

DECISION MAKING WITHIN A CANCEL CULTURE ENVIRONMENT

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
General Studies

by

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ABSTRACT

DECISION MAKING WITHIN A CANCEL CULTURE ENVIRONMENT, by Chelsey N. Fortner, 135 pages.

While most are familiar with social media's impact on American society, cancel culture, within the social media revolution, is a relatively new phenomenon. Coming into regular use in 2018, cancel culture is the practice of demanding society to socially ostracize a person, event, or object, based on evidence the person or object in question is offensive to today's norms or morals. Evidence against a victim of cancel culture can be decades-old jokes, controversial opinions, or words and deeds taken out of context and virally spread across social media. In recent events, Civil War monuments, celebrities, politicians, historical figures, and even relatively unknown civilians have fallen victim to cancel culture and the angry social media mob.

The U.S. Army is one of the most respected institutions in the country, but it still risks outside pressures against commander decisions. This thesis seeks to identify whether or not cancel culture affects senior leader decision making, in an effort to identify its impact on the U.S. Army decision-making process. This study examines four different case studies, in which cancel culture pressured leaders to reverse decisions within their organizations. Through the use of symbolic interactionism theory, this thesis examines why some leaders gave credence to cancel culture protests while others ignored the same pressures. This qualitative study aims to identify the extent of cancel culture influence on the next generation of U.S. Army leaders.

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ACRONYMS

U.S.	United States
CEO	Chief Executive Officer

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Social media in American society is both a benefit for some and a hindrance for others. For many, it is a way to reconnect with old high school friends, share baby pictures with distant cousins, and create support groups for marathon teams and cancer survivors. For others, it is a speakerphone for disgruntled customers, a recruiting platform for fringe activist groups, and an anonymous forum for shaming and cyber-bullying. Nearly a decade has passed since the 2011 Arab Spring, when social media platforms like Facebook propelled angry mobs into revolution and ended several established dictatorships.¹ Yet in the United States, social media continues to attack government and private sector leaders. When social media exposes prominent celebrity and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) offensive statements or embarrassing photos, a mob of angry onlookers may react en masse, resulting in a publicized dismissal, resignation, and apology to appease angry social media groups. This new social phenomenon is referred to as “cancel culture,” the social media movement to shame and ostracize allegedly offensive people, events, or symbols in pursuit of a social agenda.

Despite social media’s prevalence in modern day society, many prominent leaders choose to not have a social media account. In a 2018 study, only 40% percent of Fortune

¹ Heather Brown, Emily Guskin, and Amy Mitchell, “The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings,” The Pew Research Center Journalism and Media, 28 November 2012, accessed 21 October 2019, <https://www.journalism.org/2012/11/28/role-social-media-arab-uprisings/>.

500 CEOs were active on social media.² Despite this statistic, cancel culture is still capable of targeting all leaders and their organizations. Recent events reveal no one is immune to social media or cancel culture targeting.

Recent events also demonstrate how social media activism can impact U.S. Army decisions and operations. On 11 March 2007, anti-Iraqi War demonstrators in Tacoma, Washington blockaded the port and delayed the deployment of 300 Stryker vehicles for 11 days.³ The City of Tacoma attempted to bill the U.S. Military approximately \$500,000 for the unexpected security costs.⁴ Meanwhile at Fort Bliss, mass complaints led the garrison to change a street name from Forrest Road to Cassidy Road, removing the reference to General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Confederate General and founder of the Ku Klux Klan.⁵ Cancel culture and social media's ability to mobilize mass discontent present new factors and challenges to U.S. Army decision making.

Social activism was not born with the advent of social media. Environmentalism, Civil Rights, and other causes existed long before hashtags and group pages. However,

² Ryan Erskine, "Is Your CEO On Social Media? If Not, Your Business May Be At Risk," *Forbes*, 17 September 2018, accessed 3 Oct 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanerskine/2018/09/17/is-your-ceo-on-social-media-if-not-your-business-may-be-at-risk/amp/>.

³ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, *Civil Disobedience: An Encyclopedic History of Dissidence in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 163.

⁴ P-I Staff and News Services, "Tacoma wants payback for costs of policing anti-war protests," *Seattle P-I*, 1 April 2007, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.seattlepi.com/seattlenews/article/Tacoma-wants-payback-for-costs-of-policing-1232976.php>.

⁵ Associated Press, "Confederate General's Name Removed from Army's Road," *Deseret News*, 1 August 2000, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.deseret.com/2000/8/1/19521338/confederate-general-s-name-removed-from-army-s-road>.

social media enables social activism at a larger, faster rate than ever before. With a smart phone in billions of hands, providing constant information and social media input, activists are able to recruit larger numbers and mobilize faster than traditional methods of the 1960s or other social revolutions. As a result, leader decisions to react or ignore these protests have a significantly larger audience. This can cause leaders to make decisions faster and sometimes with less information or expertise, to keep up with the speed of information. Public reactions to these leader decisions can influence the leader's reputation or customer base. The concern is whether leader decisions are in reaction angry social media mobs, or based off deliberate analysis and critical thinking. For example, since 2015, American leaders have removed over 110 Confederate symbols and monuments in reaction to complaints and current public sentiment. Over thirty-seven schools, seven parks, three buildings, and seven roads changed to remove any perception of Confederate sympathies.⁶ Many critics believe this rapid change erases important American history. As the case studies of this research will demonstrate, many times a rapid, reactionary decision creates just as much of an outcry in the opposite direction as the original complaint.

The U.S. Military is one of the largest American organizations caught in the middle of the clash between preserving history and progressing towards a more inclusive and respectful institution. The U.S. Army serves as a public servant to the American people. However, U.S. Army leaders also attempt to remain apolitical, to unbiasedly

⁶ Brigit Katz, "At Least 110 Confederate Monuments and Symbols Have Been Removed Since 2015," *Smithsonian Magazine*, 8 June 2018, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/least-110-confederate-monuments-and-symbols-have-been-removed-2015-180969254/>.

study from successful commanders on both sides of military conflicts. The U.S. Military prides itself in preserving tradition, honoring fallen Soldiers, and recognizing both successes and failures throughout military history. Professional sociologists, who studied militaries from all over the world, summarize military culture as “conservative, rooted in history and tradition, based on group loyalty and conformity and oriented toward obedience to superiors.”⁷ Social media, societal pressures, and cancel culture uniquely challenge the U.S. Military’s “loyalty and conformity,” because American “history and tradition” includes the struggle for individual rights. In other words, American tradition is change. The U.S. tradition of growing and improving from social conflict can be seen in the Civil War and slavery abolition, the Suffrage Movement and votes for women, and the Civil Rights Movement and ending segregation across the nation. As such, the U.S. Army not only prides itself in preserving tradition and American values, it also prides itself in leading progressive change with inclusion of all genders, races, religions, and affiliations. The challenge comes when remaining in pace with social changes conflicts with the preservation of certain aspects of U.S. Army history and tradition, which outside organizations may see as offensive. As a large bureaucracy, the U.S. Army cannot afford to change at whim with the fluctuating offenses of the American public. U.S. Army decisions must align with American values, but not fluctuate so often as to create confusion and lose credibility.

⁷ RAND Research Staff, “Implementing policy change in large organizations,” in *Sexual Orientation and US Military Personnel Policy: Options and Assessments*, National Defense Research Institute MR-323-OSD (Washington, DC: Rand, 1993), 368-394.

U.S. Army doctrine for operations and mission command recognize the information domain, to include social media, as an important factor in leader decisions. However, the U.S. Army Social Media handbook does not address or define social media movements, including cancel culture, and their potential pressure on Army leader decision-making. Leaders must be aware of the extent and impact of cancel culture in order to make informed, unbiased decisions. This informed decision-making can help delineate whether cancel culture pressures are legitimate, progressive changes to improve an organization, or angry reactions from a small percentage of the public.

This study seeks to identify whether or not cancel culture affects executive decisions through external pressure on senior leaders. Through the use of qualitative research, document analysis, and researcher observation, this study will compare different case studies where social media cancel culture attempted to force a leader to change a decision. By fully understanding if cancel culture impacted these leaders' decisions, we can better understand any future risk of social media activist pressures on the U.S. Army decision-making process.

Primary Research Question

Does social media cancel culture affect senior leader decision making?

Secondary Research Questions

How could cancel culture movements influence Army decisions?

How do cancel culture trends differ from Army decision making doctrine?

How does cancel culture apply to symbolic interactionism theory, specifically the decision to act on certain social media posts?

Limitations

This research entirely consists of historical research, not primary research. Information and facts from each case study are derived from reputable news articles, blogs, and previously published interviews with participants.

The nature of social media limits the ability to obtain an unbiased, complete public opinion. Social media reactions to include “likes”, “thumbs down”, hearts, etc. are only reflective of the population who chose to submit a reaction. Each social media platform does not completely represent a population or demographic. In other words, observed reactions to social media posts in this study may be high or low when compared to other social media posts, but do not represent an accurate portrayal of America’s popular opinion as a whole. For example, a post decrying the U.S. involvement in Syria may appear to have a lot of traction because it received 200,000 “likes” or “hearts.” However, there may be 400,000 people who read the social media post and do not feel passionate enough to react. Moreover, there may be a million other people, inactive on that particular social media platform, who never read the post at all. Therefore, if the researcher sites popular posts on social media, they will be popular compared to normal social media reactions, but not indicative of the greater American opinion.

Delimitations

Social media has various definitions. To focus this study, the definition of social media is limited to the definition below. Social media analyzed in this study will focus on platforms used for social activism, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This study will not expand to platforms like Pinterest, whose tools and functions do not enable large activist mobilization.

Due to time and available research material, case studies will be limited to events readily available on the internet and in books. Private incidents involving unpublished interviews will not be included.

Cases studies will focus specifically on cancel culture and avoid other forms of social media pressures such as cyber-bullying and firestorming. The length and scope of this research cannot encompass all the different aspects and impacts of other forms of social media pressures.

To additionally refine the scope of this research, this study will focus solely on United States examples of cancel culture events. Time, language barriers, and research length restrict the researcher from exploring other countries' exposure and reaction to social media pressures and their own version of cancel culture.

Definitions

Social Media

Social media, like technology, is ever evolving and changing. Therefore, it is difficult to identify one concise, all-encompassing definition. Critics to the current circulating definitions of social media argue the entire internet is social. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will use the following definition: "the total of websites, networks, and apps that allow people to connect, create content, and share information." In contrast to traditional forms of media, the key difference "is the relative ease of two-way communication that makes social media so different from the old, traditional one-

way process of information sharing that governments, corporations, news publishers and [public relations] agencies once relied on and dominated.”⁸

Social Media Platform

A company, site, server, and interface which include, but are not limited to YouTube, Facebook, Snapchat, Viber, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Twitter, Viber, Weibo, and Instagram.

User

A user is the private citizen with membership or access to the social media platform, which contains the posts analyzed in this study. A user may be the originator of the post, a reactor to the post, someone who re-posts the post on their own social media page, shares the post with family and friends, or passively observes the post.

Poster

The originator of a post will be referred to in this study as the poster, in order to delineate this social media user from the passive observers or users who react to the post.

Reaction

A reaction is an active online behavior to a social media post. Reaction options vary from platform to platform, but commonalities include clicking a “heart” when a user “loves” a post, clicking “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” for like or dislike, and posting a comment below the original post. Other reactions include sharing the post; examples

⁸ Guy P. Harrison, *Think before You Like: Social Media’s Effect on the Brain and the Tools You Need to Navigate Your Newsfeed* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2017), 24-25.

include reposting a post on Facebook, re-tweeting a Twitter comment, emailing or texting a post, or other actions, which increase the post's visibility in other locations different from its origin.

Cancel Culture or Call-Out Culture

Cancel culture is a relatively new term and predominantly came into use in 2018. The Macmillan Dictionary defines it as “the practice of no longer supporting people, especially celebrities, or products that are regarded as unacceptable or problematic.”⁹ According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, canceling is the act of “removing support of public figures on the basis of their objectionable opinions or actions. This can include boycotts or refusal to promote their work.”¹⁰ This “removal of support” can also apply to historical figures or objects.

Symbolic Interactionism

The study of how individuals view themselves and make decisions based on the meaning they give certain symbols and their interpretation of social interactions. Rather than looking at society as a whole, symbolic interactionism focuses on the individual and how that individual makes meaning out of objects and events and then decides how to act. Symbolic Interactionism has three tenants: First, one's actions towards an object are

⁹ Springer Nature Limited, “Cancel Culture Definition,” *MacMillan Dictionary*, 2 May 2019, accessed 1 November 2019, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/us/dictionary/american/cancel-culture>.

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, “Words we’re watching: What It Means to Get ‘Canceled’: Show’s over, folks. Time to go home,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 11 July 2019, accessed 1 November 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/cancel-culture-words-were-watching>.

based on the meaning one gives it. Second, people may have different meanings towards the same object. And third, this meaning can change. For example, if an individual spends their life sitting under a tree for shade, the next time they see a different tree, this same individual will use it for shade. Meanwhile, another person may see the same tree and associate the tree with biting ants. The second person will tell the first person to avoid the tree because of the ants. As soon as the ants bite the first person, the first person changes their meaning of the tree to one of shade, but also of ant bites.¹¹ Symbolic interactionism is the theory of how both individuals view the same tree, and then how interaction with each other and the ants changes the symbolic meaning of the tree for the first individual.

Social media posts, like the tree, are interpreted and acted upon based on the meaning given by the individual. This meaning or interpretation may cause a user to protest, a leader to fire someone in retaliation, or an executive to change a company decision. This decision may be positively or negatively received by other social media users, based on the meaning these users give the same social media post or symbol. If online outrage generates a cancel culture action, and the leader perceives a risk or does not want to be cancelled, they may change their meaning making of the original social media post and change their decision.

¹¹ Khan Academy, “Symbolic Interactionism,” 2020, accessed 13 January 2020, <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/society-and-culture/social-structures/v/symbolic-interactionism>.

Conclusion

This study will seek to identify what effect, if any, the social media cancel culture has on pressuring senior leaders to change their stance or alter a decision within their organization. This study also seeks to identify whether or not U.S. Army doctrine reflects the potential impact of social media pressures within the information element of combat power. By better understanding the impact of cancel culture, we can identify what risk, if any, such activism has on future U.S. Army organizations.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter analyzes social media's psychological effects, a background on cancel culture and its current use in society, U.S. Army doctrine on social media within the information domain, and U.S. Army leadership doctrine on decision making. Literature reviewed in this study consists of peer-reviewed academic articles, online media reports, books on social media and modern day culture, and online news commentary. Army doctrine includes Field Manuals (FM), Army Doctrine Publications (ADP), and Army policy messages (ALARACTs).

Social Media and User Psychology

According to psychological studies, social media is changing the way people view relationships, empathy, and communication with others. According to anthropologist studies, the human brain can only absorb approximately 150 friends and alliances. "Beyond that, we are just fooling ourselves, because it takes time, work, and cerebral real estate to build and maintain meaningful friendships . . . a small core of around five close relationships is far more important to our well-being than a vast collection of hundreds or even thousands of casual online acquaintances."¹² Despite this lack of cerebral real estate, many users feel it is important to have as many friends and followers on social media platforms as possible. However, the increase in quantity of friends decreases the quality of friendships, as social media interrupts individuals' ability to communicate

¹² Harrison, *Think before You Like*, 28-29.

effectively. A majority of information transferred between two people consists of facial expressions and body language, which is lost through online exchanges.¹³ Therefore, many scientists and anthropologists conclude the social media generation is damaging human ability to make meaningful connections with others.

Defenders of social media view it, not as an inhibitor of human interaction, but a tool to facilitate communication. One student in her master's program viewed social media as an effective means to receive instantaneous updates on test dates and classwork expectations.¹⁴ Additionally, Georgia Tech researchers found the best way for non-celebrity posters to increase their followers was to share more useful and interesting content, rather than personal information. News and informational content attracts thirty times more followers than a poster's meal details, personal mood, or even highly personal topics. The same study showed an overuse of hashtags also repelled potential followers.¹⁵ When used as a tool, social media can increase user knowledge and more efficiently share information.

Though social media is an effective tool for learning and mass communication, the need for more followers or social media acceptance contains some negative psychological drawbacks. Recent studies directly link social media to depression and loneliness, both for the poster and the follower. Non-celebrity social media posters with a large number of followers normally acquire these followers through displaying a fake or

¹³ Harrison, *Think before You Like*, 29.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Ibid., 38.

compartmentalized ideal version of themselves. When these posters dwell on the fact their reality is not as amazing as their social media persona, serious loneliness and depression emerges. Social media allows us to “filter” our lives, and only show the best versions of ourselves, “we are good at showing other people ‘life is amazing, even though I am depressed.’”¹⁶ As for the followers, they are also depressed their life does not live up to the perfection portrayed on social media. Many addiction and psychological studies focus on the younger generations, who never lived in a time without social media: “Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011 . . . It’s not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades. Much of the deterioration can be traced to their phones . . . having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy.”¹⁷

Along with a growing depression trend, researchers also observe an increased addiction to social media. In one respect, this addiction is fueled by advertisers. “Social media companies make their money based on how long users stay on their sites and apps . . . In 2016, Facebook took in a whopping \$27 billion in advertising.”¹⁸ Advertisers and social media platforms, as a result, hire consultants to find ways to make pages more attractive and content more addictive. From another and perhaps more dangerous respect, social media addiction is linked to a dopamine effect on the brain. Like slot machines for

¹⁶ Simon Sinek, “The Dangers of Social Media Addiction,” *IQ: Inside Quest with Tom Bilyeu*, 30 March 2017, accessed 8 March 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPmNf362_K0.

¹⁷ Jean M. Twenge, “Has the Smartphone Destroyed a Generation?,” *Atlantic* (September 2017): 61.

¹⁸ Harrison, *Think before You Like*, 136.

an addictive gambler, social media addicts are drawn to the constant feedback.

“Numerical feedback mechanisms (number of likes, retweets, shares, etc.) of many social media platforms help to make them so addictive.” Posters crave the instant feedback of hundreds of anonymous followers “liking” their activity. When a user reacts to a social media post, studies show dopamine is released in the poster’s brain. Dopamine is the chemical released in the brain when someone drinks alcohol, gambles, or smokes. Like a drug, social media addicts can tailor their behavior and decisions based on whether or not they receive enough “likes.” Unfriending someone on social media can have devastating psychological effects to the unfriended person.¹⁹ As a result, addicted users will change their behavior to appease their followers and receive more positive reactions.

In 2018, the global selfie death rate was on the rise, with over 260 people killed since 2011. Deaths were a result of attempting to get the perfect social media picture at the edge of a cliff, in front of a shark, or in other dangerous actions.²⁰ In addition to death-defying photos, sites like YouTube are witnessing dangerous new “challenges.” These include the Tide Pod Challenge to eat a laundry detergent pod, or the Fire Challenge to set oneself on fire. “These ‘challenges’ are clearly driven by social media imitation and competition.”²¹ Unfortunately, the trend is only increasing because the

¹⁹ Sinek, “The Dangers of Social Media Addiction.”

²⁰ BBC News, “Selfie Deaths: 259 People Reported Dead Seeking the Perfect Picture,” 4 October 2018, accessed 8 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-45745982>.

²¹ Mike Elgan, “People are falling off buildings in search of the perfect Instagram shot,” *Fast Company*, 4 January 2019, accessed 8 March 2020, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90287323/people-are-falling-off-buildings-in-search-of-the-perfect-instagram-shot>.

activity produces the desired result. After a British YouTuber glued his head in a microwave with expanding plaster and required paramedic rescue, he received 70,000 new subscribers in only three days. As of 2019, the video had more than 5.7 million views.²² As the death toll rises globally, the United States is one of the top four countries for selfie deaths, next to India, Russia, and Pakistan. The researcher also witnesses social media addiction in her own family. During a recent hunting trip, the researcher's brother insisted on hiking four miles in the wrong direction to take a picture of himself at the mountain crest for his Instagram followers. On a trip to Paris, another family member obsessed more over pictures in front of the Eiffel Tower for Instagram followers than experiencing the Tower for their own enjoyment.

Statistics indicate people spend more time on social media than drinking, eating, socializing in person, and grooming. Teens can spend as long as nine hours a day on social media, longer than they sleep or spend time with parents and teachers. Thirty-nine percent of American girls between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four self-identify as Facebook addicts, waking up in the middle of the night to check their social media and logging into Facebook in the morning before they use the bathroom. YouTube viewers across the world spend approximately one billion hours watching videos each day, increasing tenfold from 2012. Approximately 60% of parents think their teens are addicted to their smartphones and 50% of teenagers agree with them. Thirty-eight percent of Americans admit they never disconnect from their phones.²³

²² Elgan, "People are falling off buildings in search of the perfect Instagram shot."

²³ Harrison, *Think Before You Like*, 139-140.

