned list
of things that you can be for Halloween.
And there was this viral video
that my co-author Greg actually,
he happened to be on campus that day.
And he took a video of Nicholas Christakis
who was also a professor there, Erica's husband,
being screamed at and yelled at and torn down
for not even his own view, his wife's view.
And so I think that that example, I mean,
it was shocking in 2015 and 2023,
it's probably not anymore
because we've seen so many really unceremonious take downs
of people with perfectly reasonable viewpoints.
But, you know, I think if you allow society
to move towards a place where censorship is acceptable
and more and more spheres,
then eventually you end up in a place where
something as innocuous as that is beyond the pale.
Yeah, and I'm not just trying to play gotcha here
but I think the terms really matter.
But I'd like to know,
I'd like to know what censorship means, right?
Because on the one hand,
if we're talking about social media platforms,
I think censorship is pretty clear,
shadow banning, doxing, especially in doxing
as a means of like increasing fear of your safety
or like notoriety, like this and this or that
and definitely taking down social media accounts.
I get that, but I kind of,
I get the sense that you and Greg are pretty libertarian.
And I think that's kind of a way of like understanding
kind of the maybe, the actually interesting debate,
which is like, what is the difference between

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our private thoughts, our private actions
and then government and then like big tech platforms?
And I think on a governmental level,
I don't think we, for a variety of reasons are Germany
where it's just like illegal to own mine, comf
and like, hold Nazi memorabilia.
I don't think that vision is compatible with the United States.
And I also am uncomfortable
with social media platforms going too far in one direction.
But I just kind of worry that me thinking,
oh yeah, like I would never debate a Nazi like that.
I worry about that being categorized as like censorship
or me being unwilling to engage with ideas.
Cause I think sometimes ideas are just bad
and shouldn't be engaged first.
So kind of help me work, help me work through that.
Yeah, I mean, I think that obviously Greg and I,
we, part of our definition, we define it as being torn down
for speech that is or would be protected
by the First Amendment, which obviously in the realm
of a government agency or a public employee,
that's one thing where you do have First Amendment protections.
We argue that in other contexts in which people are
perfectly within their legal rights to fire you
or just be disassociate themselves for you,
that that still does technically count as cancel culture.
And I think, you know, Greg and I are,
I mean, he's the president and CEO of fire.
I'm very much a libertarian and I, you know,
champions of free speech are very often put
in a really uncomfortable place when, you know,
for example, Greg, when he first joined fire,
this was back in like around 2001.
And his first major TV hits were defending the right
of somebody to like say grotesquely inappropriate things
about 9-11 as the rubble was still smoking.
And I think that it takes, I've learned quite a lot
from him because we have different political viewpoints
and I've seen him defend people who I, you know,
my gut instinct is like, yes, Greg, go ahead.
And then I see him defend people where I'm like,
oh my God, that idea is so beyond the pale.
But he's really taught me the importance

of being able to distill that principle
from your own viewpoints in a way that I think, you know,
our partnership in that book was super helpful
because we're calling out both right and left.
But it also means, yes, sometimes it's tolerating views
that are beyond the pale.
Obviously it doesn't mean, you know, hire somebody
who is diametrically opposed to your viewpoint
in a job or a field where that's relevant necessarily.
I mean, you as a private employer,
that's your own prerogative.
But it also means, you know, if you disagree with someone
or if someone's beyond the pale
or if they vote for someone that you don't agree with,
that that's not an acceptable reason
not to hire them and engage with them.
But that's not relevant to the world
in which you're working together.
And I think, you know, I worry that obviously
there are exceptions where things are so extreme
and like, you know, Putin walking around.
I'm one of Putin's major generals, I believe,
said that he was being canceled for invading Russia,
which like, that's not canceled culture.
That's, I mean, we're not that extreme and pure
in our definition.
It's called society.
Yeah, but I think that there's a really important difference
in nuance between tearing down people
and tearing down their ideas.
And I think that we've totally lost that kind of binary
of being able to attack ideas and not attack people.
And that's the backbone of a healthy society.
And I think sometimes it does mean, yes,
even in like fringe and extreme instances
to really stay true to those principles.
Because, I mean, we live in such a polarized moment right now
where I think the demonstration is if you don't do that,
then we just continue to divide and splinter
and move into our own crevices to the point
where we can't even have a conversation,
let alone even like a common body of facts and knowledge.
And it's truly an epistemic crisis that results

