

The Culture War Must Go On

The woke are angry, humorless, and—worst of all—vindictive. Surrender is not an option.

By Joseph Epstein
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I happened to mention the phrase “culture war” in a 1996 conversation with Irving Kristol, who was a contributor to these pages and always a penetrating observer of contemporary American life. “The culture war is over,” Irving said, then paused and added: “We lost.” Alive today, Irving would have been sadly reaffirmed in his declaration, surprised perhaps only at the extent of the loss and the cost it has entailed.

His “we” would include those people who believe in the rewards owed to effort and merit, the value of tradition, and the crucial significance of liberty. “We” would distinctly not include those who believe in the importance of spreading “diversity,” “inclusion” and “equity” as conceived by present-day universities. Nor would it include those whose sense of virtue derives from their putative hunger for social justice and their willingness to make severe judgments of others based

on lapses from political correctness. These people are “they,” the woke, who have, as Kristol had it, won the culture war.

The extent of the woke victory is perhaps best demonstrated by the long list of cultural institutions they have captured and now control. Two of the country’s important newspapers, the [New York Times](#) and the Washington Post, are unashamedly woke. The New Yorker and the Atlantic have ceased to be general-interest magazines and are now specific-interest publications—that interest being the spread of woke ideas. The major television networks early fell in line without a fight.

Universities, in their humanities and social-sciences divisions, are not merely devoted to the propagation of woke ideas but initiate most of them. In turning away from the ideals of authority and objectivity in favor of clearly partisan views, these institutions have lost their former prestige yet are apparently sustained by the confidence that preaching woke doctrine is a higher calling.

Under the deep division in the country, certain prizes—Pulitzers, MacArthur grants, honorary degrees—go almost exclusively to people whose views are woke. (Presidential medals—in the humanities, in the arts, for freedom—are dictated by whether the president in office is woke or not.) Under political correctness, one of the main planks in the woke platform, freedom in the arts is vastly curtailed owing to strictures against what is known as “appropriation,” which disapproves of whites writing about blacks, men about women, heterosexuals about homosexuals. Under woke culture, art is vastly inhibited; humor, because so much of comedy is politically incorrect, largely excluded.

All this might be deleterious enough, but woke culture adds to the nightmare by punishing its opponents through disgrace and cancellation, the latter often affecting not only reputation but income. To suggest that surgery and hormone treatment in connection with transgendering may bring biological penalties, or that riotous looting has any connection at all with the Black Lives Matter organization, or that the anti-Israel movements on campus are a form of thinly veiled anti-Semitism, or that defunding the police will above all hurt black and Latino communities—all this under the reign of woke culture is beyond the pale, and disqualifies anyone who dares to suggest any of it.

The unwoke are left outside the prevailing culture. But what form might resistance to the dominant regime take? A small number of magazines continue to exist outside the woke culture, among them Commentary, First Things, the Claremont Review of Books. The Journal does too, and ought to be supported. Those journalists and intellectuals who haven’t gone woke need to be encouraged and reminded that they are not alone. Argument and humor must be regularly deployed against the absurdity of woke language and slogans. Diversity, inclusion and equity—put them all together, they spell DIE, and death to much that is best in American life they bode.

Those of us who sense that the greatness of the U.S. is dwindling feel that a good part of the reason is the defeat of traditional values and their replacement by woke ones. Identity politics may be the rule in the Democratic Party, but its origin is in woke culture, which accounts for

why the country is filled with so many angry people, for whom no evidence of progress lessens the intensity of their grievances.

Although the culture war would appear to be over, to surrender to the dreariness of woke culture—which tramples on art, is without intellectual authority, allows no humor, and is vindictive toward those who oppose it—is unthinkable. So praise the Lord and pass the ammunition; it's back to the trenches, for there isn't any choice. The culture war must continue.