Critics to these statistics argue the internet and social media are merely means to behavior that could be found anywhere: gaming, social competition, and bullying. An analogy would be blaming the shot glass for producing the alcoholic. Critics argue social media does not make the addict, the addict finds social media. When social media provides a selective window into another's successes and creates the perception of someone else's perfect life, it merely amplifies social competition, which was already there. "Social media amplifies ordinary social competition, which can drive people to extremes."²⁴ In other words, the combination of social media with current smart phone and internet technology merely amplifies societal pressures as old as the human race. Additionally, not all self-declared social media addicts are medically diagnosed with addiction. Contrary research argues a distinct difference between addiction and excessive use.²⁵ Social media often receives the blame, but it is a consolidated medium of tasks, which people previously completed through multiple mediums. Scheduling meetings, sharing pictures, checking in on a trip, party invitations, and concert and festival announcements are all accomplished via social media.²⁶ Whether an addiction or pervasive activity, social media is here to stay.

If the statistics above are correct, and nearly 50% of American teens are addicted to social media, future U.S. Army leaders may have a completely different social

²⁴ Elgan, "People are falling off buildings in search of the perfect Instagram shot."

²⁵ Isobel Baxter, Amy Craig, Ellena Cotton, and Thomas Liney, "Social Media Addiction: An Industry of Unreliability," *British Medical Journal* (June 21, 2019): 365, accessed 8 March 2020, <https://lumen.cgsccarl.com/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2244962797?accountid=28992>.

²⁶ Harrison, *Think before You Like*, 142.

perspective from previous generations before them. In consequence, young Soldiers and leaders may develop a different approach to decision making, placing more emphasis on public opinion. The increased need to be “liked” could influence young leaders’ approach to decisions on soldier work schedules, weekend details, and discipline within their organizations. The researcher, through personal observation, witnessed this growing trend as a Lieutenant. A fellow Lieutenant was reprimanded in her unit for bringing a beer keg to an underage enlisted Soldier drinking party. Prior to this incident, the Lieutenant often expressed her opinion that good leaders should be friends with their Soldiers. In another instance, a squad leader refused to inspect his Soldier’s barracks rooms for health and welfare inspections. He disagreed with the inspection as a whole, because he felt it violated his Soldiers’ personal space. As Soldiers often represent a microcosm of societal changes in the U.S., the effects of social media are likely permeating into U.S. Army culture as well.

The Cancel Culture Phenomenon

Cancel culture has emerged, as a result of increased social media pressures to be accepted and liked. According to a *New York Times* analysis, cancel culture existed in some form or fashion for years but really came into regular use around 2018. Subject matter experts refer to cancel or call-out culture as a “Cultural Boycott...an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, [or] give money to [a person, location, or event]...[as a matter of] attention economy. When you deprive someone of your attention, you’re depriving them of a livelihood.” The term “cancel culture” originated from the demand to cancel certain celebrity Twitter accounts, in order to silence offensive speech or opinions. According to the *New York Times*, nearly every celebrity has been cancelled at some time or another.

Angry social media users cancelled Shania Twain for supporting President Donald Trump and rapper Cardi B after she defended her husband's discomfort with homosexuals. In order for someone to be cancelled, one only needs to say they are cancelled; though consequences can differ. According to the article, major politicians and businessmen are less impacted by being cancelled because their livelihood does not depend on social media acceptance. A celebrity or social media influencer who depends on attention economy is more susceptible to the implications of becoming a social media outcast.²⁷

Internet research revealed an equal number of articles in favor of cancel culture as against it. Supporters of cancel culture believe it is the only societal mechanism to punish bad internet behavior: "The problem with the internet is you can't get kicked off. You can do whatever you want today, come back, and do it again tomorrow . . . [our power as a society to make] you act right is [to] ostracize you. We can send you to jail . . . even in this room, we can kick you out. But not with the internet."²⁸ According to a columnist at *The Boston Globe*, cancel culture is a mechanism to face consequences for one's behavior. To those in favor of cancel culture, socially ostracizing someone for offensive, racist behavior or bigotry is absolutely necessary. In their opinion, cancel culture has not gone far enough, because most cancelled celebrities barely feel the punishment.

²⁷ Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Everyone Is Cancelled," *The New York Times*, 28 June 2018, accessed 4 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/style/is-it-canceled.html?searchResultPosition=6>.

²⁸ Dwayne Perkins, "Don't Name Your Kids Something Stupid. Dwayne Perkins – Full Special," *Dry Bar Comedy*, 6 December 2019, accessed 10 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOwvnBzJK5k&t=1437s>.

According to the columnist's own observations, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer was cancelled, but he still wrote a book, received an invitation to appear on the Emmys, and performed as a guest on ABC's *Dancing With The Stars*.²⁹ Though this columnist applauds social media as a vessel to publicly shame a celebrity or politician, she believes cancel culture should lose its negative stigma and be celebrated for curtailing racist or bigoted behavior.

Another writer for *Time* magazine defended cancel culture practices, calling it accountability. As a black, Muslim woman, the writer viewed social media as a medium in which "marginalized people . . . can express [themselves] in a way that was not possible before. That means racist, sexist, and bigoted behavior or remarks don't fly like they used to. This applies to not only wealthy people or industry leaders but anyone whose privilege has historically shielded them from public scrutiny." However, this writer believes cancel culture is a generalized term, used too broadly. When one attacks cancel culture for bullying, they may discredit other legitimate cases of offensive behavior. She compares singer Taylor Swift being cancelled over a social media disagreement with another musician, and Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein being cancelled for dozens of sex crimes. "It should go without saying that Swift's perceived offense should not be lumped in with [Harvey] Weinstein's alleged crimes." Swift's personal defense against cancel culture attacked it as a form of bullying. Swift said, "When you say someone is cancelled, it's not a TV show. It's a human being . . . You're

²⁹ Renee Graham, "It's not 'cancel culture.' It's facing consequences," *The Boston Globe*, 17 September 2019, accessed 21 October 2019, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2019/09/17/not-cancel-culture-facing-consequences/AQdgitET1Spa8nZMzGwKoO/story.html>.

sending mass amounts of messaging to this person to either shut up, disappear, or it could be perceived as, kill yourself.” However, through these accusations of bullying, Taylor Swift remained one of the highest paid celebrities in the world. For people with a distaste for cyber bullying, when they hear the term ‘cancel culture,’ they tend to take the defensive side of the argument. Because the term has often been used for cases such as Swift’s, people see it as unfair cyber harassment. According to the journalist, the wariness against cancel culture turns many people off to legitimate complaints:

I write frequently about racism and Islamophobia and have received more death threats . . . and insults than I can keep track of. But when people who believe cancel culture is a problem speak out about its supposed silencing effect, I know they’re not talking about those attacks. When they throw around terms like ‘cancel culture’ to silence me instead of reckoning with the reasons I might find certain actions or jokes dehumanizing, I’m led to one conclusion: they’d prefer I was powerless against my own oppression.³⁰

Indeed, most defenders of cancel culture refuse to refer to the phenomenon as “cancel culture” because of its negative connotation. In several editorials and articles, every writer and pundit who defended cancel culture presented the controversial argument: cancel culture does not exist. To them, this trend is nothing more than the eventual reckoning of years of silencing the offended, with social media giving a voice to those who had none before.

Those opposed to cancel or call-out culture believe it is a direct violation of freedom of speech. Cancel culture critics agree certain comments and actions are offensive or unacceptable, but they view this form of social media outrage as an

³⁰ Sarah Hagi, “Cancel Culture Is Not Real—At Least Not in the Way People Think,” *Time*, 21 November 2019, accessed 12 March 2020, <https://time.com/5735403/cancel-culture-is-not-real/>.

emotionally charged overreaction, which stymies a constructive dialogue and communication between opposing viewpoints. Adam Carolla, comedian, author, and producer, is currently one of the most outspoken commentators against cancel culture. He currently appears on several news broadcasts and podcasts to critique cancel culture protests, boycotts, and riots from groups who are offended by someone else's behavior. He sees these actions as an emerging reflection of oversensitivity in American society. His new documentary *No Safe Spaces* interviews several prominent public speakers, academic professors, comedians, and actors to explore their views on this new move to silence offensive speech or expression. In an interview, Carolla expressed his apathy for cancel culture and a refusal to give into to their censorship. According to Carolla, offended or outraged spectators are only as powerful as one allows. "[Outraged people] go where the gettin's good. They are basically feral cats looking for a saucer of milk. If you don't put it out on the porch, they'll keep going. People don't bother me when I say horrible things, by their definition, not by my definition, [because] I don't buy off on your definition of what I did and I'm not apologizing to anybody about it."³¹ In Carolla's documentary, Republicans, Democrats, and Libertarians alike, speak out against social media pressures to silence different ideas or opinions.

In October 2019, former-President Barack Obama spoke out against the "call-out" movement at an Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago. Not only did President Obama criticize the lack of empathy or humane acceptance for those attacked on social media, he

³¹ Adam Carolla, "How You Can Know Who's A Secret Celebrity Republican (Pt. 1)," *The Rubin Report*, 10 December 2019, accessed 27 December 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpnmOBonNF0&t=329s>.

also attacked the laziness of hashtag movements to bring about any real change. In his discussion, he said, “If I tweet or hashtag about how you didn’t do something right or used the wrong verb, I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself. ‘Man you see how woke I was, I called you out.’ But that’s not activism. That’s not bringing about change.” President Obama went on to compare and contrast the cancel culture movement with Civil Rights protests in the 1960s and explained how past successes involved some form of compromise and acceptance of the other side’s and points of view. Obama used past examples to demonstrate how an activist movement’s purpose was to get one at the table or in the room to begin to negotiate in the name of a cause.³² In contrast, many social movements today, fueled by cancel culture and social media outrage, adhere to a purist point of view and demand unconditional loyalty to their message or cause.

This research leads one to come to the conclusion in order to be a cancel culture event, a decision must be debatable, controversial, and have one side who seeks to completely silence discussion or the other side of the argument. Cancel culture moves hand in hand with social media, because offensive behavior, or inoffensive behavior taken out of context, spreads virally over social media platforms and exponentially mobilizes hundreds or thousands of angry activists. A joke taken out of context may be recorded and spread to millions of people within seconds. In some instances, local decisions made from an otherwise unknown small town can generate enough of a social media reaction to receive national mainstream media attention.

³² Malaika Jabali, “Barack Obama thinks ‘woke’ kids want purity. They don’t: they want progress,” *The Guardian*, 1 November 2019, accessed 1 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/01/does-obamas-critique-of-radical-politics-help-bring-about-the-change-he-wanted>.

In terms of symbolic interactionism, cancel culture is social media-fueled anger, based on one's personal meaning making of symbols, in this case controversial statements, posts, or monuments. Cancel culture involves Americans emotionally taking one side of an argument over social media, Americans who otherwise have generally similar values or cultural norms. According to media commentators, the symbolic meaning behind offensive social media posts often falls along political lines: "The right has adopted the sympathetic read . . . The conservatives view [racist social media comments] as a personal failing . . . the real threat isn't the racist comments themselves . . . but the impulse to punish people for them. If you penalize people for every past politically incorrect comment, the logic goes, then people will have no room to grow. You might even punish the innocent." On the left, "liberals and leftists, meanwhile, see racism as a structural problem, reflected in both social institutions and deeply ingrained, arguably unshakable biases that can lead even people who firmly believe in ideals of equal treatment to act or speak in prejudiced ways. Addressing the consequences of racism requires work, effort, and vigilance."³³ According to the left, there is no way to accidentally express bigotry; a racist joke to shock friends is still racism. Simply apologizing does not negate the underlying biases that began said controversy.

Cancel culture is more of an emotional topic in the United States because American culture values the right to freedom of speech and expression. The United States has some of the most permissive internet laws, allowing social media to spread

³³ Zack Beauchamp, "The Kyle Kashuv-Harvard controversy, explained," *Vox*, 17 June 2019, accessed 10 March 2020, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/6/17/18682101/kyle-kashuv-harvard-parkland>.

controversial arguments and discussions exponentially. The discussion about cancel culture itself demonstrates the difficult balance of American values between freedom of expression and tolerance for all races, genders, and cultural background. A Confederate Flag flying over a southern government building symbolically represents racism and a lack of respect for the American Civil War to some. Meanwhile, supporters may not see themselves as racist and solely interpret the flag as a preservation of history or representation of southern culture. Both sides of the argument may be reasonable Americans who do not view themselves as racists or bigots, but current news coverage will label the event a cancel culture movement when the disagreement becomes a heated debate over social media, sometimes leading to protests and counter protests in the streets. In other words, the researcher has concluded a cancel culture event separates itself from other forms of activism or social media movements by its ambiguous nature which does not have an overwhelming consensus on one side or the other. The ambiguity and nuance of each cancel culture event results in fierce debate and high emotions on both sides of the argument.

Cancel Culture in Current Events

In addition to the case studies discussed in Chapter 3, there are many other cases of cancel culture highlighted by news media, commentators, and bloggers daily.

The largest movement to project cancel culture into the mainstream media was the #MeToo movement in 2017. Me Too originally started in 2006 over MySpace, a now obsolete precursor to Facebook. Tarana Burke founded the Me Too MySpace movement to bring attention to women and children of color, who were sexually abused and felt alone in their suffering. The movement encouraged other women to share their stories

over MySpace to let other victims know they were not alone.³⁴ In 2017, the movement resurged over Twitter and Facebook, now in #MeToo format, after allegations against Harvey Weinstein created a tidal wave of sexual misconduct allegations across Hollywood, Washington DC, and other prominent offices.

On October 5, 2017, the New York Times published a story detailing three decades of allegations against successful Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. By the end of the month, nine accusations of rape and dozens of women came forward against Weinstein. Two and half years later, after being fired and arrested for his crimes, Harvey Weinstein would be found guilty of “criminal sexual acts in the first degree and third degree rape” and be sentenced to 25 years in prison.³⁵ In the year that followed the initial accusations against Harvey Weinstein, the media exploded with accusations against other famous actors, Hollywood icons, and politicians. Police reports of sexual assault nearly doubled from the year prior to the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network reported an increase in calls by 66.6%, over 5,000 people requested help from the Time’s Up Legal Defense Fund, and approximately 200 state bills were introduced to address workplace harassment. Just short of a year after the #MeToo movement began, McDonald’s fast food chain workers went on strike across 10 U.S. cities to protest sexual harassment in the workplace. Actress Alyssa Milano received credit for helping the #MeToo movement go viral. Her initial tweet encouraged others to

³⁴ Tarana Burke, “The Inception,” Me Too Official Website, 2018, accessed 23 March 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/the-inception/>.

³⁵ BBC News, “Harvey Weinstein Timeline: How the Scandal Unfolded,” 24 February 2020, accessed 24 March 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41594672>.

share their story or simply reply “Me Too” over social media. This tweet received 50,900 likes with 85,900 people talking about it.³⁶ Within the first 24 hours, social media users shared the #MeToo hashtag 12 million times. The large following took everyone by surprise, as “survivors took to social media to share their experiences and engage in ‘call-out culture’ . . . [in] perhaps one of the most high-profile examples of digital activism we have yet encountered.”³⁷

For those who study feminism and social activism, #MeToo was different from other international rallies against violence against women because social media allowed the movement to spread via both grassroots and famous celebrities. “The media—and especially social media—have made a huge difference for #MeToo, allowing it to be much easier to spread the word.” #MeToo involved “well-known TV personalities, journalists, and members of political elites. The fact that they [were] famous and that many [were] speaking at the same time [made] the difference in allowing their accusations to be heard and believed.” Support for the movement as a whole and the large number of participants gave more validity than ever to previously dismissed sexual harassment and sexual assault cases. Past sexual assault accusations in the 1980s and 1990s usually involved a single case with a low-income female against a powerful

³⁶ Alia E. Dastagir, “It’s been two years since the #MeToo movement exploded. Now What?,” *USA Today*, 30 September 2019, accessed 23 March 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/09/30/me-too-movement-women-sexual-assault-harvey-weinstein-brett-kavanaugh/1966463001/>.

³⁷ Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, “#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 25, no. 2 (29 April 2018): 236-246, accessed 25 March 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506818765318>.

celebrity. The media would attack the accuser and it was easier for traditionally powerful institutions to silence and shame the victim.³⁸ #MeToo fundamentally changed this culture and fueled a mass cancel culture movement against sexual harassment practices in the work place.

However, for all the praise for #MeToo and celebrating long-awaited justice via social media, the same people who praised the movement also recognized that the court of social media does not deliver lasting or viable solutions, and in some cases, this mob mentality decides wrong. Women's studies feminists recognized a #MeToo case in which a male journalist accused a male TV producer of rape in the Netherlands. The accused appeared on TV with his lawyer and denied the rape accusations. But even years later, the false accusations caused "irreparable damage" to the producer's reputation and career. "The #MeToo phenomenon has provided public recognition and support for individuals who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence. However, it has also generated a 'trial by media' where individual men are publicly 'blamed and shamed' for actions for when they often suffer severe consequences, and before having a chance to defend themselves."³⁹ Additionally, the blaming and shaming does not create systematic changes to a culture which accepts sexual predatory acts, especially when cancel culture effects people differently. As previously addressed in the cancel culture phenomenon overview, canceling someone only carries as much impact as the targeted individual

³⁸ Dubravka Zarkov and Kathy Davis, "Ambiguities and dilemmas around #MeToo: #ForHow Long and #Where To?," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 1 (15 January 2018): 3-9, accessed 24 March 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506817749436>.

³⁹ Ibid.

invests into their social media acceptance. “We should not assume that what is happening among the political and cultural elites will automatically ‘trickle down’ to the streets. In other words, we should not expect that office workers, teachers, shop owners, or policemen will be equally easily publicly ‘blamed and shamed’ or dismissed from their jobs because they have harassed and assaulted dozens of women (and men).”⁴⁰ Aside from #MeToo, the next selection of cancel culture examples demonstrate other groups of people who also allowed social media and viral posts to affect their decisions.

In November 2019, The New York Times and CBS News analyzed the emergence of cancel culture in schools. Previously predominant in Hollywood, the New York Times investigative reporters discovered a growing prevalence of cancel culture among classmates in high schools and colleges. According to their study, cancelling someone could be used flippantly as a joke or more seriously to socially ostracize someone. The reported difference between age-old bullying and cancelling someone, was attacking someone due to a perceived “moral wrong” or “offense” due to their unpopular opinion or statements in these academic settings. According to the study, all cancel culture cases generated from social media. Some shrugged off the social media attack. Other cases made the victim feel like a monster or horrible person. According to the *Time* reporter’s analysis, high school and college cancelling of unpopular opinions was creating an “echo chamber” of consensus and stifled new ideas or opinions.⁴¹ On the other hand, the reporter concluded cancel culture was little more than a new name for

⁴⁰ Zarkov and Davis, “Ambiguities and dilemmas around #MeToo.”

⁴¹ CBS News, “Cancel Culture in American Schools,” 7 November 2019, accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42nnQbcoLvc>.

social behavior that has always existed. The only difference now, was the propagation on social media.⁴²

Another high profile cancel culture event occurred against high school student Kyle Kashuv. After surviving the 2018 Parkland shooting, Kashuv became a local activist to address school shootings while preserving Second Amendment gun rights. His local community activity, high grades, and exceptional SAT scores earned him an admission to Harvard.⁴³ Shortly after, “Trolls from the far right and the far left worked together to publicize racist comments that . . . Kyle Kashuv had made in a group chat . . . long before the Parkland shooting.” Kashuv apologized for the remarks and said he had grown since the shooting, but Harvard University revoked his admission.⁴⁴ Kashuv documented every step of his efforts to convince Harvard to rescind their decision over Twitter, and the argument with Harvard quickly went viral. Within the first day, Kashuv was trending nationally. Media commentators quickly turned the event into another unjust, cancel culture crucifixion: this event “set the conservative media aflame with allegations of liberal bias in academia and the dangerous power of social media mobs.” The case hit on “some of the hottest hot-button issues—racism, political correctness, [and] campus free speech.”⁴⁵ Kashuv explained his behavior as that of a foolish, naive teenager. His

⁴² Sanam Yar and Jonah Engel Bromwich, “Tales from the Teenage Cancel Culture,” *The New York Times*, 31 October 2019, accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/style/cancel-culture.html>.

⁴³ Beauchamp, “The Kyle Kashuv-Harvard Controversy, Explained.”

⁴⁴ Robby Soave, “The Year in Cancel Culture,” *Reason*, 31 December 2019, accessed 11 March 2020, <https://reason.com/2019/12/31/cancel-culture-2019-year/>.

⁴⁵ Beauchamp, “The Kyle Kashuv-Harvard Controversy, Explained.”

comments were not publicly available over social media; they came from a leaked private chat with several close friends. According to Kashuv, the racist jokes were a teenage effort to shock his friends as much as possible. Harvard never changed their decision and Kashuv's acceptance remains rescinded.

In another cancel culture example in 2019, a local community cancelled a 1930s mural at George Washington High School in San Francisco. In the 1930s, when people did not discuss the cruel treatment of Native Americans and African Americans, artist Victor Arnautoff painted a high school mural depicting images of violence and slavery against these two groups. The artist wanted to expose America's "whitewashing" of history and failure to acknowledge their crimes. However, 90 years later, members of the general public "cancelled" the mural and demanded its removal. The price tag for the school's decision would be 600,000 dollars with painting and environmental costs.⁴⁶ The school board voted unanimously to cover the murals, but the issue raised national attention when historians, politicians, artists, and the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) weighed in on the mural debate.⁴⁷ Those for covering the mural argued it displayed the worst parts of African American and Native American history, with the depictions of enslavement and abuse. They also believed it was offensive to the Native American and African American students who must walk past the mural daily. Those opposed to destroying the mural

⁴⁶ Soave, "The Year in Cancel Culture."