if we can't have conversations about ideas.
No, and I think that,
I don't think it's unfair for me to bring up Nazis,
especially because if you're, you know,
the new CEO of Twitter,
that's what you're actually having to adjudicate around
in terms like the advertising controversies.
But I do think this is where your slippery slope point
is so important.
If we look over the past few years,
the actual, the incidents that I worry about the most
weren't, okay, Nazi walks into a building,
says, debate me, no one debates him or her.
And then they're like, I can't still,
like that hasn't been the problem.
I think the actual problem has been,
this isn't my actual ideology,
so I'm just playing someone here.
Hey, like I'm a populous nationalist
and I think the EU is bad
and I think that the border should be sealed
and I hold a variety of opinions
that are definitely right wing.
It's been very easy for critics
of people who hold those point of views
to then say, see, this world bizarre or marshal
is being a Nazi now and let's treat him accordingly.
So it's really, it's really when these,
when I was saying Nazi earlier,
I was being very, very precise with my language,
but it's pretty clear that the realm of,
the realm of what that term came to mean
and the way it was weaponized,
I think really approximated
the cancel culture thing you're worrying about.
Yeah, and I mean, I would say also,
even like the super extreme viewpoints,
like getting rid of Alex Jones, for example,
that's one of the,
when he got removed from Twitter
and all the Info Wars accounts were purged from Twitter,
that's one of those instances that the NCRI found
that there was a huge uptick in users moving to GAB

at that point in time.
And then on GAB, they could actually see
that it went from like the word ban showed up
in 0.1% of GAB like tweets
or whatever their counterpart is posts on their platform.
And then after every single one of these events
where there's a mass censorship event on Twitter,
the word ban swells to like 3% of all posts.
So this is not just a matter of like the net number
of people moving to these platforms,
but also a matter of conversation.
And I would say that looking back in the scheme of history,
I mean, Twitter at one point in time, like a decade ago,
their general manager was saying that
they're free speech wing of the free speech party.
I mean, obviously you have the legal bounds
of you can't incite violence,
you can't doc someone,
you can't meaningfully threaten them,
you can't defame them.
And we do have First Amendment standards
that have been tailored to that.
But as soon as you start saying,
well, these alt-right accounts are beyond the pale,
which I'm not saying they're not reprehensible.
I'm sure there's stuff that these people were posting
that I would be deeply offended by.
But as soon as you do that, and then you do that again,
and then you do that again,
the span of viewpoints that's allowed
on a social media company can narrow considerably
and you don't actually banish these people from the internet.
And if anything, I would say it's even more dangerous
that Alex Jones or someone like that
is in their own little crevice, not actually being refuted.
Like most of us in the normal day-to-day plate society
don't really know what he's talking about,
but there are still probably just as many,
if not more fans that he has
that have moved into his little ecosphere
or somewhere like truth social.
I mean, getting booting Trump off of Twitter
didn't make him any less powerful.

It just gave him an echo chamber
in which his viewpoints are even less refuted
and the rest of us don't really know
what's happening in that world.
And yet here he is,
the most formidable Republican candidate in 2024
at the moment.
I think it takes a remarkable degree
of like being able to remove yourself
and your views from views
that quite literally can be reprehensible
so long as they're not directly,
physically, literally dangerous or defamatory.
What you just said is where this gets really difficult.
Define when ideas get dangerous.
Physically dangerous.
I mean, genuine incitement of violence.
I mean, the first amendment law that I'm fortunate
Greg is the expert in that sphere and I am not.
But we do have a huge body of case law
and a huge amount of precedent
that has demonstrated that free speech absolutism
is not literally absolute in this country.
And if I say go and hurt this person
in a way that is actually actionable,
like that is beyond the pale.
If I defame someone in a way
that shows gross negligence for the truth,
that is beyond the pale.
Our legal body of precedent says as much
and that is something that I think social media companies
would benefit from actually embracing the fact
that the courts have answered a lot of these questions
for them and the problem is,
as soon as you put your finger on the scale,
which I totally understand the instinct
that a lot of these social media companies
and platforms and professionals had
because I would feel deeply uncomfortable
if I owned a platform
in which really reprehensible vile stuff was happening.
But as soon as you open that up,
the can of worms just,

