

# The best way to honor Charlie Kirk’s memory

Last Thursday, we marked the anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. I was at the Pentagon that day. I remember the feeling of the walls of my office shuddering, the smell of the smoke that filled the hallways, and the sight of the broken and burning building.

The day before our nation passed to remember those who died on 9/11, conservative commentator Charlie Kirk was shot and killed while boldly exercising his right to free speech — a freedom that the brave men and women in uniform who responded to the terrorist attacks were acting to secure. Kirk lost his life honoring their service and sacrifice by embracing the liberty for which they risked and gave their lives.

After 9/11, President George W. Bush declared that our nation had been attacked by the followers of “a hateful ideology that rejects tolerance and crushes all dissent.” We don’t know yet who killed Kirk, but if he was targeted for political assassination, as appears likely, then he, too, was killed by a follower of a hateful ideology that rejects tolerance and seeks to crush all dissent.

The goal of the 9/11 attacks was to terrorize Americans. The terrorists’ objective was to frighten and intimidate us, and force us to curtail the way we exercise our freedoms. On its face, it appears that Kirk’s shooting was intended to terrorize as well. Was this an effort to drive conservatives off college campuses and out



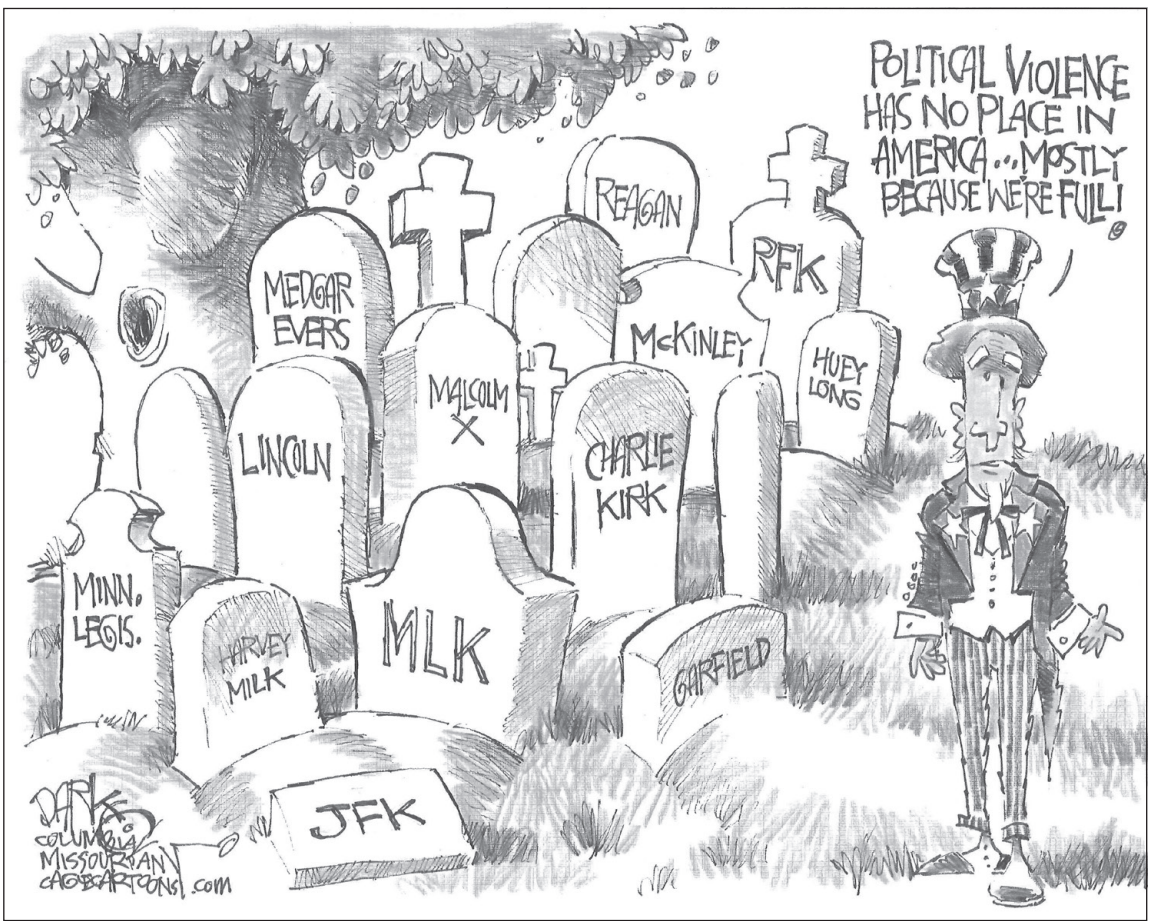
MARC A. THIESSEN

of public debate, to frighten us and stop us from speaking out?

We must not give in to terrorism. Unfortunately, I fear the opposite might happen.

In the wake of Kirk’s killing, many colleges and universities could respond by saying they can’t host conservative speakers on campus because they can’t guarantee their security. Yes, they can - and they must. Whatever the motive for this atrocity turns out to be, our nation’s response must not be to stifle speech, but to double down on it. College campuses need more speech and more ideological diversity, not less. Schools need to invite more conservative speakers like Charlie Kirk to campus. Every college president in America should, at this moment, be compiling a list of conservative speakers they will invite to campus this fall — security costs be damned.

I did not know Kirk well, but I followed and admired his work. I know that his legions of supporters — many of them young — are angry right now, and rightly so. He was just 31, in the prime of his life, with a beautiful young family and children who will now grow up without a father. His senseless killing is infuriating. It is also appalling to discover that there are so many people who