⁴⁷ Carol Pogash, "San Francisco School Board May Save Controversial George Washington Mural," *The New York Times*, 10 August 2019, accessed 12 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/arts/san-francisco-murals.html>.

wanted to preserve the famous artwork of a renowned 1930s communist artist. They also supported the mural's message against "whitewashing" American history. After the heated debate and national attention, the school board decided to cover the mural with panels or a curtain.⁴⁸ The researcher found no resolution to the issue and debates continue.

A more recent example demonstrates how cancel culture includes both boycotting celebrities, and attacking hand-selected, previously unknown civilians. On March 22, 2020, the U.S. was in the middle of mass self-isolation during the COVID-19 or Corona Virus outbreak. Countless businesses shut down overnight and millions of people were suddenly out of work. Initial scientific information indicated anywhere between eight to less than one percent mortality rate for the virus. Most studies indicated the virus predominantly affected older people and those with preexisting conditions. With record-high unemployment, some people expressed concern over causing a disproportionate amount of damage to the global economy, to save a small percentage of those vulnerable to the virus. U.S. President Donald Trump pontificated his long-term goals to eventually restart the economy and tweeted, "We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself." In La Mesa, California, Scott McMillan, a relatively unknown lawyer, retweeted the President's tweet and included his own additional opinion, "The fundamental problem is whether we are going to tank the entire economy to save 2.5% of the population which is (1) generally expensive to maintain, and (2) not productive." Within minutes, his tweet

⁴⁸ National Coalition Against Censorship, "San Francisco Mural Controversy: Perspectives and Updates," 4 October 2019, accessed 12 March 2020, <https://ncac.org/news/san-francisco-mural-controversy-perspectives>.

was negatively trending across social media. People called him both a “liberal” and a “right-wing nut,” to include a “Nazi.” Angry reactions included threats against the lawyer’s livelihood, family, and home. In the first 48 hours, McMillan received nine death threats. McMillan defended his statements, claiming he is not a bad person. He told the Washington Post “I don’t want to take out old people, but I don’t want the kids coming up today to be akin to the Depression kids. The longer this drags on without people working, the worse it’s going to be. We can’t allow our society to collapse over this.” He was genuinely surprised by hateful rhetoric against him and his family, from both the right and the left. “I thought I’d have some interesting conversations with people, and maybe have to explain that I’m not an evil psychopath who wants to cull the old people, but nothing like this.”⁴⁹ This lawyer only had 400 Twitter followers when he originally tweeted his controversial statement, but when a “never Trump” commentator shared a screen shot of the tweet, criticism of McMillan’s tweet received over 8,000 retweets and 22,000 likes. When a senior editor from The Washington Post dragged this private citizen into further scrutiny, the newspaper received extreme backlash. The Washington Post, in their story on McMillan, called his parents, and asked them if they were willing to die and whether or not they agreed with McMillan’s opinions. “The Washington Post article was slammed on social media with critics who hammered [the Post,] going after a non-public figure’s tweet and getting his parents involved.” A senior

⁴⁹ Marc Fisher, “He urged saving the economy over protecting those who are ‘not productive’ from the coronavirus. Then he faced America’s wrath,” *The Washington Post*, 25 March 2020, accessed 28 March 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/coronavirus-tweet-economy-elderly/2020/03/25/25a3581e-6e11-11ea-b148-e4ce3fbd85b5_story.html.

writer with RealClearInvestigations reacted, “Random person tweets something offensive, and the Washington Post calls the guy’s parents and decides to make it a national news story? This is appalling.” Another conservative commentator tweeted, “You found a tweet from a guy with under 400 followers you didn’t like and called his mom and dad.” For his part, McMillan defended the Washington Post reporter, saying he was very professional and respectful to both McMillan and his parents. He still believed the opinions he expressed in the tweet, but if he could go back, he would have never tweeted the opinion. “I had no idea that tweet was going to strike a nerve in the American psyche. Had I known that I wouldn’t have said it. It was a glib statement that—had I been a little more thoughtful of the situation people were going through, I wouldn’t have said it.” McMillan, a lifelong Democrat, did not see himself as a champion of either side of the political aisle. In the past, he had been critical of President Trump.⁵⁰

The Washington Post dragging McMillan into a political debate is a potentially dangerous precedence to military public relations. The new generation of Soldiers entering the U.S. Army come from a generation that feels it is their right to freely express opinions over social media. No Soldier is a celebrity, but McMillan demonstrates how a person with a low social media profile can still make national news. If a U.S. Soldier posts an opinion contrary to military policy, news and social media trolls could turn the “Army” opinion into a social media scandal. Likewise, a company commander, battalion commander, or platoon sergeant decision, once viral and under attack by thousands of

⁵⁰ Joseph A. Wulfsohn, “Washington Post blasted for interviewing elderly parents about son’s viral coronavirus tweet,” *Fox News*, 26 March 2020, accessed 28 March 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/washington-post-blasted-for-tracking-down-twitter-users-parents-over-coronavirus-tweet>.

social media onlookers, could disrupt the trust and confidence in internal U.S. Army leader decisions.

As shown, social media gives a voice to previously unheard opinions. Before social media, if the average citizen wanted to react to a celebrity, politician, or CEO's behavior, the only options were local newspaper letters to the editor, calling a radio talk show host, or orchestrating a public protest. Now, social media not only allows the average citizen the ability to broadcast their discontent, it is also much easier to find more likeminded people. A large population of discontent on social media deceptively gives the perception of increased validity to a complaint, and if an angry movement receives enough traction, it can attract national attention. If a leader changes their decision, the perception is one of cowing down to the angry social media mob, not deliberate decision-making processes. As the cancel culture name suggests, many worry this mob-like pressure against unpopular decisions is fundamentally changing American culture.

Other Terms for Social Media Pressure

While the scope of this study is limited to cancel or call out culture, the following are other common forms of social media pressures.

Cyber Bullying

Cyber bullying, also known as cyber harassment, is when an "individual or groups of individuals use digital media to cause another individual to suffer emotional distress." In 2013, an estimated half million adults experienced some form of cyber harassment. In extreme cases, people were driven to take their own lives. In one tragic example, a university student killed himself after he discovered his roommate spied on him and

gossiped about him on Twitter.⁵¹ Though Americans, by and large, are horrified by publicized cyberbullying cases, studies indicate a majority still disagree with censorship tools, which would curtail their own freedom of expression. Studies show “users of social media often view the use of [cyber harassment detection tools] as an unwarranted intervention that limits a rich expression of their online identities.”⁵² Therefore, social media platforms are searching for ways to restrict hateful comments without violating their users’ freedom of speech and expression. In analyzing the best approach to the cyber bullying problem, studies found people valued their identity on social media more than cyber bullying censorship decisions. However, people were willing to comply with certain measures if they could empathize with someone else’s personal story of cyberbullying. Social media, for all its distancing of human interaction, at the same time increases some abilities to empathize with a complete stranger. Social media increases the ability to view a stranger’s life in story format, played out in posts and pictures across a timeline. When another user enters that story, they lose an awareness of their own personal identity.⁵³ The study that published these findings hopes to use this empathy to generate more buy-in for cyberbullying censorship tools across social media platforms.

In the context of cancel culture, these empathy studies may explain why some users take offensive posts so personally and want to completely cancel someone who

⁵¹ Tom Van Laer, “The Means to Justify the End: Combating Cyber Harassment in Social Media,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 123, no. 1 (2014): 85-98, accessed 12 March 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/42921476.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

offends them on social media. Meanwhile, the increased empathy combined with fierce defense of freedom of expression may explain the passionate defense for someone who is cancelled or attacked for expressing themselves on social media, no matter how offensive.

Online Firestorms

Firestorming appears to be very similar to cancel culture. Online firestorms consist of “large amounts of critique, insulting comments, and swear words against a person, organization, or group” which are “propagated via thousands or millions of people within hours.”⁵⁴ An online firestorm is an “aggressive word-of-mouth propagation in social media [in] response to (perceived)” social norms violations by public actors. This may include “politicians who disregard political correctness norms, corporations that violate human rights, or academics who violate scientific norms by engaging in plagiarism.” People are more likely to participate in this aggressive, group behavior online, rather than physical shouting, face-to-face insults, or street protests because online criticism is monetarily inexpensive, quick, and can be performed at anytime and anywhere. Social media is a breeding ground for the seeds of anger because social media is a forum to discuss controversial ideas. In the context of news media, social media allows one to post, comment, and share articles, quickly spreading an unpopular,

⁵⁴ Katia Rost, Lea Stahel, and Bruno S. Frey, “Digital Social Norm Enforcement: Online Firestorms in Social Media,” *PLoS ONE Journal* 11, no. 6 (17 June 2016): 1-26, accessed 12 March 2020, DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0155923.

breaking news event. As news spreads quickly, social media displays a large number of likeminded opinions, giving the perception of validity to anger over a new event.⁵⁵

Firestorming consists of a large number of intrinsically motivated actors. These actors believe it is their obligation to “make the world a better place,” referred to as “altruistic punishment.” These altruistic punishers require reinforcement from a large number of followers, to fuel the justification of their offense. Though past studies identified a correlation between anonymity and increased online aggression, this cited study observed no cause and effect relationship. While anonymity does create favorable conditions for online aggression, non-anonymous firestormers have more credibility. Anonymous posters are still likely to be perpetrators of online aggression because they “do not expect a reunion and hence to not fear any risks and constraints.” However, specific to firestorming and attacking someone from an altruistic perspective, non-anonymity “increases the trustworthiness of the masses [with otherwise] weak social ties . . . in our digital social networks. Trustworthiness of former firestorm commentators encourages us to contribute ourselves.”⁵⁶ In other words, many online firestormers, who viciously attack someone in the name of their specific brand of social norms, are often named and self-declared, to build a perception of validity against the offense, establish trust amongst other social media users, and increase the number of angry users who will join in the firestorm.

⁵⁵ Rost, Stahel, and Frey, “Digital Social Norm Enforcement,” 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.

There appears to be little difference between cancel culture and firestorming. Both are social media attacks on someone for violating the attacker's definition of social and moral norms. As the case studies in Chapter 3 will show, most instigators of a cancel culture event are self-declared. Social media users demanding someone's cancellation are not anonymous voices across Twitter and Facebook. Some are famous for their social media vigilante behavior, and use their online reputation to increase the validity of their complaint against someone.

Social Media and Army Doctrine

In July 2019, the U.S. Army officially recognized information as one of the six elements of combat power. Combat power is the “total means of destructive, constructive, and information capabilities that a military unit or formation can apply at a given time.” The Army's six elements of combat power consist of Movement and Maneuver, Intelligence, Protection, Sustainment, Fires, Leadership, and Information. Within information, U.S. Army leaders strive to consistently evaluate their ability to project and dominate information in space and time. “Information enables commanders at all levels to make informed decisions about the application of combat power to achieve definitive results.” The management and understanding of this information “helps determine what among the vast amounts of information available is important.”⁵⁷ According to U.S. Army doctrine specific to Information Operations, the information environment consists “of the physical, informational, and cognitive dimensions.” The

⁵⁷ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Army Publishing Directorate, 31 July 2019), 5-2.

informational dimension is content flow, which may contain images or texts which can be stored and analyzed. The cognitive dimension consists of “the minds of those who are affected by and act upon information. These minds range from friendly commanders and leaders, to foreign audiences affecting or being affected by operations, to enemy, threat or adversarial decision makers . . . In this dimension, decision makers and target audiences are most prone to influence and perception management.”⁵⁸ In other words, U.S. Army doctrine recognizes the risk of information overflow or misinformation and its effect on leaders and their decision making within the cognitive dimension of the information environment.

U.S. Army operations, mission command, and leadership doctrine not only broadly address social media in terms of information operations, they also allude to social media effects in terms of messaging. “A message is a narrowly focused communication directed at a specific audience in support of a specific theme.” It is important for U.S. Army commanders to present a coordinated message in what they portray to the public. Messages must be tied to a military end state or objective, synch with the actions of all echelons and war fighting functions, and positively influence audiences in support of military operations.⁵⁹ Within the U.S. Army publication for operations, social media is addressed under public affairs operations as “social networks.” According to this regulation, the U.S. Military is obligated to communicate with the public through a

⁵⁸ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, December 2016), 1-2.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

“proactive release of accurate information to domestic and international audiences”; to “put joint operations in context, [facilitate] informed perceptions about military operations, [counter] adversarial propaganda, and [help] achieve national, strategic, and operational objectives.” Both commanders and their public affairs personnel are expected to not only portray accurate and vetted information, but also analyze the information they receive. “The abundance of information sources, coupled with technology such as smart phones, digital cameras, video chat, and social media enterprises, allows information to move instantaneously around the globe.” Public affairs officers must “frequently review and analyze [reports] at the international, national, and local levels.”⁶⁰

The U.S. Army Public Affairs Operations field manual elaborates more on the importance of understanding social media as a part of information operations: “a seemingly unimportant post or update can go viral and have significant impacts on military operations.” To remain ahead of any social media effects, commanders must work with their public affairs personnel to ensure the Army presents the best version of itself:

Public affairs professionals must understand the effectiveness of social media operations in communicating quickly and effectively with their local publics . . . Command information is an excellent venue to incorporate and reinforce the five essential characteristics of the Army profession (trust, military expertise, honorable service, esprit de corps, and stewardship).

Public opinion is a required input within a public affairs assessment and staff estimate:

“A commander must know how regional and local publics, the American people, and U.S. civilian leaders perceive a situation, military operations, and the use of military

⁶⁰ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, October 2017), 2-30.

power. The public's perception may impact the overall public affairs plan based on the information needs of the identified publics.”⁶¹

While U.S. Army doctrine addresses social media within the information domain, the focus is on dominating an enemy during expeditionary operations, more than decision making in garrison peacetime operations. “Commanders achieve advantage when they preserve their freedom of action in the information environment while degrading enemy or adversary freedom of action.” Within this context, and linking information operations directly to friendly and enemy commanders, the U.S. Army regulation on information operations ties social media to Army decision making. “Affecting enemy and adversary decision making necessitates affecting all contributing factors that enable it. These factors include, but are not limited to . . . Information content (words, images, symbols) [and] Human networks . . . that influence the decision maker and to whom the decision maker seeks to influence.”⁶² Social media awareness and defense against negative perceptions is an active operation, which directly supports commander decision-making: “Will, awareness, understanding, and capability all contribute to and sustain decision making and, if compromised, can impair that decision making . . . Advantage [over the enemy] is achieved when commanders preserve their will to fight, as well as their situational understanding.”⁶³

⁶¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 3-61, *Public Affairs Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, April 2014), 2-5.

⁶² HQDA, FM 3-13, 1-4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1-5.

Outside of U.S. Army publications and field manuals, the U.S. Army's official application and regulation of social media is found in the U.S. Army Social Media Handbook, which is now a website maintained on the U.S. Army official homepage. This handbook introduces social media as a tool to portray the Army Values to the greater public and Army families.⁶⁴ According to the handbook, each unit must have a social media manager and commanders must have release authority before releasing content over social media, even if the unit is authorized an official social media platform page. Most guidelines, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and tips in this handbook pertain to protecting Soldiers' privacy and tips on photo editing and graphics. It does not address how a commander must handle social media pressures against their decisions. However, the handbook does address cyber harassment and other unacceptable social media behavior. The handbook contains links to social media conduct regulations, covered under ALARACT Message 058/2018, which prohibits "the use of electronic communication to inflict harm. Examples include but are not limited to: harassment, bullying, hazing, stalking, discrimination, retaliation, or any other types of misconduct that undermine dignity and respect." Commanders and leaders are expected to enforce this regulation with disciplinary action in order create an online climate which reinforces the Army Values.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ U.S. Army, "Army Social Media Policies and Resources," accessed 10 March 2020, <https://www.army.mil/socialmedia/>.

⁶⁵ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), ALARACT Message 058/2018: Professionalization of Online Conduct, 25 July 2018, accessed 10 March 2020, https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/socialmediaALARACT_058_2018_PROFESSIONALIZATION_OF_ONLIN_CONDUCT.pdf.

Decision Making and Army Doctrine

Leader Intuitive Qualities and Meaning Making

According to U.S. Army Doctrine Pamphlet (ADP) 6-0 for Mission Command, Army decision-making authority rests with the commander, and his or her staff works to provide timely, accurate information to enable the commander's informed decision-making. ADP 6-0 emphasizes the importance of certain commander attributes to make the right decision at the right time. These attributes include the ability to make a quick decision with incomplete information, understanding the impact or cause and effect of their decisions, making a decision and acting faster than one's opponent, and delegating decision-making authority to subordinate commanders for faster execution.⁶⁶ ADP 6-0 identifies two different types of commander decision-making: deliberate and quick. Deliberate involves detailed staff work and the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), while quick decisions belong solely to the commander. "Decision making requires knowing if, when, and what to decide as well as understanding the consequences of that decision."⁶⁷ Whether deliberate or quick, a commander must have the greatest understanding possible to make the best decision. Just as symbolic interactionism studies the meaning making of certain symbols throughout life experiences, ADP 6-0 defines meaning making as a commander-centric process. Figure 1 illustrates the process from raw data, to meaning-making, and ultimately to situational understanding.

⁶⁶ Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-0, *Mission Command, Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, July 2019), 2-23.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

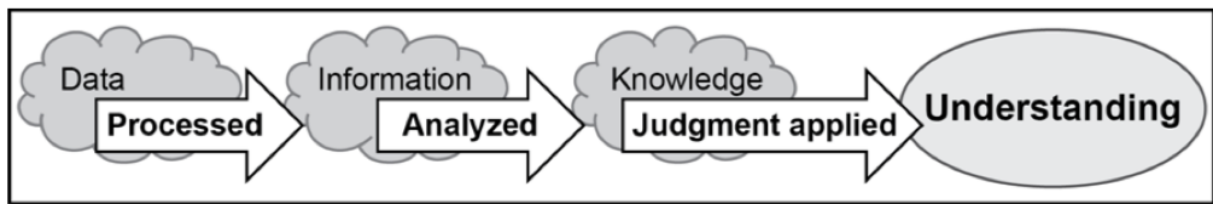


Figure 1. Achieving Understanding

Source: Headquarters, Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, *Mission Command, Command and Control of Army Forces* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, 31 July 2019), 2-4.

The layers of meaning making begin with data, which is unprocessed observation collected by humans or equipment. Data becomes organized, analyzed, and categorized to become information. Information applied with study, experience, and human interaction, becomes knowledge. When a commander combines both tacit and explicit knowledge with judgement to the level of being ready for a decision, the knowledge becomes understanding.⁶⁸ Throughout the process of gathering knowledge and applying experience, critical thinking must permeate every step. “Critical thinkers apply judgment about what to believe or what to do in response to facts, experience, or arguments.”⁶⁹ According to U.S. Army doctrine, commanders must be the final authority for Army decisions. In time-constrained environments, commanders must rely more on their intuition to make a quick judgment and decision, even without enough time to gather all the facts and data. “Ideally, perfect understanding should be the basis for decisions.

⁶⁸ HQDA, ADP 6-0, 2-4.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

However, commanders realize that uncertainty and time preclude achieving perfect understanding before deciding and acting.”⁷⁰ Once an operation is in motion, a commander continues to assess the effectiveness of his or her decision: “Using personal observations and inputs from others (including running estimates from their staffs), commanders improve their understanding of their operational environment throughout the operations process.”⁷¹ For this reason, the Army profession puts great stock in creating leaders who are experienced, educated, and possess good judgement.

Military Decision Making Process

Though commanders possess extensive experience, the U.S. Army’s preferred method of decision making is through the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP). MDMP leverages a commander’s entire staff and their expertise to help the commander make the best decision possible through extensive analysis. MDMP is a deliberate, time-intensive, and resource-intensive process. More than a process, MDMP is a journey from the receipt of mission, to the most comprehensive situational understanding possible, to a planned course of action and list of key commander’s decisions during the operation. The steps of MDMP consist of the following: Receipt of Mission, Mission Analysis, Course of Action Development, Course of Action Analysis or Wargaming, Course of Action Comparison, Course of Action Approval, and Orders Production, Dissemination, and

⁷⁰ HQDA, ADP 6-0, 2-74.

⁷¹ Ibid., 2-14.

Transition.⁷² To effectively complete MDMP, a staff must address every element of combat power, to include information.

During MDMP, Public Affairs officials analyze the information element of combat power with a public affairs assessment. This assessment “addresses all aspects of the information environment, whether or not they are under the commander’s control.”⁷³

U.S. Army doctrine recognizes social media as a critical factor within the information environment:

Social media, in particular, enables the swift mobilization of people and resources around ideas and causes, even before they are fully understood. Disinformation and propaganda create malign narratives that can propagate quickly and instill an array of emotions and behaviors from anarchy to focused violence. From a military standpoint, information enables decision making, leadership, and combat power.⁷⁴

Army doctrine recommends commanders be aware of social media perceptions from the very first step of MDMP: “A commander must understand the level of media interest from initial receipt of mission.”⁷⁵ Public affairs personnel assess and predict civilian reactions throughout the rest of the decision making process and inform the commander so he might make the best decision possible. During execution, public affairs continue to monitor media reactions and keep the commander informed. This allows the commander to adjust his actions as necessary.