there's no putting it back in my opinion.
Greg has a term called censorship gravity
which I found super interesting.
He'd written about it in the past
and I used a different analogy in the book.
But essentially we've spent so,
such a relatively short span of time
in the scheme of human history
actually not burning our heretics
in a way that I think is super profound.
And he believes that there's a gravity pulling societies
down towards censorship
and it takes a great degree of purposefulness
and being able to remove yourself from the situation
as a society with all citizens buying into it
to actually resist that gravity towards censorship
because I think anyone can kind of rationally reason themselves
into cases, fringe cases where they think like,
oh, maybe it would just be worth not listening to that person
or banishing them or getting them off social media.
And I think it's analogous to like slouching.
Like you need to,
like if you're somebody who kind of
from time to time might slouch down
and then realize like, oh, I know I need to stand up.
Like it takes a degree of fortitude and attention
and personal buy-in to make sure
that you don't slouch towards that more natural standard.
And I think that the scheme of human history
is a demonstration that unless we're very, very purposeful
to resist just the slippery slope of censorship
that that's where we're going to head towards quite quickly.
Seems like the problem though.
And this is something that Elon and the folks
at Twitter's advertising team
are trying to figure out right now is
we can talk about Twitter being the free speech
being in the free speech party all we want.
There is one set of actors
who are very not bought into that vision
and that actors are the advertisers.
There's basically no major corporation
that is interested in advertising

on that version of Twitter.

So I guess, what would you say to the act?

Cause that's where it gets like really, really interesting where it's like, okay, sure, you can do your platform Elon but clearly there's a lot of resistance to companies and brands who need to pay the bills here being willing to sort of advertise on a platform that's built around that principle.

So what would you say to advertisers who just don't like at a literal level like just don't care about philosophy.

And I think obviously there's a bit of ideology there but clearly they care about bottom line and reporting their bosses and those different dynamics.

I mean, I think that the problem with the Elon situation is that you're going from a context in which censorship was the status quo for a while on these platforms and then having someone waltz in and say, oh no, we're going to go back to the way that it was. But I would say back in 2012, when Twitter was saying we're the free speech wing and the free speech party and before they'd instituted mass bans of alt-right accounts or infowars accounts and Russian bots and trolls and white nationalists.

Like all these people who I think most of society would agree are not savory in any way, shape, or form.

Like they had advertisers before but the problem is once you open that can of worms and you say we're going to censor and we're essentially saying these are acceptable viewpoints and these aren't and then you have someone come in and say, oh no, actually it's a free for all.

Like you can't put that back in.

So I mean, I would say look back in recent history a decade ago, there were advertisers on Twitter.

I mean, it's not, I don't think it's particularly because these viewpoints are there that they're not advertising.

I think that it's just the whole host of all the other external factors and issues with, Elon himself maybe and things that he's saying, but I wouldn't say that it's purely because there's less censorship on the platform

that they're not willing to advertise.

What's your advice for Elon B?

Cause I like the way, I actually really like the way you frame that in terms of this isn't 2012, it's after, you know, 10 plus years.

Like what would your advice for Elon be?

What would your advice to Elon and the new CEO be moving forward considering, considering your research and considering I think the fact that you all have a broad understanding of this.

Yeah, I mean, Greg wrote an open letter to Elon a while ago that I thought was really great

and I would refer anyone for his viewpoints to that.

Holding to that in the show notes, yeah.

Awesome.

I would say from my vantage point,

if I had been in his ear at this whole point in time,

I would have said from day one,

like you need to put the controls of censorship away

because I don't think anyone single person

can be in control of something as vast as Twitter

or as vast as the public square like he has.

