

# Obama's Very Boomer View of 'Cancel Culture'

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 [nytimes.com/2019/11/01/opinion/obama-cancel-culture.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/01/opinion/obama-cancel-culture.html)

By Ernest  
Owens

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When Barack Obama talks, everyone listens.

That's why I paid close attention to his remarks about young people and our activism on social media at a Tuesday [Obama Foundation event](#), and why I gasped at what I heard: "This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically 'woke' and all that stuff. You should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids. And share certain things with you."

He doubled down on his finger-wagging, criticizing college students in particular who, in his view, think, "The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people and that's enough."

"That's not activism," Mr. Obama said. "That's not bringing about change. If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do."

But the former president's disdain for the kind of criticism that has become popular to dismiss as "cancel culture" (which is a term that, as Osita Nwanevu wrote for the [New Republic](#), "seems to describe the phenomenon of being criticized by multiple people — often but not exclusively on the internet. Neither the number of critics, the severity of the criticism, nor the extent of the actual fallout from it seem particularly important.") is misguided. His eagerness to dismiss one part of what happens when young people stand up for what they believe in as "casting stones" is a reminder of a largely generational divide about whether it's impolite to speak out in favor of the most vulnerable among us and the world we'd like to live in. While there's [some debate](#) about which generation Mr. Obama belongs to, he's solidly in the older camp.

Boomers and Gen-Xers, along with a handful of younger people with more regressive views, have been agitated by the way many young Americans — and especially young people of color — use social media, the only platform many of us have, to talk about the causes we care about.

But they are going to have to get over it.

The issues that my fellow millennials, along with even younger people in Gen Z, tend to be "judgmental" about are the same ones many of our parents and grandparents have been debating for decades. Being outspoken about climate change, women's rights, racial justice, LGBTQ inclusivity and gun control — and critical of those who stand in the way of progress on these issues — is work that's been left to us.

As a millennial who has participated in using digital platforms to critique powerful people for promoting bigotry or harming others, I can assure you it wasn't because they had "different opinions." It was because they were spreading the kinds of ideas that contribute to the marginalization of people like me and those I care about. It was because I didn't want them to have a no-questions-asked platform to do this.

The R&B singer [R. Kelly deserved to be "muted"](#) after decades of sexual abuse allegations against him. Similarly, harsh scrutiny of Hollywood heavyweights Harvey Weinstein and Roman Polanski is appropriate. The National Football League doesn't deserve my viewership after blackballing former player Colin Kaepernick for standing up against racist police brutality. Dave Chappelle should be ridiculed for making transphobic jokes, especially at a time when black transgender women continue to be murdered. It's not rude or intolerant to say Kevin Hart's homophobia isn't funny.