⁷² Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA), Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Publishing Directorate, May 2014), 9-3.

⁷³ HQDA, FM 3-61, 2-4.

⁷⁴ HQDA, FM 3-13, 1-1.

⁷⁵ HQDA, FM 3-61, 1-1.

Research and observations above indicate cancel culture is the polar opposite of U.S. Army doctrine on military decision-making. The application of staff processes and commander's judgement involves searching for a complete situational understanding of a situation. Cancel culture, based on the above-researched definition and examples, is an emotional reaction to a select amount of information, usually spread virally across social media, followed by a call to completely silence one side of the argument.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to understand cancel culture's influence on organizational leaders, this study will focus on four case studies derived from document analysis of news articles, interviews, and social media posts. Research will predominantly consist of qualitative analysis, due to the subjective nature of reactions to social media. Trends indicate social media interactions are only increasing, as mainstream media sites, customer feedback pages, and government official websites are becoming more interactive between the information publisher and the customer. This study attempts to better understand the cancel culture phenomenon and potential impact on U.S. Army decisions. These four case studies will attempt to understand whether or not cancel culture can influence a leader's decision through the paradigm of symbolic interactionism.

Why Case Study

The researcher chose case study as a research methodology because a concept as new and unpredictable as cancel culture must be studied through real-world examples put into context. As each study will show, cancel culture reactions consists of online anger against one individual or organization, while ignoring similar people in a different context. For example, the #MeToo movement quickly dethroned Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey from Hollywood stardom. However, similar accusations against Woody Allen and Dustin Hoffman were by in large ignored, and these actors continued their careers, defended by the same Hollywood actors who championed the #MeToo movement. These case studies will demonstrate how a cancel culture reaction is often

unpredictable and sometimes unreasonable to a large portion of the population. There is no quality or quantity of offensive behavior, which automatically results in a movement to cancel someone from society.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: James Gunn and the Walt Disney Company

In August 2009, the Walt Disney Company purchased Marvel Studios for four billion dollars. By 2019, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) had produced some of the world's most successful movies. In July 2019, *Avengers: End Game* became the highest grossing film of all time, earning 2.79 billion dollars.⁷⁶ Even famed director Martin Scorsese admitted the Marvel Cinematic Universe redefined cinema.⁷⁷ One of the highest grossing character storylines within the Marvel movies was *The Guardians of the Galaxy*. This less-known comic series caught the world by surprise, with its funny misfit team plot and catchy 1980s soundtrack. *Guardians of the Galaxy* ranked number 13 out of 23 Marvel movies for gross revenue in 2019. The movie broke records with the best August movie release of all time in 2014, with a total worldwide gross of \$773,328,629. In 2017, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* would surpass the first movie, during the worst summer movie season in years, with a worldwide gross of \$863,756,051, ranking 11 out

⁷⁶ Rachel E. Greenspan, "Here are the Highest Grossing Marvel Movies," *Time*, 21 July 2019, accessed 7 March 2020, <https://time.com/5523398/highest-grossing-marvel-movies/>.

⁷⁷ Julia Alexander, "Like it or not, the Marvel Empire Redefined Cinema This Decade," *The Verge*, 12 December 2019, accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/12/12/21011381/marvel-decade-cinema-mcu-iron-man-captain-america-disney-endgame>.

of 23 for the highest grossing Marvel movies.⁷⁸ Most of *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 1 and 2*'s success was directly attributed to writer and director James Gunn. However, as plans were underway for a *Guardians 3* film, Disney shocked fans when it suddenly fired Gunn.

In July 2018, an alt-right online activist resurfaced several old tweets from 2008-2012 in which James Gunn used dark humor to make fun of pedophilia and rape. The Walt Disney Company reacted swiftly, calling the tweets “indefensible and inconsistent with our studio’s values.”⁷⁹ Within days, Disney fired Gunn. Unlike other cancel culture events, in which the cancelled person in question receives overwhelming condemnation, fans and actors rallied to Gunn’s defense. To the tweets, Gunn vehemently apologized, agreeing they were not funny. He refused to blame the Disney Corporation for his firing, taking full responsibility for his immature behavior of the past.⁸⁰ However, while Gunn remained silent and moved to Warner Brothers Studios to work on another movie, his fans and coworkers demanded Disney change their stance.

Ten days after Disney’s announcement, the entire *Guardians* cast released an open letter in support of James Gunn. The letter was not meant to “defend his jokes many

⁷⁸ Greenspan, “Here are the Highest Grossing Marvel Movies.”

⁷⁹ Michael Cavanaugh, “#WeAreGroot: How Hollywood is reacting to James Gunn’s Disney firing,” *Chicago Tribune*, 24 July 2018, accessed 7 March 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-hollywood-reaction-james-gunn-firing-20180724-story.html>.

⁸⁰ Erik Kain, “Why Disney Was Right To Reinstate James Gunn On ‘Guardians Of The Galaxy 3’,” *Forbes*, 16 March 2019, accessed 7 March 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2019/03/16/why-disney-was-right-to-reinstate-james-gunn-on-guardians-of-the-galaxy-3/#32e619a62be5>.

years ago but rather share [their] experiences . . . the character he has shown in the wake of his firing is consistent with the man he was everyday on set . . . we believe the theme of redemption has never been more relevant than now.” In reaction to cancel culture and social media reactions, the cast said, “there is little due process in the court of public opinion. James is not the last good person to be put on trial. Given the growing public divide in this country, it’s safe to say instances like this will continue, although we hope Americans from across the political spectrum can ease up on the character assassinations and stop weaponizing mob mentality.” The cast further went on to call for this to be a learning lesson, understanding the consequences of etching our written words “in digital stone.”⁸¹ While one actor publicly deleted his Twitter account in anger over Twitter’s ability to fire someone, others demonstrated solidarity over social media with #WeAreGroot and #RehireJamesGunn trending. A change.org petition received over 200,000 signatures to rehire the writer, and *Guardians* fans began a GoFundMe campaign, created a RehireJamesGunn.com website, and erected a billboard over a prominent California highway calling to rehire James Gunn for the *Guardians Vol. 3* sequel.⁸²

⁸¹ Tasha Robinson, “Guardians of the Galaxy cast petitions Disney to rehire James Gunn,” *The Verge*, 30 July 2018, accessed 7 March 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/7/30/17630792/guardians-of-the-galaxy-cast-petitions-disney-to-rehire-james-gunn-fired>.

⁸² Aaron Couch, “‘Rehire James Gunn’ Billboard Appears Near Disneyland,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 October 2018, accessed 7 March 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/james-gunn-billboard-asks-disney-rehire-him-guardians-3-1156340>.

Initially, the Walt Disney Company stood by their decision to fire James Gunn. Three months after the fans' reaction, Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger replied, "The James Gunn decision was brought to me as a unanimous decision of a variety of executives at the studio and I supported it . . . I haven't second guessed that decision."⁸³ However, on March 15, 2019, nine months after Disney's initial decision, the company would reverse their stance and reinstate James Gunn as the writer and director of the third *Guardians of the Galaxy* installment. Over the nine months leading up to this decision change, outrage, arguments, and heating opinions would circulate over social media and mainstream media platforms.

Much of the outrage revolved around the motive behind resurfacing James Gunn's long-buried tweets. Unlike other cancel culture case studies in this research, James Gunn's old tweets resurfaced and were manipulated to go viral across social media platforms as a deliberate attack by social media activist Mike Cernovich. According to *The Huffington Post*, Cernovich is a self-declared member of the alt-right with an agenda against the left and mainstream media. Labeled a social media "troll," Cernovich leads a team of social media propagandists who spread misinformation, rumors, or old information to destroy celebrities, liberal media anchors, and democratic politicians. Cernovich celebrated Gunn's release from Disney and admitted his team worked hard to spread the old tweets across social media and make them viral to receive new attention. According to the *Huffington Post*, Cernovich's social media activity against Gunn was

⁸³ Couch, "'Rehire James Gunn' Billboard Appears Near Disneyland."

part of a larger promise to propagate the “fireable” tweets of his self-appointed enemies, though Cernovich’s promise has since been deleted from Twitter.⁸⁴

In researching Cernovich’s Twitter activity, specifically during the July 2018 announcement to fire James Gunn, Cernovich justified his actions on Twitter as exposing Hollywood hypocrisy. Several Twitter users defended Cernovich’s actions against James Gunn. According to one user, “the only reason Cernovich even bothered to look at Gunn’s tweets was because Gunn was advocating the firing of others based on what they said.”⁸⁵ Other Twitter users defended Cernovich’s actions solely based on their disgust at Gunn’s behavior. To them, it did not matter whether the old jokes were meant to illicit a reaction or display dark humor. His tweets were sickening, far too numerous, and far worse than anything said by celebrities attacked from the left. One tweet said, “For the record: After being exposed, #JamesGunn deleted over 10,000 tweets and an entire blog. He was well past the “edgy old tweets” mark and up to his pencil neck in a full-blown obsession with sexually objectified children.”⁸⁶ Dozens of other users cited a recent cancel culture incident with Roseanne Barr, saying her comments were not nearly as bad as Gunn’s social media behavior. Many viewed Gunn’s firing as revenge for years of leftist cancel culture attacks on conservatives: “They created the outrage culture and of

⁸⁴ Luke O’Brien, “How Pizzagate Pusher Mike Cernovich Keeps Getting People Fired,” *The Huffington Post*, 21 July 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mike-cernovich-james-gunn-fired_n_5b5265cce4b0fd5c73c570ac.

⁸⁵ Minapo @peko3417, tweet, Twitter, 21 July 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/peko3417/status/1020697237070983168>.

⁸⁶ Weird Chick @wyrdchyk, tweet, Twitter, 20 July 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/WyrdChyk/status/1020515369998606342>.

course, can't deal with the consequences.”⁸⁷ However, critics of Cernovich's behavior called out his own hypocrisy. Both media reporters and Twitter users attacked Cernovich as a “toxic opportunist” and a “scumbag.” Cernovich's personal opinions and offensive statements over Twitter included “a woman over 40 is indistinguishable from a tranny,” “Who cares about breast cancer and rape? Not me.”, “date rape does not exist,” and other advice on how to get away with date rape and comments admonishing women.⁸⁸

However, Cernovich defended his actions against James Gunn, believing he was fighting for free speech for all, including his own offensive statements. He promised to unearth more “fireable” tweets and has since caused others to be fired, including prominent news anchors.⁸⁹

James Gunn admitted he originally viewed Twitter an open forum for opinions, ideas, and jokes. He viewed his tweets as a means to be funny and provocative. However, since those tweets, Gunn has grown older and gained more prominence and experience working with Disney, arguably the most family-oriented company in Hollywood. Gunn never justified the inappropriate tweets that resulted in his termination, but as an explanation he said,

My words of nearly a decade ago were, at the time, totally failed and unfortunate efforts to be provocative. I have regretted them for many years since—not just because they were stupid, not at all funny, wildly insensitive, and certainly not provocative like I had hoped, but also because they don't reflect the person I am

⁸⁷ T-Rivz@TRifzFTW, tweet, Twitter, 20 July 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/TRivzFTW/status/1020426878275014657>.

⁸⁸ Mayday Mindy@maydaymindy9, tweet, Twitter, 21 July 2018, accessed 10 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/maydaymindy9/status/1020615388676218880>.

⁸⁹ O'Brien, “How Pizzagate Pusher Mike Cernovich Keeps Getting People Fired.”

today or have been for some time . . . I take full responsibility for the way I conducted myself then.⁹⁰

In an interview after his return to Disney, Gunn refused to call the case an issue of free speech. He did not interpret his tweets as an exercise of his free speech rights, but as a mistake. As a result, he only blamed himself for the situation and chose not to be defensive. His decision is in sharp contrast to other victims of cancel culture, who portrayed themselves as victims. He returned to work with the Walt Disney Company on good terms, while other celebrities who made the opposite decision never returned to good terms with their former employers.

When the Walt Disney Company originally discovered James Gunn's twitter history, current events pressured them to make a quick decision to preserve good public relations. Gunn's tweets resurfaced at the height of the #MeToo movement, and days after Paramount Pictures fired Paramount Television President Amy Powell for unprofessional and racist remarks. In an official statement, Walt Disney Studios chairman Alan F. Horn said, "The offensive attitudes and statements discovered on James' Twitter feed are indefensible and inconsistent with our studio's values."⁹¹ However, Disney altered its meaning making of the situation nine months later, after Horn met with James Gunn on multiple occasions. "Persuaded by Gunn's public apology and his handling of

⁹⁰ Mike Fleming, Jr., "Disney Reinstates Director James Gunn for 'Guardians of the Galaxy 3'," *Deadline*, 15 March 2019, accessed 11 March 2020, <https://deadline.com/2019/03/james-gunn-reinstated-guardians-of-the-galaxy-3-disney-suicide-squad-2-indefensible-social-media-messages-1202576444/>.

⁹¹ Brooks Barnes, "Disney Fires 'Guardians of the Galaxy' Director Over Offensive Tweets," *The New York Times*, 20 July 2018, accessed 11 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/business/media/james-gunn-fired-offensive-tweets.html>.

the situation after, Horn decided to reverse course and reinstate Gunn.”⁹² Horn said he personally witnessed the difference between the Gunn with whom he conversed, and the perception from his tweets in the past. Though Horn and other commentators maintain the tweets were deplorable, they interpreted Gunn as a completely different person, based on the extremely vocal testimonies of his coworkers and Gunn’s “humble” insistence on supporting Disney’s decision.

Through overwhelming media support for Disney’s decision reversal, nearly all reporters and commentators cited Gunn’s silence and respect for Disney as directly responsible for the reunion. Gunn’s “grace and poise” and refusal to disparage Disney allowed the company to rehire Gunn without any bad blood between the two parties.⁹³ The media lauded this event as a victory against the cancel culture and a boon for redemption in a seemingly ruthless social media environment:

The social media outrage mob is without mercy and it never tires . . . We become exhausted by it after a while. Normal folk are numb, while the outrage warriors on all sides claim victim after victim . . . [James Gunn was able] to change and grow and become better . . . Redemption should not be a dirty word. Forgiveness should not be verboten. Even when someone like Roseanne says deplorable things, we should hesitate before simply firing her and cancelling her show . . . I’m glad James Gunn is back in Disney’s good graces, but I’m even happier that we have at least one small story of redemption in this mad, mad, mad, world.⁹⁴

The nod to Roseanne in this quote is in reference to Roseanne Barr, a comedian who posted a racist tweet only months before James Gunn was fired from Disney. In her

⁹² Fleming, “Disney Reinstates Director James Gunn for ‘Guardians of the Galaxy 3’.”

⁹³ Kain, “Why Disney Was Right To Reinstall James Gunn On ‘Guardians Of The Galaxy 3’.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

tweets, she poked fun at President Barack Obama's senior advisor, Valerie Jarrett, saying she looked like the Muslim Brotherhood and Planet of the Apes had a baby. Within hours of Roseanne's tweet, ABC Broadcasting Company fired her and cancelled her show.⁹⁵ Disney also owns the ABC Broadcasting Company.

Case Study 2: Anheuser-Busch and Carson King

In September 2019, ESPN broadcasted its *College Game Day* series at the University of Iowa game. In the background, 24-year-old Carson King held up a sign that read: "BUSCH LIGHT SUPPLY NEEDS REPLENISHED VENMO CARSON-KING-25." To King's surprise, the image went viral and donations poured in by the thousands of dollars. By September 26, 2019, the account reached over one million dollars. King announced he would donate the money to a local children's hospital. Anheuser-Busch, excited by the positive attention, also pledged 350,000 dollars to the same children's hospital. The company announced it would release a series of beers with Carson King's face on the label and provide King with a lifetime supply of Busch Light.⁹⁶

The *Des Moines Register* sent investigative reporter Aaron Calvin to investigate Carson King as a "feel-good story" on the local Iowan. Calvin unearthed several

⁹⁵ John Kobin, "After Racist Tweet, Roseanne Barr's Show Is Cancelled by ABC," *The New York Times*, 29 May 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/29/business/media/roseanne-barr-offensive-tweets.html>.

⁹⁶ Des Moines Register Staff, "Busch Light severed ties with Carson King hours before news conference, Register story," *Des Moines Register*, 26 September 2019, accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2019/09/26/busch-light-cut-ties-carson-king-before-article-news-conference-on-tweets/3776208002/>.

offensive tweets and social media posts from Carson King eight years prior, when the University of Iowa student was sixteen years old. The tweets quoted comedian Daniel Tosh, who at the time was famous for his over-the-top, shockingly offensive jokes. According to King, the jokes were meant to shock his friends and were not meant for the public. However, reporter Aaron Calvin called King and told him he would release the information in the next *Des Moines Register* release. King preemptively called a press conference, informed the public of his foolish behavior, and gave a “heartfelt apology” for his past transgressions. Upon release of the news article, Anheuser-Busch announced King’s behavior did not align with their values as a company. Anheuser-Busch announced it would cut off association with Carson King and cancel its plan for the specialized beer cans, but the company would still honor their donation pledge to the children’s hospital.⁹⁷

Many people criticized the *Des Moines Register* for unearthing King’s mistakes as a minor. Reporters and commentators labeled the event another example of cancel culture and questioned whether a person should be allowed to grow and learn, or be held accountable to the anonymous public for every past transgression. Meanwhile, donations continued to pour in. Two days after Anheuser-Busch’s announcement, King announced he raised nearly two million dollars for the hospital. Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds chose to view the story as one of personal growth. According to Governor Reynolds, “Volunteerism and selflessness defines Iowans by nature.” After declaring the following

⁹⁷ Sandy Hingston, “The Best Thing That Happened This Week: I Got Yer First Stone Right Here,” *Philadelphia*, 28 September 2019, accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.phillymag.com/news/2019/09/28/busch-light-carson-king/>.

Saturday “Carson King Day,” she tweeted, “You can make a mistake in your life, and still go on to do amazing things, @CarsonKing2, thank you for reminding us all of that! #IowaProud.”⁹⁸

In agreement with the Iowa Governor, many social media users reacted negatively to Anheuser-Busch’s decision to disassociate with Carson King. In retaliation, Twitter users unearthed past tweets from reporter Aaron Calvin from 2010 to 2013, with derogatory comments against homosexuals, transsexuals, and females. In response to this information, the *Des Moines Register* announced it would investigate the issue and subsequently fired Aaron Calvin. Within one day, the *Des Moines Register* received more than 13,000 Facebook posts, many attacking the newspaper for choosing to release King’s tweets as a teenager. Approximately 130,000 people signed an online petition demanding a front-page apology from the paper. By the time the story hit national news, “tens of thousands of people had un-liked and unfollowed *The Register* on Facebook and Twitter, [and] readers were also calling for subscription cancellations.”⁹⁹

The *Des Moines Register* decision to release Carson King’s tweets was highly debated over social media and national mainstream media platforms. Some believed it was both unfair and irresponsible to post social media posts from a minor. Others

⁹⁸ Scottie Andrew and Christina Zdanowicz, “He raised a million dollars for a hospital through beer money. Then his old racist tweets surfaced,” *CNN*, 26 September 2019, accessed 18 December 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/26/us/carson-king-busch-cuts-ties-beer-posts-trnd/index.html>.

⁹⁹ Vanessa Miller, “Thousands respond to Carson King UI Children’s Hospital fundraiser fallout,” *The Gazette*, 25 September 2019, accessed 19 December 2019, <https://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/education/thousands-respond-to-carson-king-uihc-childrens-hospital-fundraiser-venmo-busch-light-des-moines-register-20190925>.

believed Carson King should still be held accountable because he was not a minor anymore and his tweets were still publicly available. In the *Register's* own justification, they believed themselves to be a transparent organization who felt obligated to report the truth, no matter how it contradicted with the “feel-good” narrative about the children’s hospital. According to an Iowa State University professor of journalism ethics:

The Register’s editors faced competing values of fairness, transparency and public service . . . As for fairness, the tweets have little to do with the content of the story. The content of the story was the donation to University Hospitals, and (the tweets) were done as a juvenile . . . Regarding a journalistic public service ideology, by publishing the tweets, you would inevitably do harm to the beneficiary of the generosity that was occurring—that would be the Children’s Hospital. On the other side, there’s the argument of transparency . . . the tweets were public, and there’s public information—donors have a right to know. Throw in complicating factors like when the tweets were made—King was a juvenile—and there’s no clear standard of how we all deal with that.¹⁰⁰

The *Register* editor saw Carson King’s tweets as something donors had a right to know, and interpreted the newspaper’s position in society as a purveyor of honesty and transparency, no matter how controversial. This is evidenced through their decision to release the tweets and not give in to tens of thousands of angry Facebook posts, petitions, and calls to cancel subscriptions. It is also evidenced through their decision to investigate equally offensive tweets from their own reporter and subsequently fire him. In doing so, they held their reporter to the same standard to which they held Carson King.

Over time, the case lost prominence in mainstream media coverage, though it was referenced in other cases of cancel culture afterward. As for Carson King, he continued his fundraiser while the media moved on to new events and controversies.

¹⁰⁰ Miller, “Thousands respond to Carson King UI Children’s Hospital fundraiser fallout.”