And I think that he's made some really unfortunate missteps with certain specific censorship instances

like suppressing substack links

or I think pretty obviously retaliating against a journalist

who did not tweet his specific location

with the Elon jet controversy.

I don't know if you were following that,

but like there were instances where the censorship

that he put forth were just very much

in his own self-interest,

which I would understand the instinct if I were him,

I'd probably be really hard-pressed

not to also retaliate against someone

that I felt was like doxing me in the second degree.

But I would say you can't be in control of this.

Like this, it cannot ever be up to one person

what is happening in the public square.

Even the most principled person possible

still has their own internal biases.

And I think divesting that control

to either a broader group of people

or even frankly, like an open source algorithm would be a better situation than him being able to kind of be a little bit of a tyrant from time to time in my opinion, even if I'm sympathetic to a lot of his viewpoints on free speech.

You know, it's interesting.

I feel like you and I are just dancing around the fact that open, Wild West adjacent free speech platforms are probably just not compatible with an advertising business model.

But for example, let's put aside the Elon jet tracker because that is very, very personal.

I think on a broad level, the reason why Elon censored substack is because Elon with Twitter blue or X blue, whatever it's called now, he has the long form notes, people could write longer tweets.

So not only do they want to keep people on the platform to maximize advertising dollars, but they actually want people who are using substack to basically start using the longer tweet format as their version of substack.

So that's why he banned it once again for business reasons.

So it's frustrating that they so botched at the start of the acquisition, Twitter blue, because a world where Twitter was driven by subscription revenue rather than making. So if instead it was 70% subscription revenue, 30% advertising, I think it'd be easier to make the decisions you're articulating rather than 90% advertising, 10% give or take subscriptions in those different bases.

Because you just can't depend on advertising if your priority is speech maximization.

I mean, but I also would say that if someone manages to somehow turn the clock back to a like pre-2016 Twitter sort of platform where people genuinely, I mean, I would also tell Elon much like Trump, like maybe a little less tweeting on the toilet and things that are not well thought through.

Cause I think his own personal rhetoric is hurting the brand a little bit too. But if somebody was able to create a genuine viewpoint neutral public forum again, I would say like the only reason advertisers feel as though they have the choice to say, like, oh, I don't really want to advertise on Twitter right now is because it's lost a part of the market share. You know, there was the question of wood threads, like super seed Twitter, which I don't think really happens. I think that's been settled. Yeah, I think that's been settled. We're not trying to get an Instagram sponsorship deal here. It's not happening. But I would say like in a world in which we could actually develop a viewpoint neutral common ground to voice our viewpoints, like advertisers are going to come. It's just that it's just a matter of like, can somebody figure out how to turn back time, which I think is a really difficult thing to do. But I mean, I think business and bottom line is business and bottom line. And in the end, if there are eyeballs on a platform, there are going to be advertisers who want to reach those eyeballs. I just don't see a world in which someone says, oh, just because it's Elon, I can't advertise to the millions and millions of people. Yeah, I mean, you would be surprised. So I think we 30% of this is almost certainly something like that. I want to go back to something interesting you said, because I so love that you picked the Yale situation in 2015, because I think a lot of the way that most people tell the cancel culture story, especially people like me who don't like cancel culture, but are sympathetic to, I think the stronger arguments that are put out is, look, this is all basically about Trump. After 2016, everyone kind of loses their mind