don’t just oppose his ideas — they celebrate his demise. Just look at the reaction of those cheering Kirk’s death on social media. They might not represent a majority of those on the left, but they are a shockingly vocal and hateful minority.

For American conservatives, our response cannot be to match their hatred; rather, we must match Kirk’s love.

What distinguished Kirk, and made him special, was that he was a model of civil discourse who sought out

those who disagreed with him and respectfully engaged them. As he told one student who asked why he had come to campus: “I love America because I love talking with people I disagree with. ... When people stop talking, that’s when you get violence ... because you start to think the other side is so evil, and they lose their humanity.” He sought to persuade by reasoned discussion and through affirming the humanity of those who disagreed with him.

He listened attentively to those on the left who shared this love of reasoned discussion and gracefully took the insults of those who did not. He was a devout Christian who lived Jesus’ command to love your enemies.

The best way to honor Charlie Kirk’s memory is by carrying on his legacy of civil discourse and engaging those who disagree with us with love.

Marc Thiessen is a national columnist.

## Cancel culture and Charlie Kirk

MINOT

A funny thing has happened on our way to the apotheosis of Charlie Kirk.

The right — the “facts don’t care about your feelings” crowd — has lost its disdain for cancel culture, and it’s come home to North Dakota, with a Fargo city employee in hot water after saying Kirk “won’t be missed” in a social media post.

Before we dive into the local story, though, we should talk about what cancel culture is and what it is not.

If someone advocates an extreme point of view around which there is a cultural consensus — say someone calls for a new holocaust for Native Americans or the elimination of the Catholic Church — we don’t take much umbrage if they are fired or otherwise “canceled” because our society, with near unanimity, does not support these things.

I would go so far as to say I support canceling people who express extreme points of view. Remarkably, we seem to be living in an era where there is little consequence for saying and believing truly odious things. Right-wing commentator Tucker Carlson’s attempts to rehabilitate Adolf Hitler’s legacy would end his career in a better sort of world, but instead he maintains his large audience and is still capable of booking big names like OpenAI CEO Sam Altman (though Altman may be regretting that interview now).