Case Study 3: Chick-fil-A and the Salvation Army

Over the past decade, the Chick-fil-A fast-food franchise has been ground zero for the fight between gay rights and what is otherwise referred to as “traditional Christian values.” Indeed, Chick-fil-A has a reputation for being one of the most conservative American franchises, closing on Sundays in respect for the Christian day of worship. The company mission statement reads, “To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A.” Founder and owner Truett Cathy refused to let the company go public to preserve these Christian values. Upon his death in 2014, his son assumed control and maintained the company’s Christian policies.¹⁰¹ In 2012, the chicken sandwich franchise received severe backlash after information went viral that the founder donated over two million dollars to companies who oppose same-sex marriages. In retaliation, Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer (LGBTQ) activists called for a nationwide boycott of the chicken franchise. In a counter-reaction to the boycott, traditional marriage activists launched a Chick-fil-A Day to support the company.

In an example of the high emotions over this controversy, that same year, a Tucson medical manufacturing firm executive filmed himself berating a 20-year-old Chick-fil-A employee for the CEO’s stance against gay marriage. The executive posted his video on social media. However, after an outraged reaction from social media viewers, he was forced to resign. In researching this Tucson event nearly eight years

¹⁰¹ Kate Taylor, “Why Chick-fil-A will never go public,” *Business Insider*, 28 January 2016, accessed 15 January 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/chick-fil-a-will-never-go-public-2016-1>.

later, social media platforms contained strong emotions and opinions, as users either fiercely defended the company, defended the faultless young employee, or defended the executive's right to free speech.¹⁰²

Years later during the 2020 Presidential race, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, an openly gay democratic nominee, made national headlines when he said he approved of Chick-fil-A's chicken while he did not approve of their politics. The comment was meant to be an example of how the candidate could bridge differences better than other presidential hopefuls.¹⁰³ Several prominent leaders within LGBTQ rights organizations criticized Buttigieg's placating remarks, wanting him to take advantage of his high political profile and openly condemn the company. In interviews, several gay rights activists said they continued to refuse business to a company which "openly expresses their hatred" for them. Chick-fil-A officially released the statement their "restaurants welcome and embrace all people, regardless of . . . sexual orientation or gender identity." Despite this release, San Antonio voted to block the franchise from its international airport, and the dean of Rider University in New Jersey refused to bring the restaurant on campus due to its donation history.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, when most current cultural war analysts reference controversial business decisions, Chick-fil-A is often referenced as a prominent example.

¹⁰² Associated Press, "Video: Man loses job after berating Arizona Chick-fil-A worker," *East Valley Tribune*, 3 August 2012, accessed 14 January 2020, https://www.eastvalleytribune.com/local/video-man-loses-job-after-berating-arizona-chick-fil-a/article_4f006bb6-ddb9-11e1-bc00-0019bb2963f4.html.

¹⁰³ Associated Press, "Buttigieg likes Chick-fil-A's chicken but not its politics," *Associated Press*, 26 March 2019, accessed 14 January 2020, <https://apnews.com/31cc42477dc846b68cb0e8bd6509fcd5>.

¹⁰⁴ Gwen Aviles, "Pete Buttigieg's Chick-fil-A remarks draw reaction from LGBTQ community," *NBC News*, 27 March 2019, accessed 14 January 2020,

In November 2019, Chick-fil-A announced it would stop its donations to the Salvation Army and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Much to the surprise of many, the company announced it would end its multiyear charitable commitment to foundations known for their public stances against gay marriage and instead transition to “deepen its giving to a smaller number of organizations working exclusively in the areas of education, homelessness, and hunger.” Previous conservative supporters accused the chicken sandwich franchise of caving into extremist pressures and denying its Christian values. Meanwhile, LGBTQ supporters dismissed the gesture as corporate lip service and a marketing ploy. One Twitter user called the decision a “stupid move” which would lose the company millions of customers.¹⁰⁵ During interviews with *NBC News* and *The Washington Post*, LGBTQ activists continued to see Chick-fil-A as a symbol of hatred and intolerance. One commentator expressed continued anger over Chick-fil-A’s perceived anti-gay history, “I will never eat at Chick-fil-A. We need to boycott hate.” Another user pleaded for cooler heads to prevail. This user said it was just a chicken sandwich, and begged everyone to move onto more important things. Meanwhile, former Governor Mike Huckabee, who originally orchestrated the “Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day” in 2012, expressed his disillusionment, as he had held the company in high regard for resisting pressure to curtail its conservative beliefs. In a Twitter response to the 2019

<https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/pete-buttigieg-s-chick-fil-remarks-draw-reaction-lgbtq-community-n988216>.

¹⁰⁵ Nicole Lyn Pesce, “Chick-fil-A will stop donating to the Salvation Army and Fellowship of Christian Athletes — and people are furious,” *Market Watch*, 23 November 2019, accessed 20 December 2019, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/chick-fil-a-will-stop-donating-to-the-salvation-army-and-fellowship-of-christian-athletes-and-people-are-furious-2019-11-18>.

donation announcement he said, “I regret believing they would stay true to convictions of founder Truett Cathy.”¹⁰⁶

Research of over 150 tweets resulted in a near equal number of social media posts both for and against the decision. However, overall it did not seem to affect the general public decisions to patron Chick-fil-A restaurants. Many with an opinion on Twitter would caveat their statement with a disclaimer similar to “I never liked the food before and never eat there, but I think” or “I never tried Chick-fil-A but I like their decision.” Despite the controversy’s high profile and increased news and social media coverage, the event did not appear to physically affect bottom-line sales. The company is privately owned, so no shareholder information exists to identify whether or not this decision affected business. In all other recent reporting on Chick-fil-A, company sales continued to outperform fast food chains like MacDonald’s, Burger King, Subway, and Starbucks.¹⁰⁷ According to some market analyst bloggers, customers were more attracted to the friendly employees and clean atmosphere than restaurant politics.

Despite the anger on both sides of the political aisle, Chick-fil-A’s official 2019 announcement remains non-committal to either side of the argument. The company press release announced it “will no longer make multiyear commitments and will reassess its

¹⁰⁶ Emily Heil, “Chick-fil-A drops donations that angered LGBTQ groups, and conservative leaders cry betrayal,” *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2019, accessed 14 January 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voraciously/wp/2019/11/18/chick-fil-a-drops-donations-that-angered-lgbt-groups-and-conservatives-cry-betrayal/>.

¹⁰⁷ Matthew McCreary, “5 Things You Need to Know before Investing in a Chick-fil-A Franchise,” *Entrepreneur*, 13 January 2020, accessed 15 January 2020, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/slideshow/307000>.

philanthropic partnerships annually to allow maximum impact. These partners could include faith-based and non-faith-based charities.” Chick-fil-A’s spokesperson also maintained loyalty to their founder and his past decisions, “This giving strategy further honors principles set by our founder Truett Cathy, who believed that all people are worthy of care.”¹⁰⁸

Chick-fil-A’s decision pulled the Salvation Army into public scrutiny. The Salvation Army released a public statement expressing their disappointment at losing their donations from Chick-fil-A. The Salvation Army reaffirmed their commitment to the LGBTQ community and denied any policies against the group. One angry Twitter user tweeted, “The fact that the mainstream media has reduced the Salvation Army—one of the most important humanitarian groups around—to an “anti-LGBTQ organization” tells us everything we need to know about our current culture.” This tweet was in direct reference to the current cancel culture environment and received 14,700 “likes” within the first day of being posted. Another angry Twitter user sarcastically posted, “The Salvation Army feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless and offers free rehab to people who need it. Clearly, they must be stopped.”¹⁰⁹ As of January 1, 2019, the Salvation Army provided charity work to 131 countries with 495 homeless hostels, 232 children’s homes, 114 women’s and men’s refuge centers, 30 general hospitals, and 1,212,181

¹⁰⁸ Chick-fil-A Staff, “Chick-fil-A Foundation Announces 2020 Priorities to Address Education, Homelessness, Hunger,” *The Chicken-Wire*, 18 November 2019, Accessed 15 January 2020, <https://thechickenwire.chick-fil-a.com/News/Chick-fil-A-Foundation-Announces-2020-Priorities>.

¹⁰⁹ Pesce, “Chick-fil-A will stop donating to the Salvation Army and Fellowship of Christian Athletes—and people are furious.”

Soldiers or volunteers. The Salvation Army's mission statement clearly proclaims the organization's deep-rooted Christian values, and prohibits the use of alcohol and tobacco. However, nothing explicitly in their official message says anything against homosexuals.¹¹⁰ Research and document analysis on social media revealed multiple Twitter and Facebook posts about the Salvation Army's charitable donations to families during abject poverty, and many accused the cancel culture of framing the Salvation Army for non-existent hate.

Beyond the Chick-fil-A controversy, the Salvation Army continues to fight the anti-homosexual perception. In an interview with *Out Magazine*, the Salvation Army Director of Communications said, "If anyone needs help, they can find it through our doors. Unfortunately, as a large organization, there have been isolated incidents that do not represent our values and service to all people who are in need." During the Chick-fil-A incident in 2019, pop singer Ellie Goulding refused to perform at a Salvation Army-sponsored football game as soon as angry fans informed her of the organization's anti-homosexual history. Soon after, the Salvation Army contacted Goulding and after a private discussion, she changed her position and chose to perform at the concert with little to no explanation to her fans. In response to the press coverage over the Goulding concert controversy, the Salvation Army released the following statement: "Regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, we're committed to serving anyone in need. Every day, we provide services such as shelter for the transgender community

¹¹⁰ The General of The Salvation Army, "About Us," Salvation Army International, 2020, accessed 15 January 2020, <https://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/about>.

and resources for homeless youth—40 percent of whom identify as gay or transgender.”¹¹¹

In December 2019, the downtown Seattle branch of the Nordstrom department store banned the Salvation Army from positioning their iconic bell ringing donation receiver outside their doors. Nordstrom refused to issue a statement, but behind closed doors, they told one Salvation Army volunteer this decision was due to the Salvation Army making some of their LGBTQ employees feel uncomfortable. In an official rebuttal via the *Seattle Times*, a Seattle-based Salvation Army spokesperson highlighted a number of their gay employees. The bell ringer banned from the Nordstrom door was an 85-year-old Salvation Army volunteer, who for 19 years collected donations outside the Seattle Nordstrom. In disgust at this referendum on the Salvation Army, a reporter said, “our job [is] to tell the truth, not perceptions. But here we have unnamed employees going after an 85-year-old man because of their perceptions.”¹¹²

Case Study 4: The United States Army Installations

Currently the U.S. Army has ten military installations named after Confederate leaders.¹¹³ This includes “three of largest military bases in the world—Fort Bragg in

¹¹¹ Matt Baume, “Salvation Army Says It’s No Longer Homophobic,” *Out*, 18 November 2019, accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.out.com/news/2019/11/18/salvation-army-says-theyre-no-longer-homophobic>.

¹¹² Julia Duin, “Another Salvation Army story: This time, Nordstrom’s dumps its famous bellringer,” *GetReligion*, 27 December 2019, accessed 16 January 2020, <https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2019/12/27/another-salvation-army-story-this-time-nordstroms-dumps-its-bellringer>.

¹¹³ Daniel Brown, “These are the 10 US military bases still names after Confederate soldiers,” *Business Insider*, 19 August 2017, accessed 13 March 2020,

North Carolina, Fort Hood in Texas, and Fort Benning in Georgia.”¹¹⁴ Among the ten installations, Fort Gordon in Georgia is named after General John Brown Gordon, a Confederate General elected as U.S. Senator in 1872, and the head of the Georgia chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. Fort Hood is named for General John Bell Hood, who fought for the Confederacy, though his hometown of Kentucky remained with the Union. Fort Pickett receives its name from Major General George Pickett, who was investigated for war crimes after hanging twenty-two Union prisoners. In one of the most recent naming decisions, Fort Rucker was named for Confederate Colonel Edmund Rucker in 1955.¹¹⁵ Though all these installations were built and named after 1917, the U.S. Military chose Confederate leaders in order to reconcile the north and south after the Civil War. According to U.S. Army public affairs officials, “Every installation is named for a soldier who holds a place in our history . . . Accordingly, these historic names represent individuals, not causes or ideologies.”¹¹⁶ When asked in 2015, an Army official said there was “no discussion of adjusting the naming policy.”¹¹⁷

<https://www.businessinsider.com/these-are-the-10-us-military-bases-still-named-after-confederates-2017-8>.

¹¹⁴ Vera Bergengruen, “No Plans to Change Names of Bases Honoring Confederate Generals,” *Military.com*, 17 August 2017, accessed 13 March 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/08/17/no-plans-change-names-bases-honoring-confederate-generals.html>.

¹¹⁵ Brown, “These are the 10 US military bases still names after Confederate soldiers.”

¹¹⁶ Bergengruen, “No Plans to Change Names of Bases Honoring Confederate Generals.”

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Many critics to the Confederate names agree there are far better leaders worth admiration than those currently chosen. Some of the current namesakes come from leaders who were notorious or famously incompetent. General Beauregard is remembered as a poor military commander. General Bragg exacted corporal punishment on his troops, was hated by his fellow generals, and was responsible for the death of many of his troops through outdated tactics. Some suggest a change to military heroes like General George Marshall, General Matthew Ridgway, or General Omar Bradley, all of World War II fame. Other suggestions include Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the first African-American general, or Anna Mae Hays, the first female general. As one advocate for change said, it is time for the U.S. Army to stop pandering to the side who fought against the American flag. The U.S. Army must “accept that the images and icons of the Confederacy, while of historical value, are meant for graveyards and museums, not in public places of honor or bases where men and women defend the Constitution.”¹¹⁸

However, some installations already follow this recommendation. Fort McNair, located in Maryland near Washington, DC, was originally named Greenleaf Point after its location on the Potomac. In 1948, Fort McNair received its current name from Lieutenant General Lesley J. McNair, who was killed in Normandy in 1944, after heroic service in the North Africa Campaign and subsequent service as Commanding General of the Army Ground Forces.¹¹⁹ Though the ten U.S. Army installations in question receive negative

¹¹⁸ Mark R. Jacobson, “Rename US Army Bases for Heroes, not Confederates,” *Defense One*, 17 August 2017, accessed 13 March 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/08/rename-us-army-bases-heroes-not-confederates/140326/>.

¹¹⁹ Mark W. Royston, *The Faces behind the Bases: Short Biographies of Those for Whom Military Bases are Named* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009), 31, accessed 29

attention for being named after Confederate officers, there are many more installations, which are not named for Confederate leaders. The U.S. Army official homepage lists 79 posts in the United States and Puerto Rico alone, not counting locations in Germany, Japan, Korea, or other international sites.¹²⁰ Though these ten Confederate-named posts include some of the largest and most populated U.S. Army installations, there are others equally famous. Fort Carson in Colorado is named for Colonel Christopher “Kit” Carson, who served as a frontier scout, mapped the Oregon Trail, and served as a Colonel for the Union during the Civil War.¹²¹ Fort Lewis, now Joint Base Lewis-McCord in Washington State, is named for Meriwether Lewis of the famed Lewis and Clark expedition.¹²² Even in the south, Fort Stewart, home to the Third Infantry Division in Georgia, is named for Brigadier General Daniel Stewart, who fought with Francis Marion’s militia during the Revolutionary War and served with distinction during the War of 1812 and would eventually be great-grandfather of Theodore Roosevelt.¹²³

Though the decision to name U.S. Army forts after Confederate leaders is currently under scrutiny, in the past, Army decisions went unquestioned by a majority of America’s population. “Except for a few years of war in the [nineteenth] century, the

March 2020, https://books.google.com/books?id=IhMGCVmJ5dAC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbp_book_other_versions#v=onepage&q&f=false.

¹²⁰ U.S. Army, “About the Army: Post Locations,” 28 November 2016, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.goarmy.com/about/post-locations.html>.

¹²¹ Royston, *The Faces Behind the Bases*, 8.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 31.

¹²³ Royston, *The Faces Behind the Bases*, 46-47.

military services went about their routines out of sight and out of mind of most Americans. Under the direction of a government which showed little enthusiasm for either, the Army garrisoned the frontier, and the Navy patrolled the distant seas.”¹²⁴ Despite this lack of public scrutiny, the U.S. Army has a long reputation for being more egalitarian than other organizations. “[Military history] is a particularly important part of black history as the services offered blacks greater opportunities than were available in civil life for three-quarters of a century after emancipation.”¹²⁵ Today, the U.S. Army remains a respected institution and many of its decisions remain unquestioned. “Americans are much more likely to face off against civilian government officials to get a public space renamed than they are to go against the military . . . The military is consistently the most respected institution in the country, according to Gallup. It’s also conservative by nature and loath to get caught up in any contentious debate.”¹²⁶ Even black veterans organizations and the NAACP choose not to push strongly against the issue, choosing instead to focus on black veterans rights and other “issues where public pressure has a bigger impact.”¹²⁷ Within U.S. Army organizations, leaders typically are not required to justify their actions to the public. Most questions and explanations are reserved for testimonies to Congress, and those testimonies revolve around the current

¹²⁴ Edward M. Coffman, “New American Military History,” *Military Affairs* 48, no. 1 (January 1984): 2, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1988340>.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁶ Bergengruen, “No Plans to Change Names of Bases Honoring Confederate Generals.”

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

leader's decisions, not the decisions of an Army leader a century ago to name a fort after a Confederate officer.

Much of the explanation for naming these installations after Confederate leaders remains speculation, and many still cannot find an explanation for these ten locations receiving their names so long after the Civil War.

Ten high-profile U.S. Army facilities were named after Confederate military leaders . . . for bases opened during World War I and World War II. All the men honored were long dead and, while a few Civil War veterans might have still been around fifty years after, virtually all of the men who served under them were also gone . . . Why did the U.S. Army name facilities after men who served a vanquished foe? It's hard to pin down an answer when we're so many years removed.¹²⁸

According to several sources, the namesakes were chosen from famous leaders who lived in the respective State, or after a leader who made a significant contribution to the military. For example, Fort Knox, historically the home of the U.S. Army Armor branch, is named for Henry Knox who served as the Continental Army's Chief of Artillery during the Revolutionary War, as well as the United States' first Secretary of War.¹²⁹ All other installations, not named after famous people, are named for their location, like Aberdeen Proving Ground or Pine Bluff Arsenal.

The most recent official U.S. Army statement is the U.S. Army maintains its current naming convention in a "spirit of reconciliation", moving past the Civil War. However, one article claims this decision was more to garner support from the U.S.

¹²⁸ Under the Radar, "Ten Army Bases Named after Confederate Officers," *Military.com*, 3 October 2018, accessed 26 March 2020, <https://www.military.com/undertheradar/2018/10/03/ten-army-bases-named-after-confederate-officers.html>.

¹²⁹ Royston, *The Faces behind the Bases*, 26.

Army's largest recruiting base during a time of war. "A number of these bases got these names in the early and mid-20th century, at a time when military leaders needed to fill the ranks and relied heavily on Southern states. Some were named in the lead-up to World War I and others on the cusp of American entry into World War II. Many of the names were put forward by the states, and the Army, in desperate need of manpower, agreed."¹³⁰ Though the researcher could not find any evidence to prove this theory, such an explanation could also explain the naming of Lee Barracks at West Point in 1962. Though in the middle of the Civil Rights movement, 1962 was also in the middle of America's controversial involvement in Vietnam. Whether in a spirit of reconciliation or to garner more support from southern states, the decision to name bases after long-gone and long-defeated Confederate Generals is a symbol of solidarity with whatever identity the southern leaders had at the time of these post naming decisions. In the best cases, this could have been southern leaders' desire to preserve history and honor previously distinguished citizens of their respective state. From a pessimistic perspective, the south's allegiance to Confederate leaders, which in turn led to the U.S. Army's decision to commemorate their memory, could have been more racist in nature and less in allegiance to the outcome of the Civil War.

Despite these controversial decisions, research revealed an overall consensus to not hold current U.S. Army leaders accountable for decisions over 100 years ago. In an effort to keep the U.S. Army out of political matters, many agree any change would need

¹³⁰ Bryan Bender and Negassi Tesfamichael, "Battle Joined to Strip Confederate Names from Military Bases," *Politico*, 18 August 2017, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/18/military-bases-confederate-names-241799>.

to occur from Congress. According to a retired Army officer and researcher at the Center for a New American Security, “Military leaders are small ‘c’ conservatives, in that they don’t want to get ahead of anybody . . . They hate being seen as drivers of change on any contentious issue.”¹³¹ As one retired Lieutenant Colonel admitted, “The military is consistently the most respected institution in the country . . . As long as the military just wants to ignore [the base name history], people are happy to ignore it. But the problem is that when it’s senior Army leaders around a table, it’s mostly a bunch of white guys discussing race.”¹³²

In August 2017, the U.S. Army post name discussion received heightened media attention after a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Earlier that year, the Charlottesville city council voted to remove the statues of General Robert E. Lee and General Stonewall Jackson of Confederate Army fame. In response, local residents filed a lawsuit, citing a state law that prohibits the removal of war memorials. By August, local white nationalist groups staged a protest to protect the Lee statue. In the aftermath of a demonstration, which at times turned violent, a 32-year-old counter protestor was killed, as well as two state troopers in a helicopter patrol accident.¹³³ This rally was referred to as a “Unite the Right” rally, orchestrated by Jason Kessler. Months earlier, Kessler

¹³¹ Bender and Tesfamichael, “Battle Joined to Strip Confederate Names From Military Bases.”