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and now that Trump's not in office anymore,
everything's going to calm down
and we're all just going to kind of move on.
But you said 2015, which means that,
and I think Trump, and what my actually take on this
is the reason why we're in a moment
where cancel culture is on clearly receding
in the American party politics is,
I think it's because Trump is no longer in office
and Joe Biden is largely the type of Democrat
where people are going to feel comfortable
diving back, but my soapbox aside, 2015 is pre-Trump.
So what was happening?
What's the origin story
if I can't just blame everything on Donald Trump?
I mean, I think that a lot of cancel culture,
we think Greg and I argue that the roots are in a liberalism
that was just growing in academia for quite a while.
But I think also, I saw it burgeoning, I'm 23,
so I was on social media from the time that I was 11,
unfortunately, I know every time I say that
in an interview, my mom fringes,
because she was like, I didn't want you on there,
but I was on Tumblr in its earliest days
and I saw that it's all kind of incubating there
where you'd be in like weird fandoms
and one person has the wrong take
on some like ridiculous thing
and then it's just like a tear down
and no one can talk to that person at all whatsoever.
So I think a lot of it was social media fueled
and there were the seedlings of it before.
I do think though, I don't think it's just Trump.
I think it's a country where a liberalism is acceptable
or at least where the populace is not truly dedicated
to classical liberal ideals.
If that country or nation is in an uncomfortable point
in time or a divisive point in time,
I think a liberalism flourishes.
I don't think, I mean, I think Trump
was certainly the spark for it,
but I think all the groundwork was set.
We were at such a, in 2016, we were at such a point

where I think a lot of young people
didn't really understand the tenets of free speech,
the tenets of classical liberalism,
what it means to truly buy into a pluralistic democracy
and a diverse democracy.
And so I think that moment made things flare up.
I would say 2020 was pretty much the same thing
happening again with the pandemic,
with the death of George Floyd,
with all the social unrest going on at that point in time.
This, the same thing of like just the exact same explosion.
And I think in 2024, even if Trump
were completely out of the picture,
being in a divisive moment like that in a country
where free speech is losing its grip on American hearts,
I think we can expect something pretty similar
to come out of that.
In this last section, I kind of want to go over recent events
because I think it's really,
I think this is actually, and this one's again,
why I think the book is coming out at the right time.
This book is its most interesting back in,
I think this year rather than just a little earlier,
because in opinion, I've definitely changed on.
I think it got very easy to basically dismiss the space
that you're in as just like a cottage industry.
Like it's 2019, everyone in their cousin has like
a cancer culture book, like there's your latest Fox News,
Jesse Water situation.
But I think the funny impact of this,
and this is where you kind of talk about
the state of higher education,
is that all of these people were messaging me like,
what were all of these like young people thinking,
signing these crazy Pro Hamas statements?
And my take is just they spent four to eight years
at institutions where their ideas
literally were not challenged.
Not only not challenged,
but actually clearly privileged above other ideas.
Cause there's a difference between
whether or not I'm going to argue with you
and whether or not the ideas you even hold in

that itself are like first before others.
So I think it's just like a very,
I think we just saw like an example
of kind of like the mass psychosis
that happens with elite, educated, ambitious people
when they come out of an institution
where these ideas are kind of really, really dominant.
So I'd love for you to kind of speak to that side of things.
Yeah, I mean, this is something that I know firsthand
as someone who was on a college campus very recently.
I was at NYU, I would have been the class of 2022.
I ended up dropping out during the pandemic
and just doing my own thing.
But I would say there's something really scary
about the tyranny of the minority
sometimes on these campuses.
Cause when I was at NYU, when I was a freshman,
I got there, you're 18, New York city of all places.
It's very like strange place to be at that age alone
with strangers that you're living with.
And the last thing you want to do is be canceled
or like lose friends.
And so I got there and I was hiding my Thomas soul
and Jordan Peterson books under my bed,
which is so embarrassing to say in retrospect,
but I was so scared to put myself out there politically
or to lose friends or to have my roommates dislike me
because of my viewpoints.
And I wasn't until 2020 or 2021
in the wake of the pandemic that I wrote an op-ed
in the New York Post about how I felt
that free speech on campus was in a really dire state.
And that experience made me realize
how there's an illusion of this community
where everyone thinks the same way
and where you're completely alone because I wrote that
and I had former people that lived across the hall for me,
people that were in classes with me,
professors that I had classes with
and deans of departments at NYU reached out to me and say,
oh, I agree with you,
but just don't tell anyone we had this conversation,
by the way.