Alternatively, if someone says transgender women aren’t women, that’s a bit different. Whatever you or I might think of that statement,



ROB PORT

we are far from any sort of a consensus.

Cancel culture is one political faction attempting to bully institutions like businesses or governments into enforcing its cultural preferences in the absence of a consensus. It’s not cancel culture if our culture is in broad agreement on the question at hand.

Which brings us to the furious effort from the right to turn Kirk into a kind of saint, and his detractors into heretics to be burned at the stake. Figuratively speaking, of course.

I find this campaign to be objectionable. President Donald Trump’s immediate decision to award Kirk the Presidential Medal of Freedom — the highest civilian honor our government has — was crass politics. I also think the decision to lower the nation’s flags in Kirk’s honor was a mistake. I don’t think North Dakota Gov. Kelly Armstrong should have complied, though for me that is less about Kirk than my argument that we’re lowering the flags too often in general.

If we want to talk specifically about Kirk, there’s no question that he was a wildly successful political entertainer and hugely effective political operative, but his success in those endeavors was built on gaining attention by saying and doing things that were calculated to be outlandish and

offensive, and using the attention that brought to divide Americans against one another. We shouldn’t lower the flags for someone like that any more than we should lower them for a figure like, say, left-wing commentator Rachel Maddow.

Or even someone like me, should someone take up that flight of fancy when I shuffle off this mortal coil.

We shouldn’t allow our political figures to turn these honors into gratuities for their cronies.

But thinking Kirk was divisive is not the same as delighting in his death. The people who are losing their jobs or facing other negative consequences for endorsing Kirk’s murder get little sympathy from me. That’s not cancel culture. Murder has been illegal in this country since the founding, and an enormous majority of Americans oppose political violence.

Yet believing that Kirk was a bad influence on American politics isn’t the same thing as endorsing his death. Which brings us back to Fargo.

My impression of what the city employee was saying — in an admittedly callous way — is that Kirk was a provocateur. An instigator. An architect of discord and a force of fracture. That’s certainly a controversial thing to say, especially in the immediate aftermath of the man’s murder, but it’s a view millions of Americans share, and I don’t think anyone should lose their job over expressing it, not the least because it’s objectively true.

Perhaps doing it so soon after is death was a contretemps worthy of criticism, but



Cheney Orr / REUTERS

Charlie Kirk, Turning Point USA founder, greets the crowd during the AmericaFest 2024 conference Dec. 19, 2024, sponsored by conservative group Turning Point in Phoenix, Arizona.

a loss of livelihood?

C’mon. Are we to now pretend that Kirk wasn’t an inflammatory, confrontational figure simply because he was tragically murdered?

There’s irony in canceling someone for saying something incendiary about the death of someone who was incendiary for a living.

Heck, there’s irony in building this new mystique around Kirk given that he invested a not inconsequential portion of his career trying to puncture the “myth” of sainthood around political figures like Martin Luther King Jr., someone Kirk derided as “awful” and “not a good person.”

King, I’m sure I don’t need to remind you, was also gunned down for his beliefs.

Kirk was bothered by the mythologizing around the famous civil rights movement, but now his supporters are building their own myth around him, and attempting to enforce it on Americans with their newfound cultural hegemony.

It’s a terrible thing that Kirk was murdered, but that doesn’t excuse turning criticism of Kirk’s words and deeds into an affront worthy of ruining a person’s life.

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Grand Forks  
Herald

A division of Forum Communications Company  
ISSN: 0745-9661 (print) and 2642-7249 (digital)  
USPS 225-580 | Vol. 146 Edition 85  
Copyright 2025  
[www.grandforksherald.com](http://www.grandforksherald.com)  
(701) 780-1100 | (800) 477-6572

The Grand Forks Herald is published digitally daily and printed Wednesdays and Saturdays by the Herald at 3535 31st St. Suite 205 Grand Forks, ND 58203-3707. Periodical postage paid at Grand Forks and additional mailing offices.

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