¹³² Bergengruen, “No Plans to Change Names of Bases Honoring Confederate Generals.”

¹³³ Shannon Van Sant, “Judge Blocks Removal of Confederate Statue That Sparked Charlottesville Protest,” *National Public Radio*, 14 September 2019, accessed 13 March 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/14/760876494/judge-blocks-removal-of-confederate-statue-that-sparked-charlottesville-protest>.

participated in the fight against renaming Lee Park to Emancipation Park in the same square. According to Kessler, his rallies were a protection of his “First Amendment Right . . . the right of every American to be able to peacefully assemble and speak their mind free of intimidation.”¹³⁴

By 2019, a Virginia judge ruled to keep the Lee statue, saying any removal would violate a state statute for historic preservation. The judge subsequently issued a permanent injunction preventing its removal. Many argued these statutes were created to preserve racist ideology, at a time when racism and the Ku Klux Klan had much more power in the south. In response, the judge said, “I don’t think I can infer that a historical preservation statute was intended to be racist . . . Certainly, [racism] was on their minds, but we should not judge the current law by that intent.”¹³⁵ Those who called for the removal view the statue as a symbol of white supremacy. Those who defend the statue view it as a symbol of history, and not all defenders idealize Robert E. Lee. In the middle, moderates want to keep the statue, but with more historical context.

After tensions deescalated from the August “Unite the Right” rally, rumors began to circulate that some white supremacists were connected to the U.S. Military. In response, General Mark Miller as the U.S. Army Chief of Staff released the tweet: “The Army doesn’t tolerate racism, extremism, or hatred in our ranks. It’s against our Values

¹³⁴ Jacey Fortin, “The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville’s Storm,” *The New York Times*, 13 August 2017, accessed 13 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html>.

¹³⁵ Van Sant, “Judge Blocks Removal of Confederate Statue That Sparked Charlottesville Protest.”

and everything we've stood for since 1775.”¹³⁶ However, as a result of this rally and the national attention it received, investigative journalists resurfaced the discussion on southern U.S. Army posts named after Confederate leaders.

Retired Lieutenant Colonel Jason Dempsey, who once served as special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said, “[The Army] is coming out saying ‘we won’t tolerate bigotry’ while operating from bases that honor traitors, who had slaves, who fought against the United States. How does that happen?” One U.S. Army veteran, who experienced the Civil Rights Movement violence in Mississippi in 1966, said his skin would crawl every time he had to write the name Fort Hood as his work address. He said he feared living in the south more than deployments to Southeast Asia and South America during the Civil Rights fights and police brutality of the 1960s. “[Fort Hood] could be named after countless Texan military leaders who had nothing to do with the Civil War,” he said.¹³⁷

In 2017, a group of “mostly African American Democrats” introduced legislation, which would mandate the defense secretary to rename military properties “that [are] currently named after an individual who took up arms against the United States during the American Civil War or any individual or entity that supported such efforts.” Some moderate pundits agree the current naming convention is offensive, but they also understand such a change would be very expensive, and they question where to draw the line between history and memorial. “Let’s take Robert E. Lee. He was a great officer

¹³⁶ Bergengruen, “No Plans to Change Names of Bases Honoring Confederate Generals.”

¹³⁷ Ibid.

before 1861 and there are things he did we should remember. Do we expunge his entire record? Or do we find a way to reconcile what he did for the nation but not celebrate him?” In a counterargument, Civil Rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson said, “There are no bases in Germany named for Hitler or Goering . . . The losers of [the Civil War] are symbols of the vanquished, to be studied but not to be glorified.” Throughout Congressional discussions in 2017, military leaders remained decidedly out of the conversation, with the official statement from the Pentagon, “We do not comment on pending legislation.”¹³⁸

However, three years later, the U.S. Marine Corps made the decision to remove all references to Confederate causes, after a House Armed Services Committee subcommittee held a hearing on rising incidents of white supremacy in the military. The hearing was in reaction to a *Military Times* article which reported indications of rising white nationalism in the U.S. Military. In early February 2020, the *Military Times* released a poll that showed “more than one-third of active-duty troops polled and more than half of minority service members polled have seen examples of white nationalism or ideological-driven racism among their fellow troops.” This was a significant increase from previous *Military Times* polls and “follows a host of incidents of service members being connected to racist groups, online hate forums, and extremist crimes in recent months.”¹³⁹ According to the hearing and official statements to the *Military Times*,

¹³⁸ Bender and Tesfamichael, “Battle Joined to Strip Confederate Names From Military Bases.”

¹³⁹ Leo Shane, III, “Is the military doing enough to look for signs of white nationalism in the ranks?,” *Military Times*, 11 February 2020, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/18/military-bases-confederate-names-241799>.

military leaders lack the ability to detect or discipline extremist behavior. Representative Jackie Speier said, “I don’t think the military takes this threat seriously enough, has the tools it needs, or dedicates sufficient resources to the threat. The lack of urgency and focus trickles down to commanders and enlisted leaders, who appear not to be sufficiently apprised of this threat or how to deal with it.”¹⁴⁰

During the Congressional hearing, Representative Speier wanted to identify if military law enforcement needed new authorities to combat extremism. She sought to identify the “scope and magnitude of the threat,” preventative measures to keep extremists from entering the military, how extremists were identified and prosecuted within the military, and additional tools military leaders need to combat the threat. One representative testified there is no organization as integrated and multicultural as the U.S. Military, anywhere in the world. To keep it this way, the military must show the world “what right looks like” for multiculturalism. The hearing identified a lack of data collection on white supremacy within the military, especially when non-criminal extremist behavior resulted in an administrative discharge and failed to be logged in any tracking mechanism. Additionally, one expert testified the military does not have any mechanism to screen service members’ social media accounts, where most extremism is found.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Shane, “Is the military doing enough to look for signs of white nationalism in the ranks?”

¹⁴¹ U.S. Congress, House, *Alarming Incidents of White Supremacy in the Military – How to Stop It? Hearing before the Subcommittee on Military Personnel*, Washington, DC, 11 February 2020, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://armedservices.house.gov/2020/2/subcommittee-on-military-personnel-hearing-alarming-incidents-of-white-supremacy-in-the-military-how-to-stop-it>.

The military provided a divided response to this hearing. In February 2020, the U.S. Marine Corps commandant ordered the removal of all Confederate-related paraphernalia from every U.S. Marine Corps base across the world. Meanwhile, the U.S. Army officially released it had no plans to do the same. From the U.S. Army's public affairs office, "It is important to note that the naming of installations and streets was done in a spirit of reconciliation, not to demonstrate support for any particular cause or ideology. The Army has a tradition of naming installations and streets after historical figures of military significance, including former Union and Confederate general Officers." From a cost perspective, it is far easier for the U.S. Marine Corps to execute their commandant's directive; "the Marines have fewer bases and did not have the same sort of Civil War presence that can be used to justify honoring Confederate leaders."¹⁴²

Of those chosen for interviews by the *Army Times*, not one U.S. Army or former Army leader agreed with the U.S. Army's decision to keep the current Confederate names. One retired U.S. Army Colonel remembered his time serving with the 3rd Infantry Division in Fort Stewart, Georgia in the late 2000s. During that time, his brigade commander ordered all Confederate prints removed from their conference room, "And the stuff just came down. There was no blow-back or dust-up with the [inspector general]. It was just sort of like 'yeah, that makes complete sense.'¹⁴³ In addition to those interviewed by the *Army Times*, two West Point graduates, voiced their distaste for the

¹⁴² Kyle Rempfer, "Army won't follow Marine Corps lead and rename Confederate bases," *Army Times*, 28 February 2020, accessed 29 March 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/02/28/army-wont-follow-marine-corps-lead-and-rename-confederate-bases/>.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

United States Military Academy continuing to name one of its barracks after Confederate General Robert E. Lee. In op-eds in *USA Today* and *Just Security*, both applauded the United States Military Academy opening their newest barracks building and naming it after African-American West Point Graduate and Tuskegee Airmen commander Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. Both also celebrated the 2017 decision to select Cadet Simone Askew as that year's First Captain, the first African American woman to hold the position. However, both graduates believe continuing to keep the name Lee Barracks takes away from these progressive achievements.¹⁴⁴ The name alienates the diversity which makes West Point an institution for the "individuals who believe in the highest ideals in spite of a reality that tells them differently . . . West Point certainly celebrates its traditions and memorializes its most prominent leaders, but also over time it has realized the importance of . . . embracing diversity as an asset."¹⁴⁵ To both these captains and former West Point graduates, it is an insult to force African American cadets to live in a barracks named for a man, who "if [he] had been successful—would have supported the enslavement of the current First Captain and General Benjamin O. Davis Jr. instead of celebrating their humanity, citizenship, and commitment to patriotic military service."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Benjamin Haas, "West Point Grad: Rename Lee Barracks," *Just Security*, 25 August 2017, accessed 30 March 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/44439/west-point-grad-school-rename-lee-barracks/>.

¹⁴⁵ Timothy Berry, "Black Army captain: I lived in Robert E. Lee barracks. Let's honor our real heroes," *USA Today*, 4 September 2017, accessed 30 March 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/09/04/black-army-captain-on-confederate-statues-build-monuments-to-real-heroes-timothy-berry-column/626451001/>.

¹⁴⁶ Haas, "West Point Grad: Rename Lee Barracks."

Though sentiments seem to be turning towards change, the researcher found no indications of the U.S. Army planning to change their naming policy.

In Congress, some representatives view the names of Confederate leaders as symbols of white supremacy and see a direct causation between the Confederate installation names and reportedly rising white nationalism in the U.S. Military. According to Democratic Representative Yvette Clarke, “Monuments to the Confederacy and its leaders have always represented white supremacy and a continuing attempt to deny the basic human rights of African Americans.” Others in favor of changing the names may not see the names as symbols of white supremacy, but they do see installations and monuments named for Confederates as an antiquated desire to appease southern leaders. These individuals recognize the installations received their names at the height of southern segregation and institutional racism, but now the Civil Rights movement and several generations of societal progression produced the need to make a change. According to one national security analyst, “Naming a base or ship for a person or event is an expression of honor that reflects the values we hold as a military and as a society. When senior leaders condemn hatred . . . but tolerate bases named in honor of Confederate war leaders it sends a mixed signal to service members . . . what message does this send to racial minorities who work on these bases or live in the local community?”¹⁴⁷ Those who want to change the names do not believe the change breaks from tradition, but instead would reaffirm the Army Values.

¹⁴⁷ Bender and Tesfamichael, “Battle Joined to Strip Confederate Names From Military Bases.”

A research into Twitter reactions to the installation name discussion produced less social media commentary compared to the other case studies. A Twitter search of “Army bases named for Confederates” resulted in only 30 tweets. Of those, only one tweet defended the decision to keep current facility names, repeating the Army official statement of the original decision being made in a spirit of reconciliation. Most tweets reposted news articles about the bases named for Confederate leaders and were surprised, previously unaware of this fact within the U.S. Army. Many critics over Twitter focused on the hypocrisy: “If Army bases can be named for a Confederate general, what’s wrong with a black power salute?” This tweet from *The Washington Post* was a response to a controversial picture of African American West Point Cadets in 2016 posing in uniform performing the “black power” or solidarity salute.¹⁴⁸ This tweet was retweeted over 108 times and received 144 likes. Another more recent tweet pointed out the hypocrisy, “In January 2016, the Marine Corps refused to allow a man with a large tattoo of a Confederate flag to enlist, yet 10 Army bases are still named for Confederate generals.”¹⁴⁹ The more other institutions changed Confederate monuments and naming conventions, the more social media and the press questioned the Army, “New Orleans is pulling down Confederate monuments. So why are 10 U.S. Army bases still named for

¹⁴⁸ The Washington Post @washingtonpost, tweet, Twitter, 17 May 2016, accessed 31 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/washingtonpost/status/732597307791835139>.

¹⁴⁹ Austin “Wash Your Hands” Peterson @AP4Liberty, tweet, Twitter, 27 February 2020, accessed 31 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/AP4Liberty/status/1233065426386423809>.

Confederate generals?”¹⁵⁰ Others with a sense of humor speculated the joke was on the Confederacy, with the decision to name these bases after the most hated and unpopular Confederate leaders, “Hood and Bragg were both Confederate generals that now have army bases named for them. Seems odd; though, they were famously incompetent.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Max Boot @MaxBoot, tweet, Twitter, 31 May 2017, accessed 31 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/AP4Liberty/status/1233065426386423809>.

¹⁵¹ BobWill @Bobwill, tweet, Twitter, 9 November 2011, accessed 31 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/bobwill/status/134452831016071169>.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Why Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is how individuals give meaning to certain objects and social interactions and how people perceive themselves in society. It is an appropriate paradigm from which to study these four cases because it explores why leaders give meaning to certain social media posts and not others. It also seeks to understand how these leaders view their role and place in society. According to symbolic interactionism, our concept of “self” works itself out through social interactions and manifests itself in our decisions against certain symbols. For example, losing a job or breaking up with a partner may not have serious physical effects, but the event can change how a person views themselves, based on the way the news is judged by others.¹⁵² In other words, certain symbols, in this case social media posts, have meaning because they equate to an individual’s sense of self-worth in society.

Symbolic interactionism is rooted within American Pragmatism and has three premises. First, humans act towards objects and people in their environment on the basis of the meaning these objects and people have for them. Second, these meanings derive from social interaction and communication. Third, meanings are established and modified through an interpretive process that the individual actor undertakes. In other words, people behave based on the meaning they give certain symbols, and this meaning can be

¹⁵² Alex Dennis, “Symbolic Interaction,” *Hoboken* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 349-356, accessed 25 November 2019, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/894710587?pq-origsite=summon>.

molded and changed through social interactions. According to this form of qualitative inquiry, “Humans are purposive agents who confront a world that must be interpreted rather than a world composed of a set of stimuli to which the individual must react.”¹⁵³

Cancel Culture and Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism appropriately applies to cancel culture because the consequences of being cancelled directly predicate from the importance one weighs on social media posts as symbols. For example, if John Doe is rarely active on social media and hundreds of people decide to ostracize him on Twitter, he may not care and continue to go about his life. Meanwhile, his boss may interpret the social media anger differently, and look to punish John Doe or distance the image of the company from this unpopular person. In another example, if a business relies on social media popularity to attract new customers and 500 people decide to cancel it, this could significantly impact revenue. The analysis of these four cases of cancel culture aims to identify whether or not leaders chose to give certain social media interactions meaning. The purpose is to understand where Army leaders should invest their meaning-making from social media pressures.

Cancel culture is the effort to change others’ behavior against a person or object, by increasing social interactions over social media, and highlighting a “symbol” or offensive behavior. For example, if someone discovers a celebrity said something or behaved in a way which they symbolically interpret as offensive or intolerable, they will virally spread the behavior across social media to change other’s opinions of the celebrity

¹⁵³ Thomas A. Schwandt, *The Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2015), 292-293.

and hopefully affect leaders' meaning making of the celebrity's behavior, in efforts to boycott or fire the celebrity. Cancel culture consists of emotionally heated opinions of a person or object. In the eyes of those who want to cancel someone, there can only be one acceptable decision against the cancelled or "called out" individual. However, as the cases studies in Chapter 3 demonstrate, decision-makers make varied decisions against a controversial person or object because they give symbols very different meanings. Symbols are only capable of changing a leader's decision if the meaning making contrasts with leader or organization's self-identity and core values.

Figure 2 demonstrates a leader or organization's decisions against a person or object. These decisions are in harmony with the leader's identity and core values. Daily, people, leaders, and organizations receive hateful social media posts, critiques, and complaints, which they easily discard to maintain their decisions (depicted in the black dots in Figure 2). However, one day, the leader sees a post, video, or accusation, propagated and fueled by social media cancel culture, as shown with the golden dot in Figure 2. The leader decides this behavior is not in harmony with their organization's core values. This in turn changes their behavior or decisions against the person or object.

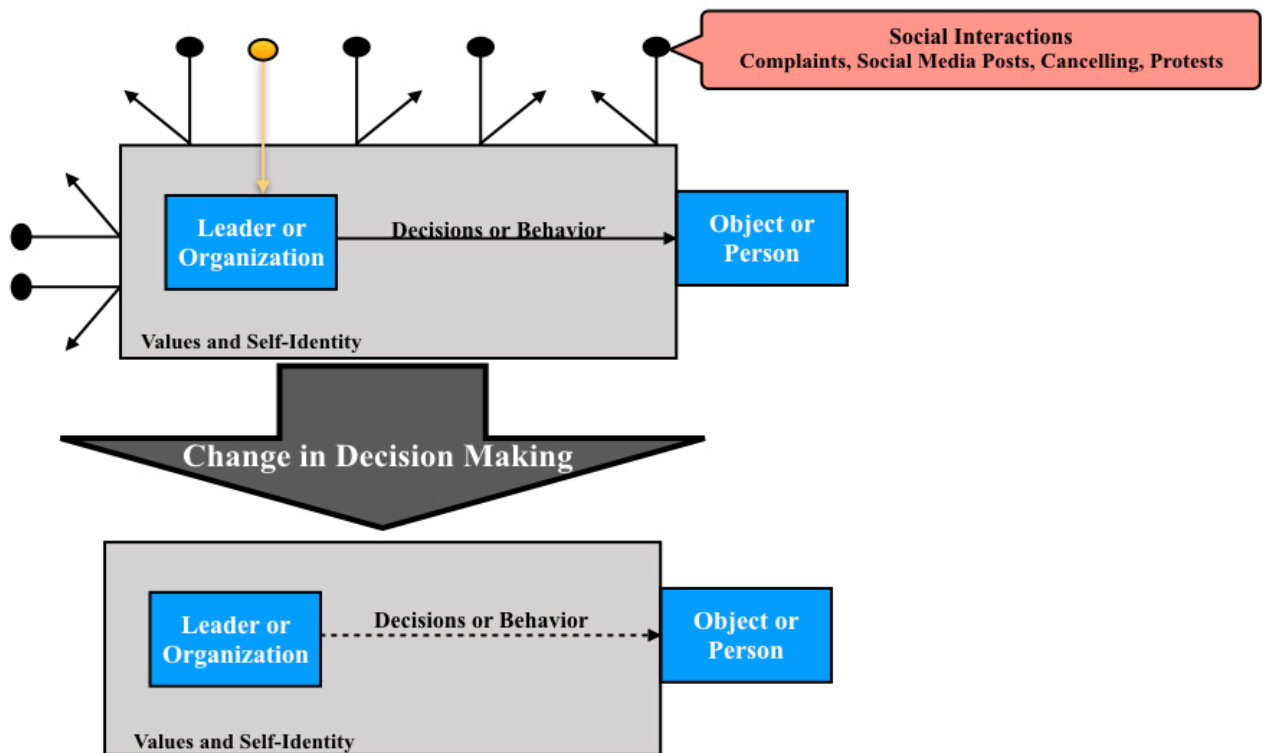


Figure 2. Cancel Culture Effects on Decision Making per Symbolic Interactionism

Source: Created by author.

Cancel culture aims to pressure leaders to make or change a decision. These changes in an attempt to appease the public may create greater anger as a result. If a leader reacts too quickly, it can be seen as unjust, and critics view the decision as a trial by social media mob. The leader might develop a reputation of bending to the will of social media pressure, rather than making deliberate, effective decisions. If the leader does not act quickly enough, participants within social media create outrage to brand the leader as a hypocrite to their declared values, and a delayed reaction may appear as the eventual result of piling social media pressures. In this circumstance, the leader would

again be accused of reacting to social media cancel culture pressure, and not organizational rules or the leader's conscience.

James Gunn and Walt Disney Company Analysis

This analysis will focus on Disney's decision-making against James Gunn. The Walt Disney Company receives hundreds of complaints every day in the name of political correctness. The researcher has witnessed an overwhelmingly large number of celebrity and public accusations that *Beauty and the Beast* glorifies Stockholm syndrome and abusive relationships. *The Little Mermaid* encourages young girls to silence their voice to win a prince. *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* tell young girls to wait for a prince to save them.¹⁵⁴ Included in attacks and accusations are urban legends of Walt Disney being a racist and anti-Semite, as well as the Walt Disney Company firing 1960s actors for being homosexual. Disney overtly ignores these complaints, choosing instead to focus on the classic nature of their movies, appealing to the emotions of children who are enchanted by the stories, and the parents who remember their own impression of the same tales. Some documentaries and articles seek to debunk the racist and anti-Semite rumors, but overall the Disney Company ignores these accusations.¹⁵⁵ However, when James Gunn's offensive social media activity resurfaced,

¹⁵⁴ Jessica L. Laemle, "Trapped in the Mouse House: How Disney has Portrayed Racism and Sexism in its Princess Films" (Student Research Paper, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, Fall 2018), accessed 11 May 2020, https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/692.

¹⁵⁵ JPost.com Staff, "No truth in claim that Walt Disney was an anti-Semite," *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 February 2020, accessed 11 May 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Culture/No-truth-in-claim-that-Walt-Disney-was-an-anti-Semite-410965>.

it could not be ignored. Figure 3 below demonstrates how James Gunn's old tweets affected the image and family values of the Walt Disney Company.