And I think there's such an illusion
of one viewpoint being so dominating a campus like that.
Like NYU is very progressive.
And I'm sure that I'm in a very much a minority
and my viewpoint is a center rate libertarian.
However, there are so many people who can sit
in a room together and not realize
if they think the same thing
or that they might have some common ground
because they're too afraid to put themselves out there
in the first place.
And so I would even go as far as to say like recently,
there was a Harvard Crimson editorial piece
where they said there was the majority view
of the editorial board and they were responding
to the fact that Harvard went
from having one longer supplemental essay
to five shorter ones in the wake
of the Supreme Court rolling about affirmative action
and the editorial piece for the Harvard Crimson,
their take was that that was actually going
to disadvantage students of color
or low people from disadvantaged backgrounds
who wanted to apply to Harvard
because they couldn't possibly know
how to condense their essays into a 200 grade essay,
which is just a, in my view,
like really bizarre and kind of racist take to have.
And also that they couldn't possibly have a response
to a question about intellectual diversity,
sorry, no, an intellectual experience that they've had
because underprivileged people might not have an answer
to that question, which is just such a tone
of take in my view.
And I was thinking to myself, like,
is there any way that that is actually the majority viewpoint
and in the Harvard editorial crimson
or the Harvard Crimson editorial board?
And I think that's the sort of example
of somebody probably waltzed in there.
I mean, I'm guessing, but they said, like,
oh, it's so offensive that they have a 200 word essay
or word limit on the essays.

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And are you going to be the person who's going to say,
like, no, actually, I don't think that's racist.
Or are you just going to be like, okay,
I'll sign off on that.
And I think there's the culture of conformity
can allow really disturbing viewpoints to go unchallenged.
And the worst thing is I think that there are people
who probably didn't sign on to letters
feeling that pressure that in, you know,
I'm sure there are true believers on those campuses,
but I'm sure that there are also people who felt too afraid
to put themselves out there
and to be the diverging viewpoint
on something like that.
So I want to ask you then,
what do you think about Reina Workman?
They, using proper pronouns here,
they signed a NYU student bar association letter
that they wrote, not just signed,
but they actually wrote a letter
that people should just go read.
I don't want to editorialize on it myself,
but I interpreted the piece as being very,
and most people did, as just very pro-Hamas.
This isn't just so cool.
They wouldn't, you know, denounce the actions of Hamas.
They said, basically, good to go, pro-resistance,
anything's justified.
They ended up losing their job after law school
because they were going into their 3L year
after being a summer associate.
I tweeted about this before they lost their job,
but I was like, well, they're gonna lose their job.
I think it's entirely, I think it's okay
that they lost their job,
because I think there was just like a limit
on societal actions that are just,
that it's completely okay not to support
or hire someone who holds those views,
especially at a firm that likely has
a more of a decent number of Jews at it.
So I'd love to hear just kind of your response to that
and your advice to people like me

and the leaders of the firm,
who obviously likely disagree with what your opinion is.
And so remind me, because I haven't done
all my homework on this exact case,
just because we're gearing up for the book tour at the moment,
but this was somebody who had not yet
started a job at that firm, right?
Was it a rescinded offer?
Yeah, they did a summer associate thing last summer,
had the full offer, the offer was withdrawn
in direct reference to writing and signing the statement.
Because like the reason why I'm asking about this one
specifically is I, and already you're seeing,
I think the conservative or even like center left version
of cancel culture going too far,
there's a bus that's driving around Cambridge and Harvard,
which is saying, look at all the students
who are members of these various student associations
that signed these reprehensible anti-Israel letters.
I think they're reprehensible,
but I think there's just like a,
there's a step change between someone who just writes
under their own name, horrible pro-Hamas things,
and someone who's just a part of a broader group.
And I guess maybe this is just your inherent point
that it's very easy for my very specific condemnation
of Rhina Workman to translate
into way too aggressive bullying of like silly undergrads.
Cause I think there's just like a gap
in terms of those circumstances,
but maybe it is just a slippery self.
But yeah, I'd love to hear just your broad,
your broad thoughts as a, as a kind of like a general rule.
Yeah, I mean, I think this is definitely a difficult one.
And Greg and I have talked about like there, I mean,
there's a world in which you could say
like Harvey Weinstein was canceled
and that's not a world that we live in.
Like that's people who genuinely have
a reprehensible track record.
And I think that, you know,
there's a world in which I think it's,
it technically does fit our definition of cancel culture