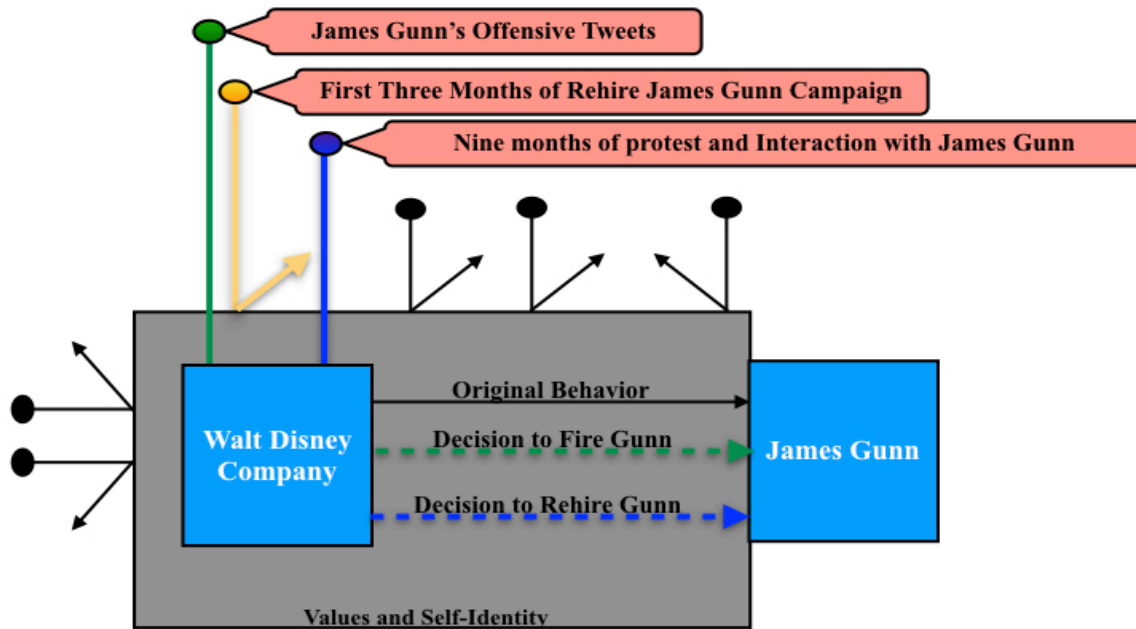


Figure 3. Walt Disney Decision Making against James Gunn

Source: Created by author.

In Figure 3, the black dots depict all the complaints, accusations, and rumors the Disney Company chooses to ignore in the form of symbols. The green represents James Gunn's tweets, which the Disney Company symbolically interpreted to not be in line with their self-identity and core values. Based on their interpretation of this green symbol, Disney made the new decision to fire James Gunn. The golden symbol represents the counteraction against this decision, to include the *Guardians of the Galaxy* cast's public letter and the Rehire James Gunn social media movement. Figure 3 depicts how the gold symbolic interactions did not affect Disney's resolution or change their interpretation of

their decision to fire James Gunn. However, depicted in the blue dot is James Gunn's response and Disney executives' interaction with James Gunn after the firing incident. These social interactions created a new symbol with which to interpret Gunn as a worthy representative of the Walt Disney Company and Marvel Studios. Based on this interpretation, Disney reversed their decision-making and made the new decision to rehire James Gunn. As assessed in press coverage, James Gunn's behavior through the incident allowed Disney to create their symbolic interpretation of the director and reverse their decision, while still maintaining behavior in line with their own interpretation of Disney's core values as a family company.

This case demonstrates how new social interactions can change one's behavior towards a person or object. Disney executives meeting in person with James Gunn on several occasions before rehiring him demonstrates how personal interaction and familiarity with a person or object creates the strongest meaning making. The decisions from this meaning making may be in contrast to social media pressures. Though there was a strong social media force pushing to rehire James Gunn, there were social media pressures just as strong to fire him and admonish his past behavior. Disney's personal interaction with the director ultimately tipped the scales in Gunn's favor.

James Gunn and Researcher Observation

The researcher was one of the millions of *Guardians of the Galaxy* fans, angry at the decision to fire James Gunn for inappropriate jokes. The timing helped formulate this opinion, as the decision to fire Gunn occurred during the mass Hollywood purge of the #MeToo movement. Mass firings over years-old mistakes began to appear unmerciful and as a Hollywood bureaucratic scramble to save face. The fact firings occurred only

after an uproar on social media and not at the time of the offense supported this perception.

In the military, decisions made in a rush to save face often receive a negative reaction. Commanders are expected to look at each offense on its individual merit before making the decision to exact punishment or separate a Soldier from the U.S. Army. Another concern for the U.S. Army in terms of this case is the ability to weaponize someone's social media activity. Hypothetically, a private could resurface offensive social media activity from his Company Commander in retribution. Senior leaders must then decide to punish the Private for insubordination, the Company Commander for conduct unbecoming of an officer, or choose no punishment at all. The challenge is further complicated if the senior leader is inactive on social media, or if the Company Commander has no visibility of his Private's social media activity. The Company Commander's old social media history could spread virally without either officer's knowledge.

Anheuser-Busch and Carson King Analysis

This case study analysis focuses on three different leader decisions: *The Des Moines Register* decisions against Carson King and their reporter Aaron Calvin, Anheuser-Busch's decision to sever ties with Carson King, and the Iowa Governor's decision to treat Carson King as a local hero. Figure 4 below depicts the *Des Moines Register*'s decisions through the controversial incident:

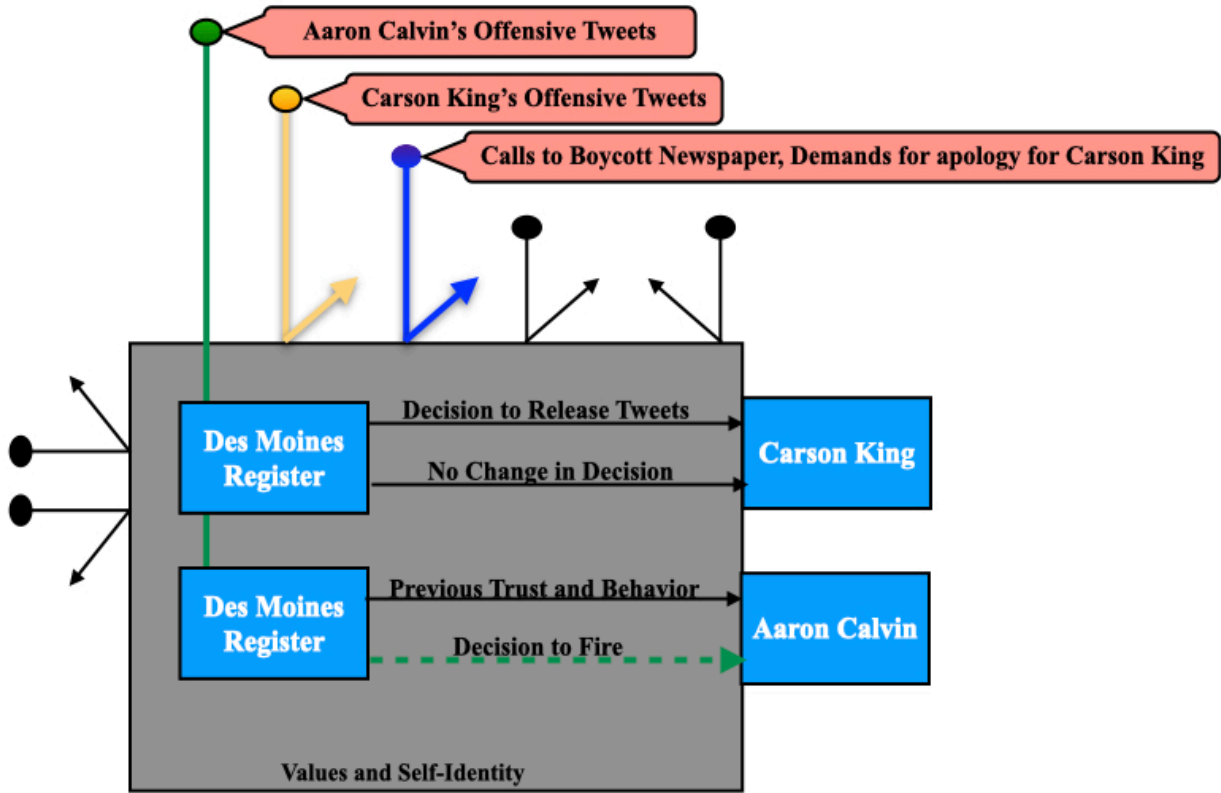


Figure 4. *Des Moines Register* Decision Making against Carson King and Aaron Calvin

Source: Created by author.

As a newspaper, the *Des Moines Register* values transparency and honest coverage of people and events. Therefore, their decision to release Carson King's old social media activity aligned with their sense of responsibility and identity as an unbiased news agency. As depicted in the gold symbol and blue symbol, both Carson King's offensive tweets and the negative backlash from King supporters did not alter the newspaper's normal behavior. Both these symbols did not penetrate the newspaper's personal values or affect how they view themselves as a news institution. However, one of their own employees behaving in a way contrary to the newspapers values effectively

penetrated their self-identity, and the *Des Moines Register* changed their behavior towards Aaron Calvin. When Calvin first presented the King's controversial social media history, the *Des Moines Register* trusted Calvin's judgment and released the information. However, when one of their own displayed equally offensive behavior, the same newspaper investigated and fired their reporter.

Anheuser-Busch and Iowa Governor Reynolds both made decisions in line with their personal values but with very different outcomes:

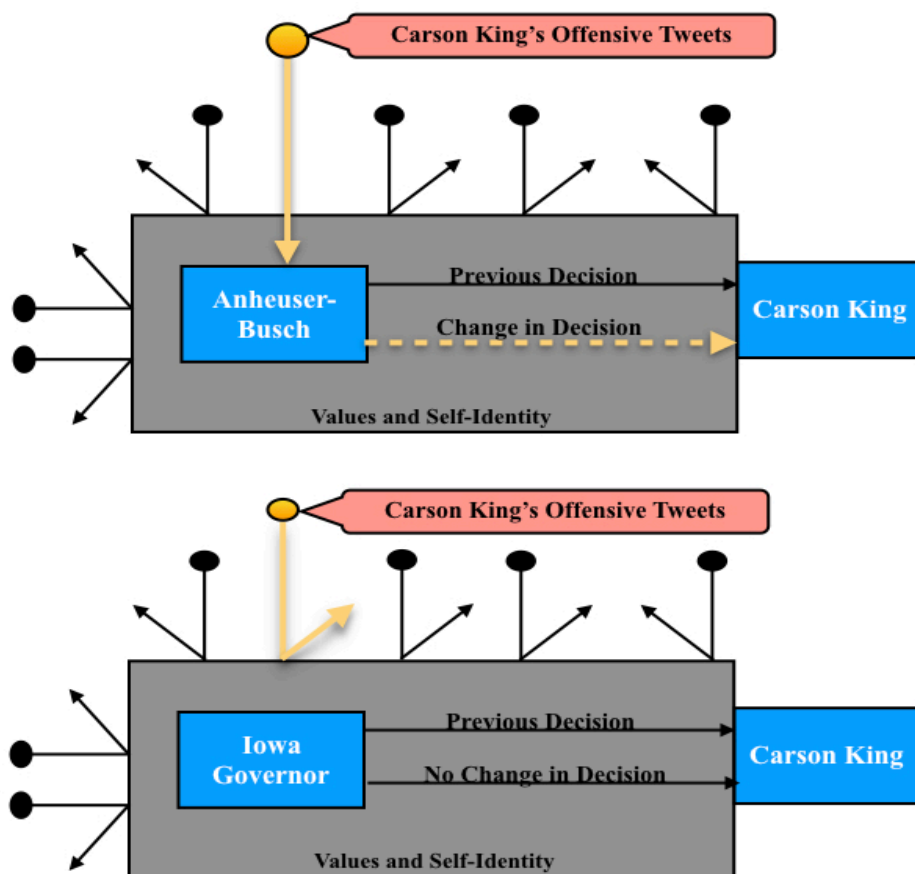


Figure 5. Anheuser-Busch and Iowa Governor Decision Making against Carson King

Source: Created by author.

Per symbolic interactionism, individual behavior towards other people or objects is based off the symbolic meaning they give certain symbols. This meaning is different for each person and changes through new interactions. Anheuser-Busch originally treated Carson King as a hero and a boon for the beer company's reputation. However, when his old social media activity resurfaced, they accepted it as a symbol which affected their meaning making and decision making towards King. Their new interpretation of King was strong enough to accept the financial and public relations consequences of reversing their decision. The backlash the company received for another trial by social media and the money lost after cancelling the beer can labels with King's face demonstrate the length the company was willing to go to distance themselves from behavior that did not align with their declared values.

The Iowa Governor on the other hand, symbolically interpreted Carson King's tweets as a story of personal growth. After making the decision to celebrate King as a local hero, the past social media activity did not change her decision or behavior towards King. This is likely due to her closer affiliation with King as an Iowan and the children's hospital location in her state. Governor Reynolds has more of an invested interest in a local children's hospital and her state constituents than an international beer company. Therefore, she weighed King's donation and his current actions more highly than his jokes as a minor.

This case demonstrates how two different leaders can make two very different decisions towards the same object or person but still act in line with their personal values and self-identity. In this case, the proximity to the person or object affects the loyalty of one's behavior. The Iowa Governor felt more obligated to defend the actions of a local

Iowan and praise his donation to an Iowan children's hospital. Anheuser-Busch had no special loyalty to Iowa, and by extension King or the children's hospital, and the company has a significantly larger audience and international image.

Carson King and Researcher Observation

This case highlights the challenge and debate on statutes of limitation for people's social media activity. As addressed in Chapter 2, one side of the cancel culture argument believes people can change, and jokes made as a minor or years ago should not condemn someone for the rest of their life. The other side of the argument believes these jokes are a reflection of subconscious biases or bigotry, ingrained in our society. According to this argument, the fact these jokes were ever considered funny is a reflection of racism or bigotry in American culture, which was excused for years before social media outrage brought it to light. However, this argument loses credibility to the other side of the argument when the social media masses subjectively choose what is offensive and what is not. The comedian who wrote the jokes repeated by Carson King has lost some prominence, but at the time of the tweets, he was very popular to both sides of the political aisle. Those who attack cancel culture worry that silencing jokes leads to silencing all discussion on race, gender relations, and lessons from historical figures. To them, the cancel culture should not be allowed to silence people's freedom of speech just because their outrage is the loudest.

From a military perspective, the issues and controversies of this case illustrate the challenges in military leaders' individual judgements on Soldiers within their organizations. How should a battalion commander react if a local newspaper asks for an official statement on a company commander's social media posts when he was 16 years

old? If a subordinate leader demonstrates sound judgement and good leadership, should his past transgressions as a minor be held against him? If the solution is censoring leaders' social media posts, at what point does this censor freedom of speech? This case study further demonstrates how two Army leaders, both espousing and living the Army values, could make two very different decisions against the Soldier in question. As the social media reactions, boycotts, and petitions in this case study display, a negative reaction to whatever decision is made has the potential to impact the good order and discipline of the organization.

Chick-fil-A Analysis

Per symbolic interactionism, this case study supports the premise that meaning making of a person or object changes through increased social interactions, and this meaning differs from person to person. For this analysis, the focus is on Chick-fil-A's meaning making and behavior towards the Salvation Army. For more than seven years, Chick-fil-A resisted cancel culture boycotts and political attacks, as they continued long-term donation commitments to the Salvation Army, while continuing to thrive financially. In announcing to sever its ties with the Salvation Army, Chick-fil-A must have found a reason to change their previous stance and decision. To the researcher's knowledge with information available, nothing outside of a cancel culture push to block Chick-fil-A from certain cities and locations influenced their decision to stop long-term donations to Christian organizations with anti-LGBTQ reputations. Figure 6 below demonstrates Chick-fil-A's change in meaning making against the Salvation Army:

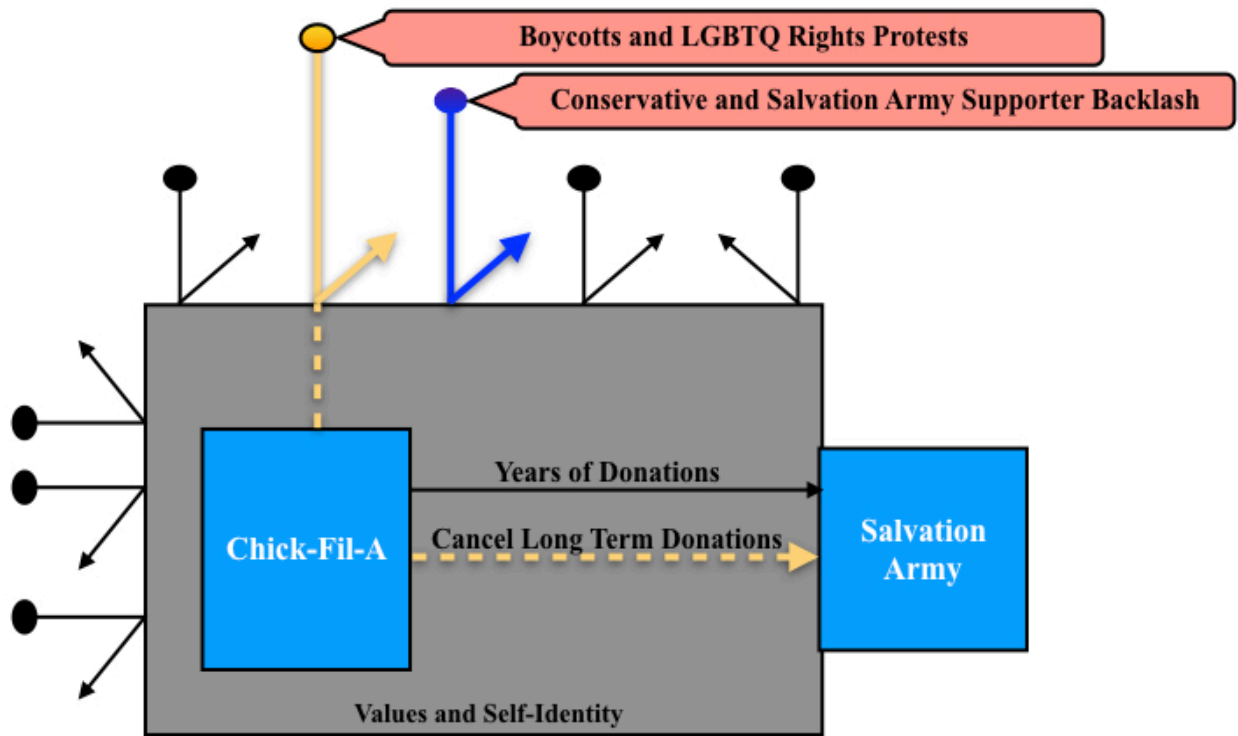


Figure 6. Chick-Fil-A Decision Making against the Salvation Army

Source: Created by author.

The black dots bouncing off Chick-fil-A's values and identity demonstrate all the complaints the company chose to ignore. The gold symbol consists of the LGBTQ activist activity against the fast food chain. The solid gold line bouncing off Chick-fil-A's values and self-identity demonstrates the years of resisting activist outrage, but the dotted line symbolizes the 2019 change. After changing their traditional charity behavior towards the Salvation Army, Chick-fil-A chose to ignore the conservative backlash, as demonstrated with the blue dot in Figure 6.

Chick-fil-A and Researcher Observation

The Chick-fil-A donation controversy not only demonstrates how continuous protests and outrage can change an institution's behavior, it also shows how partial or biased information can spread virally over social media and affect people's perceptions of an organization. The Salvation Army arguably has done more good than harm and is traditionally recognized as one of the most selfless and charitable organizations over the past century. Despite the Salvation Army's passionate public releases against any anti-LGBTQ biases, the researcher could not find one LGBTQ activist who openly defended the organization. In some cases, anger was propagated via social media based on rumors or false reporting about the Salvation Army.

In a military application, a potential cancel culture movement against an Army organization or the Army as a whole could affect recruitment numbers or general public support. Cancel culture case studies demonstrate how any perceived offense is a viable target to be spread across social media. A military training exercise accident with pictures on Twitter, a court-martial against a gay Officer taken out of context, or a ceremony in honor of a historical General with a controversial history are all potential targets of cancel culture. These offenses, whether real or perceived, can spread like a wildfire across social media, damaging the Army's reputation without any power from a commander to stop it.

Additionally, the heated backlash from the other half of the social media argument during this case study demonstrates how a change can backfire. Chick-fil-A maintains its religious mission statement and reputation. The company still closes on Sunday, and they have made no apology for Cathy Truett's behavior before his death. In light of this, both sides of the argument believe the donation change is hypocritical. The

social media outrage against Chick-fil-A not only continued, it increased. In military application, if a decision is made for public relations approval, but does not align with the Army's values, the military could lose credibility from both sides of the argument.

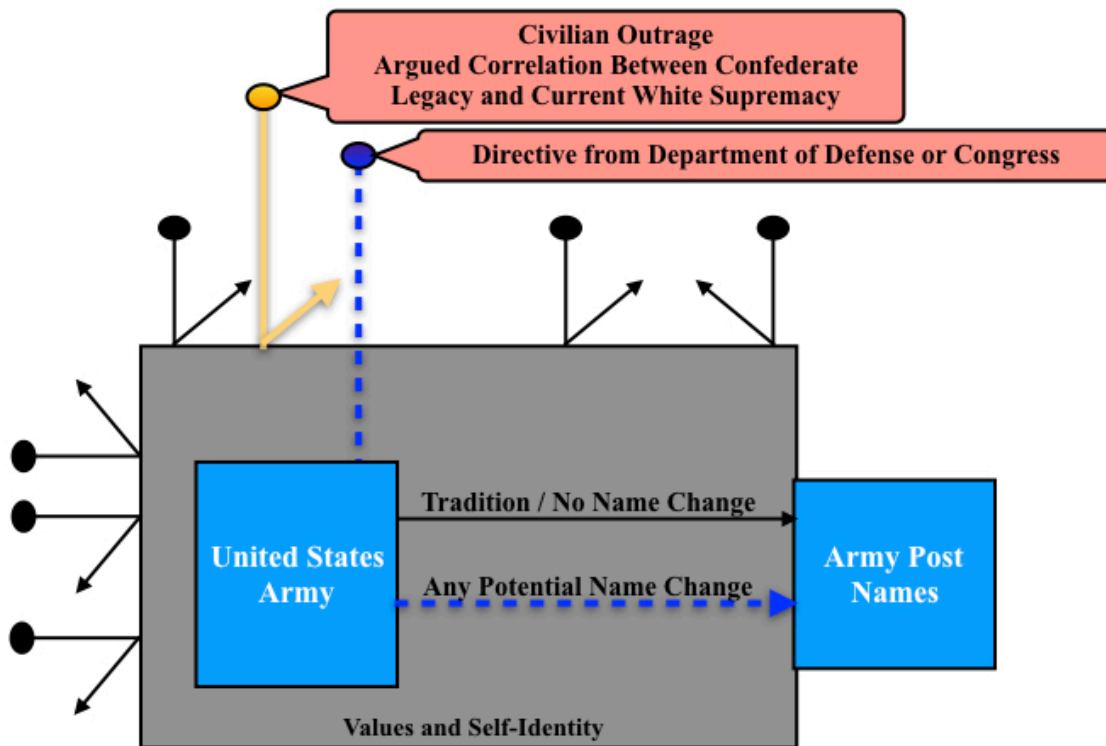


Figure 7. U.S. Army Decision Making against Army Installation Names

Source: Created by author.

U.S. Army Installation Name Analysis

The U.S. Army installation name controversy is an appropriate example of symbolic interactionism, because so many decisions throughout the background events are in relation to people's self-identity within society, as well as the emotionally-charged meaning they make of certain symbols, and the subsequent decisions they make based off

these meanings. This analysis will focus on the contemporary U.S. Army decision to keep the current installation names:

In this case study, U.S. Army leaders are the decision makers who have made no decision to change over 100 years of tradition. The gold dot in Figure 7 symbolizes cancel culture, social media outrage, and the belief Confederate names fuel white supremacy. U.S. Army decision makers do not officially accept a correlation between Confederate leader installation names and white supremacy. The decision to keep the names as they are, therefore, does not conflict with their Army Values. However, the blue dot represents a potential directive from Congress, in which case the U.S. Army would change their position and rename the ten installations in question.

Research identified several possible reasons for not changing the installations in terms of symbolic interactionism. One is the absence of a personal association between Confederate names and current white supremacy. Most Army leaders do not see themselves as racists, and therefore do not believe working on installations such as Fort Bragg or Fort Hood symbolically carries the meaning of calling them a racist. Indeed, terms like Fort Bragg have more associations with current 82nd Airborne Division achievements and World War II legacy, than conjuring an image of General Braxton Bragg. In accordance with symbolic interactionism, the meaning of certain symbols and decisions are based on personal experiences with said symbols. U.S. Army leaders have the most exposure to the U.S. Army posts in question in this case, and their exposure is to the Brigades, Divisions, and Corps of each installation and their respective reputations. If U.S. Army leaders have no personal exposure to racism or bigotry, specifically associated with the names Fort Hood, Fort Bragg, or Fort Polk, they are less likely to feel that these

installation names are out of synch with their own self-identity and personal values. This makes it easier to not take a personal ownership of each installation name and maintain the Army's current stance of letting Congress make the final decision. Leaving the decision and controversy to Congress saves the U.S Army a lot of money in expensive name changes for these 10 locations, and allows U.S. Army leaders to focus on their own decisions to promote equality and the Army Values without second-guessing Army decisions from the last century.

As with the Carson King case study, this case demonstrates how two different leaders can hold the same values and self-identity but make completely different decisions off the same object or person. Decision-making and meaning making differs based on proximity or personal association with the person or object in question. Both Congressional leaders, Civil Rights activists, and U.S. Army leaders all have a sense of loyalty to the United States and the values it represents. In this case, those more likely to defend the installations are military leaders with a personal association with the legacy and history of these installation names. Congressional members and outside individuals demanding a change, are further removed and can look at the situation and symbolically interpret the names from a different approach. This further proves the premise within symbolic interactionism that the meaning making which drives our actions towards people or objects is developed through increased interactions.

U.S. Army Installations and Researcher Observation

Within the researcher's personal observation, most U.S. Army service members associate installation names with the unit at said location, not the history of the General behind the name. If the researcher receives orders to Fort Hood, 1st Cavalry Division and

3rd Cavalry Regiment come to mind before images of General John Bell Hood. Leaders who support maintaining the Confederate names believe it maintains the U.S. Army's apolitical approach to history. In one personal example, the researcher worked for a Colonel who often cited American General Patton and Nazi General Rommel as his two favorite generals. This Colonel presented this opinion as a testament to his personal ability to admire leadership and tactics, beyond national affiliation. As a West Point cadet, the researcher often walked past Lee Barracks and Grant Hall, aware of Lee and Grant's opposing allegiance during the Civil War. However, the researcher never saw the naming as a symbol of racism, merely recognition of a skilled tactician and leader, produced by the United States Military Academy. Across the West Point installation, monuments memorialize all U.S. military conflicts. The most famous is the Battle Monument at Trophy Point. A Civil War memorial, this monument is surrounded by a circle of cannons, half-buried, facing into the ground, to represent American weapons, which will never again be used against its own citizens. The tone of the Academy's historical monuments was indeed that of reconciliation. However, not being African American, the researcher was not aware of what an insult Lee Barracks could have been to the African American cadets whose presence at the Academy was directly due to the sacrifices of the Union and the failure of the Confederacy.

Upon commissioning, the researcher did not witness a cause and effect relationship between bases named for Confederate leaders and racism or bigotry within the U.S. Army. The researcher worked on Fort Gordon, Georgia as her first duty assignment. During that time, three company commanders, two first sergeants, her first platoon sergeant, and both brigade commanders she served with were African American.

Though there were some isolated cases of racism amongst Soldiers, none witnessed were in direct result to the installation being named for a Confederate General. Indeed, the installation name and its origins never entered conversation in over three years of service at this duty station. However, the researcher understands there is a difference between racism witnessed and racism experienced. As argued by one journalist in Chapter 2, cancel culture sheds light on offenses felt but never expressed. The editorials from two West Point graduates in Chapter 3 demonstrate years of indirect racism, which social media gives voice to and allows to be heard.

Chapter Summary

In studying a phenomenon as subjective as cancel culture, case study was an appropriate method to qualitatively analyze each event, for every cancel culture event is nuanced and different. Symbolic interactionism principles illustrate how social media has the power to alter our perceptions of individuals and objects by highlighting offensive behavior and providing leaders with new symbols with which to interpret their surroundings. The increased social interactions over social media have the power to change a leader's interpretation of a person or object and then change their decision-making against them. Despite the differences between each cancel culture event, these four case studies proved the principles of symbolic interactionism and displayed the following commonalities: First, leaders are more likely to react to social media pressures if a newly introduced symbol affects the leader's personal values or self-identity. Second, different leaders can be exposed to the same symbols and social interactions, make very different decisions, and still act in accordance with similar values and self-identity. Third, leaders are more likely to resist social media pressures or cancel culture demands, the

closer their proximity to the person or object in question. Finally, decision-changes out of synch with a leader's declared values fail to appease anyone and can result in a harsher backlash than the original outrage. Like the major corporations in the first three case studies, the U.S. Army understands the importance of sound decision-making. By understanding how cancel culture and social media bias can skew one's perception, Army leaders can increase their awareness and guard themselves from subjective biases to their decision making processes.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

With smart phones and the digital connectivity of today's society, social media increasingly permeates more aspects of American lifestyle. Each social media poster has a potential audience of thousands, if not millions, of viewers. Posters use this exponentially increasing attention to voice opinions on everything from the quality of service at a restaurant, to the perceived moral conduct of a complete stranger, to the inner workings of their office, and the private behavior of a family member, friend, or boss. Controversial opinions or offensive jokes once left to social gatherings between close friends or trusted family members, now spread virally across social media. When strong emotions react to perceived offensive posts or outrage at someone else's behavior, one side of the argument seeks to socially ostracize the perceived offensive poster as an "immoral" person. In some cases, the angry social media masses will not rest until this allegedly offensive person is fired, imprisoned, or at the very least banished from social media activity. Media commentators have named this revolution of social media activism and eventual outcomes as cancel culture.

Also referred to as call-out culture, victim culture, or online firestorming, cancel culture may latch onto the offensive jokes or behavior of one social media user, while ignoring similar behavior from someone else. As examples throughout this study demonstrate, cancel culture can target a small town lawyer with less than a thousand followers, or an international multi-million dollar company. While some brush off the negative attention, delete their Twitter account, and continue with their lives, others may

get fired, lose a college acceptance, or receive death threats against themselves and their family. Opponents to cancel culture criticize its attack on freedom of speech, referring to social media platforms as open forums for even offensive ideas and opinions. While others refer to social media as a new medium to give voice to those who may have always been offended by racist or bigoted jokes and behavior, only now they have a medium to change the behavior in American culture.

This research aimed to identify whether or not cancel culture has the power to change senior leader decision making. New leaders entering the U.S. Army come from an upbringing saturated in social media. Those born after 1998, likely cannot remember a time before social media and its influence on social behavior. Understanding how social media pressures can impact the ability to make unbiased decisions can help identify potential pitfalls and raise awareness of outside influences. In the researcher's observations, many U.S. Army Officers completely avoid social media. Often this is in an effort to avoid gossip, misinformation campaigns, or activist messages. However, recent events indicate more if not all Army leaders will need to encounter and address social media pressures on decisions within their organizations. While leaders may chose to avoid social media in their personal lives, it is incumbent on leaders to have an awareness of social media influences on their organizations and Soldiers.

Symbolic interactionism is the theory of how humans react and respond to symbols in their environment. Symbolic interactionism presents three overarching premises. First, each person symbolically interprets objects they encounter in their life and use the meaning making they derive from each symbol to influence their behavior. Second, everyone has a different symbolic meaning to the same symbol based on

experiences. Third, social interactions can change or modify one's symbolic meaning towards and object or person. For the purpose of this study, social media posts and angry cancel culture reactions served as the symbol. Analysis of four different case studies aimed to understand how leaders behaved differently based on different meaning making of the same symbol.

Primary Research Question

Does social media cancel culture affect senior leader decision making?

The research from this study indicates cancel culture affects leader decision making. Cancel culture outrage demands an explanation or change from company CEOs and other organizational leaders. If the leader feels enough pressure, or if they feel the controversial event in question makes them appear hypocritical to their declared values, they will have a higher probability of reversing their decisions.

Secondary Research Questions

How could cancel culture movements influence U.S. Army decisions?

In Chapter 4, analysis of the four case studies revealed different leaders symbolically interpret cancel culture events in very different ways. If a trusted employee said something offensive on social media as a minor, one supervisor may contrast the current employee actions with their past behavior and laud the employee for personal growth and development. Meanwhile, another supervisor may side with angry social media reactions and fire the employee. As all these case studies demonstrate, cancel culture and social media often push leader decisions into the public spotlight and turn internal decision making into a public controversy.

Cancel culture and the public spotlight of such controversies has the potential to drag an otherwise respected institution into the impassioned social media political stage and undermine the U.S. Army's reputation and decision making processes. Commanders at the lowest level determine most punishments for their Soldiers. A company commander's judgement must be trusted to make the best decision possible, per Army principles of Mission Command and decentralized execution. If another commander overrides the commander's lawful and ethical judgment, it may undermine the company commander's authority in the unit. If Soldiers believe a commander decision is up for debate or the loudest outrage can cause a decision reversal, it may undermine the good order and discipline of a unit.

How do cancel culture trends differ from Army decision-making doctrine?

Cancel culture presents unique challenges, compared to other forms of social media pressures. Unique to cancel culture, one side of the outrage argument believes they take the "morally right" position. The concept of cancelling an object or person is to silence an opinion, so reprehensible, the person or object must be punished and socially ostracized for the betterment of society. In the U.S. Army, many decisions are nuanced, with limited information in a time constrained environment. During deployments, the U.S. Army operates with lethal force in complex environments, with cyber, diplomatic, civilian, enemy, and geographical terrain all factoring into pressures against mission accomplishment. Often there is no right answer, just the best possible course of action with the resources available. Because of this, U.S. Army doctrine outlines ideal commander attributes in the form of training, experience, character, and intuition to make a judgement call. To assist, the commander's staff belabors every factor that might affect

mission accomplishment, spending hours analyzing possible courses of action during the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP).

Cancel culture is the antithesis of U.S. Army doctrine on decision making. Rather than analyzing all information and multiple positions to solve a problem, cancel culture declares only one right decision. Often this judgement comes from incomplete information, words or actions taken out of context, or mistakes from years ago. While U.S. Army doctrine recognizes social media and public opinion, within the information domain, as one of many factors for mission accomplishment, cancel culture believes the social media opinion is the only factor that matters.

Army doctrine on the information environment, MDMP, and commander decisions mostly appear written for a combat environment with a known enemy. In garrison, decisions to recall Soldiers to work on a Saturday, an unannounced barracks inspection, or separating a Soldier from the Army do not have deliberate processes using MDMP, or a robust staff factoring in public opinion or social media outrage.

Commanders may not know how to react if such a decision spreads virally over social media and national news expects an explanation. Further, as studies show the next generation relies more and more on social media approval, incoming Army leaders could adjust their decisions to accommodate the social media mob.

How does cancel culture apply to symbolic interactionism theory, specifically the decision to act on certain social media posts?

As Chapter 4 analysis demonstrates, symbolic interactionism theory explains why different people make different decisions during cancel culture events. As previously explained in Chapter 1, if the symbol is a tree, one person can look at the tree and see a

place to sit for shade, while a second person sees the danger of biting ants. If the second person interacts with the first person and warns them of the biting ants, and the first person is bitten, the first person's interpretation of the tree will modify to both shade and the risk of an ant bite. For this thesis, the tree was the offensive social media activity or non-politically correct opinions of a cancel culture controversy. One leader looks at the offensive tweets from years ago or a monument which is no longer politically correct, and they see the symbol as an example of self-growth or a memorial to history and society's progressive change. Another leader sees a need to hold a person accountable for previously excused offensive behavior, or a need to remove monuments and change memorials to people more in line with current values and standards. As a result, leaders make very different decisions, despite the similar pressures they may receive. Analysis in Chapter 4 reveals those closest to the person or object in question are more likely to make a decision in defense of the person or object. Cancel culture is offended by the premise different people can have different meaning making towards the same symbol. Cancel culture rejects all other symbolic interpretations and accepts only one decision for the "tree" or symbol in question. When challenged, cancel culture is offended by counterarguments and demands the cancelling of opposing points of view.

Recommendations

While social media exists, people will continue to voice controversial opinions with billions of internet users as their audience. Social media shows no signs of extinction in the near future, so leaders must learn to navigate through their decision making processes with the acceptance social media will attempt to pressure their decisions in one direction or the other. Army leadership training, for both officer and

enlisted, must strongly enforce the age-old precept, what is right is not always popular. Likewise, the leader's judgement must be trusted when making a controversial decision, in order to maintain good order and discipline and the positional power of the U.S. Army leader. Senior leaders must understand how lower leaders with more proximity to a controversial issue will differ in their interpretation of the best course of action. Senior leaders must trust their subordinate leaders' decision making process, even when media attention demands swift punishment. As long as decisions are arguably in line with the Army Values, social media outrage can only go so far.

U.S. Army decisions, by comparison, are unchallenged compared to the private sector, due to high public support for the military. U.S. Army Soldiers must continue to perform beyond reproach to avoid unnecessary scrutiny or questioning of the Army Values. Within the Army Values, Integrity is defined as "doing what's right, even when no one is looking." While social media freedom of speech rights must be respected, Soldiers must understand their social media activity applies to their exercise of integrity.

As previously addressed in Chapters 2 and 3, cancel culture is unpredictable. It targets one person while ignoring similar behavior somewhere else. The U.S. Army has no way of predicting whether American social media users will decide tomorrow to be offended by General Dwight D. Eisenhower and demand his removal from military monuments and memorials. Likewise, it is nearly impossible to prevent every Soldier from secretly video recording his or her punishment from a First Sergeant and virally spreading the event across social media, allowing thousands of users to form an opinion without the context. Therefore, U.S. Army leaders must remain true to the Army Values

and not lose sight of the purpose of these Values during the anxiety and frenzy of public opinion pressures.

U.S. Army doctrine on decision-making defers much to the intuition and judgement of the commander, molded from years of experience, education, and training. With social media in its relative infancy, it could take years to understand whether a cancel culture event is a legitimate concern or complaint taken out of context. U.S. Army doctrine already addresses the impact and importance of social media within the information domain. Leaders must never ignore these factors and apply them to their decision making in both deployed and garrison environments.

Recommendations for Further Research

The scope of this research remained focused on cancel culture and its application to the U.S. Army, but there are opportunities for further expansion.

First recommendation is to expand beyond cancel culture to analyze other forms of social media pressures on decision-making. Towards the end of this research, media commentators moved from using the term “cancel culture” to using “victim culture.” The researcher identified announcements for new book releases, analyzing the effects of victim culture on freedom of speech. Additionally, research of “call-out culture” and “online firestorming” would produce much more information, examples, and peer-reviewed analysis of social media activists attempting to affect public opinion.

Second recommendation is to research the history of freedom of speech in the U.S. Army. The Vietnam War protests of the 1960s and other contentious events in military history may shape the way U.S. Army regulations and military law view current freedom of speech rights for Soldiers. Today, social media provides a unique challenge

for how U.S. Military leaders monitor and regulate subversive actions and words of Service Members.

Third recommendation is to give more time to observe cancel culture's evolution and long-term effects. While cancel culture terminology is only two years into regular use, it will take more time for researchers to compile statistical data and observe cancel culture's long-term effects on decision making. Future generations, increasingly inundated with social media, could increasingly allow social media opinions to sway their decisions. Or the angry social media mob could become a white noise which leaders increasingly ignore to maintain decisive action in business, politics, and military decisions. Years and generations into the future, cancel culture could morph into a new phenomenon, as demonstrated with media language on the subject transforming from firestorming, to call-out culture, to cancel culture, to victim culture. Only time and continued research will determine cancel culture's staying power and long-term effects on American society and behaviors.

Fourth recommendation is a study into cancel culture effects on individual leader decisions within the Rapid Decision-Making Synchronization Process (RDSP). RDSP involves quick commander decisions when time and conditions prevent the lengthy MDMP process. A study on how social media and public scrutiny pressure the individual commander would continue this study into cancel culture's potential effects on military decisions.

Summary

As the old saying goes, "opinions are like noses and elbows; everyone's got 'em." Americans have had centuries to learn how to interact with uncomfortable or contrary

opinions in a face-to-face environment. With opinions and offenses virally spread to millions of viewers, society is still learning how to approach this new paradigm. Cancel culture believes in a trial by social media, demanding the angry mob's definition of justice. These demands range from canceling the offender's social media page, firing the offender, or even threatening the offender and their family. The counterargument against cancel culture believes freedom of speech protects all opinions and expressions, no matter how offensive. As the examples of this study demonstrate, the debate can generate impassioned arguments from both sides of the controversy. The result often drags private citizens into national media attention and ruins the reputations of both individuals and organizations.

The U.S. Army exists as a servant to the United States Constitution and its people. As such, it is beholden to American values, which progress through time and struggle, as demonstrated in the Civil War, Civil Rights Movement, Gay Rights Movement, and Women's Rights Movement. At the same time, the U.S. Army must preserve its stalwart character and reputation by continually keeping its policies and decisions above the turmoil and undulation of politics. Unfortunately, when an internal U.S. Army leader decision is captured and spread virally across social media, the cancel culture phenomenon can transform a commander decision into a political decision, against the will or control of U.S. Army decision makers. U.S. Army leaders cannot afford to ignore social media effects on the public perception of their actions and the good order and discipline within their organization. U.S. Army doctrine, especially public affairs regulations, address these effects in the information element of combat power. Commanders must address this element with as much concern as the rest of the elements

of combat power, or risk significant blind spots in their situational understanding during any decision making process.

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