because it is a viewpoint.
It's not directly inciting violence,
but it is endorsing it.
And I think, you know, there's a question about
like what sort of society do we want to live in?
Is it just people who are directly saying like,
yes, I support Hamas and violent atrocities.
Is it someone who identifies as pro-Palestine
or has a Palestinian flag?
I do think the slippery slope is dangerous.
And I would say at least on this one,
like it definitely does fit our definition of cancel culture.
So yes, I do think that a private employer
and especially a smaller employer as well
has their complete freedom of association rights.
And that's a separate question.
I don't think that there should be any sort of like
legal protection for someone like this.
But I would also say the way that some of the tactics
going on with the response to, I mean,
in my view, really reprehensible statements
that have been signed, attack the idea
and don't call for the employer to fire someone
or don't contact someone's employer.
Like I think that's a very different conversation.
And I think that it's very easy in a world
in which for the past decade,
that's just been the kind of go-to tactic
for people in the kind of cancel culture camp
to tear people down, to contact their employer,
to dox them, to, I mean,
I've never seen until today like trucks driving around
with undergrad school photos on it.
I mean, I think that's a little bit too far for sure.
But I think the conversation on social media,
it would be a much healthier world to live in
if we were to attack the viewpoint and the letter
and not call their employment into question and call,
that's the employer's prerogative in conversation.
And I think it's just,
is that the kind of society that we want to live in?
And so long story short,
yes, I think that's definitionally cancel culture,

but yes, I think it's within the rights
of the employer as well.
You know, and given everything you just said,
a good place to close is I,
there's a key takeaway from what you just said.
I think it's kind of, I wrote this down context.
It really matters.
So for example, I think it really does matter
that the law is a, it's a service industry.
It's a very well-paid service industry,
but it's a service job.
Like you're hired to work for clients.
And I think it's entirely defensible for the firm
to say, look, listen, this is disastrous news for us.
They know our firm has a reputation.
They know we need to sell clients and do billable hours.
That was the poor sign of judgment.
And we're just not going to do this.
And this is a sign for all associates
or future associates moving forward.
But this would be different if they worked at Quiznos
or Burger King.
And I'm just sort of like, you know what?
Like it's disgusting that Burger King
would employ this person where in all actuality,
it's not a service job.
It's totally faceless.
The reputation of Burger King would not be limp,
but there have been cancellations like that.
I think that's the key thing.
It's really where, it's really where it exceeds purely
an institution acting in self-interest
and actually goes towards trying to harm someone.
And I think contacting, and I think,
I think there are probably going to be people
who contact Rina's future employers
and try to continue to cause career trouble.
And I think that's just like the total like utter line cross.
Because at that point, you're not teaching a lesson.
You're not sending a message.
You're actually just weaponizing and bullying someone.
Yeah. And I think, I think you're entirely right.
The context is very important.

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Like for example, if a journalistic outlet were to pull somebody off of a beat because they tweeted something that demonstrates that they're not able to be objective, that would not be cancel culture. That would be very relevant to the job that's at task and at hand. But I will say, I think it's just, I am concerned, regardless of my own personal beliefs about this conflict, I am concerned that we could end up in a world where just having a flag or being pro-Palestine or whatever the viewpoint might be is something that starts to get people torn down, which is obviously completely different from saying like, yes, I endorse what's happening right now with the literal terrorism that's unfolding. But I think that that line censorship, I will say again, I think is a slippery slope and we could end up in a place where the dividing lines are much less clear. Whereas right now, I think people coming out and saying like, yes, I'm on the side of terrorism being perpetrated against civilians. That's one conversation. And I think that we just need to be very careful to not just paint with a broad brush and condemn people who have differing viewpoints because violence is one thing, but a viewpoint is another. Actual last question. I worry that a lot of, and once again, you share these views with Greg. So this isn't just you as a not recent graduate, a person who attended a great school. A recent dropout. A recent, yeah, I'm trying to find the right, I'm trying to find the right, the right euphemism. I worry that you too conflate broader American society with like the ideal of higher education. So for example, at the start of the episode, you were, and you host a show called The Lost Debate, so you really should be doing this. This is your brand. On that, you're talking about how like,

look, when there are bad ideas, debate the ideas.
Like, you know, if there's a bad, like evil, racist,
misogynistic terrible thing on Twitter, like,
bait it, shout it down, it'll be countered,
like this, this, this and that.
And I just kind of worry that in a lot of the edge cases,
that just isn't how like society works.
In the sense that like, let's say you have,
and I hate the case of, you know,
digging up the tweets of some high schooler 10 years later,
and then getting them fired.
But like, if it's, if someone is like,
dropping the n-bomb on Twitter the year before,
and there's no like amorphous statute of limitations
that's been passed, I'm sort of like, ooh,
that one gets very, very complicated.
Cause also, that's not a debate.
You kind of like, we're not gonna debate, you know,
actually maybe, if it's a weird workplace,
there could be a debate about free speech,
but likely it's not, your boss isn't gonna debate you
about your public conduct.
So I would just want you to close with like,
what is the difference between a college campus
where like debate and ideas and the free exchange throw up
and social media platforms?
What's to your point, if you're Twitter saying
you're the free speech wing and the free speech party,
you are accepting that standard.
What are the differences between these three spheres
and how should that guide how we move forward?
The social media sphere, the campus sphere,
and the third one just being-
And just like, just workplace where like,
there are no debates, there are no ideas.
There's just basic, there's just basic shit
to put it eloquently.
Yeah, I mean, there's, if you're an employer
and one of your employees calls another employee fat,
like you can fire them for that.
Like this, the first amendment standards
are very different in the workplace.
And I would defer to Greg and his expertise

on how that is quite a different situation as an employer that, you know, you're paying someone's paycheck and you can expect them to comport themselves in certain ways in social media.

I mean, I think that's certainly one thing, but it's viewpoint oriented.

And I don't think that using a slur is a viewpoint.

And I also would say that, you know,

I would love to live in a world where we could just kind of tune out the unsavory ideas and just live in a happy, fluffy little bubble of people that are in the kind of moderate scene middle.

But I think that the past decade or so has just demonstrated that we're more divided than ever, that there are people who, there's a meaningful plurality of Americans who believe that they're a lizard people in control of the levers of society.

And like, is it a better thing to let them talk about that in their weird little crevice of the internet and fester and then like all of a sudden there's even more of them or is it a better thing to know the breadth of human opinion and civilian opinion in its reality and to be able to confront that and maybe change hearts and minds in common spaces.

And I would say I'd rather live in the place that's the latter.

And that does mean, you know, of course, you be friends with who you want to hire, who you want to, we're all private citizens and we can choose to engage with who we want to engage with.

But I think as a society, we can all do our part to go back to those old idioms of like to each of their own and it's a free country and to embrace the fact that we might need to be a little bit uncomfortable if we want to live in a truly diverse democracy and that the only way that we can learn to coexist is if we can actually talk to people and meet them where they are.

And yep, that means that sometimes you're going to be defending people that are fringe and make you uncomfortable.

I mean, I was just on TV the other day defending the rights of Harvard students to say things

that I think are despicable,
but that's something that I need to put myself aside
in the context of being a free speech champion.
And I think that society needs to get
a little more comfortable,
not with its extremist and genuinely dangerous violent people.
That's one totally separate thing.
And the First Amendment does have bounds
that prevent speech from becoming actionable violence,
but we need to be more comfortable
and engaging with people on the fringe
because if we aren't, then I think the fringe
becomes a larger and larger faction of society.
Well said.
The book is the cancelling of the American mind.
Cancel culture undermines trust and threatens us all,
but there is a solution.
Ricky, thank you for joining me on The Realignment.
Thank you.
It's been a pleasure.
Hope you enjoyed this episode.
If you learned something like this sort of mission
or want to access our subscriber exclusive Q&A,
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See you all next time.