

Charlie Kirk's Legacy Deserves No Mourning

The white Christian nationalist provocateur wasn't a promoter of civil discourse. He preached hate, bigotry, and division.

-Elizabeth Spiers, The Nation



Charlie Kirk speaks at Turning Point USA's America Fest in Phoenix in December 2024. (Josh Edelson / AFP via Getty Images)

Charles James Kirk, 31, died on Wednesday from a gunshot to the neck at a Utah Valley University campus event just as he was trying to deflect a question about mass shootings by suggesting they were largely a function of gang violence. He died with a net worth of [\\$12 million](#), which he made by espousing horrific and bigoted views in the name of advancing Christian nationalism. The foundation of his empire was the group he cofounded and led, Turning Point USA, which is a key youth-recruitment arm of the MAGA movement. Kirk was able to launch Turning Point at the age of 18 because he received money from Tea Party member Bill Montgomery, right-wing donor Foster Friess, and his own father, also a prolific right-wing donor. He was an unrepentant racist, transphobe, homophobe, and misogynist who often wrapped his bigotry in Bible verses because there was no other way to pretend that it was morally correct. He had children, as do many vile people.

It is rude of me to say all of this, because we live in a culture where manners are often valued more than truth. That is why a slew of pundits and politicians have raced to portray Kirk's activities, which harmed many vulnerable people, in a positive light—and to give him the benefit of the doubt that he did not grant to anyone who wasn't white, Christian, straight, and male. California Governor Gavin Newsom framed Kirk's project as a healthy democratic exercise: "The best way to honor Charlie's memory is to continue his work: engage with each other, across ideology, through spirited discourse. In a democracy, ideas are tested through words and good-faith debate." This downwardly defines both "discourse" and "good faith."

There is no requirement to take part in this whitewashing campaign, and refusing to join in doesn't make anyone a bad person. It's a choice to write an obituary that begins "Joseph Goebbels was a gifted marketer and loving father to six children."

Many of the facile defenses of Kirk and his legacy are predicated on the idea that it's acceptable to spread hateful ideas advocating for the persecution of perceived enemies as long as you dress them up in a posture of debate. This is just class privilege. The man who [smeared Black women like Ketanji Brown Jackson and Michelle Obama](#), whom he claimed had benefited from affirmative action, saying, 'you do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously,' said it while wearing a nice shirt and a tie on a podcast instead of tattered overalls in the parking lot of a rural Walmart. That does not make it any less racist.

It's true that we *cannot know what was in Charlie Kirk's heart*, because we are not telepathic. But we can make reasonable inferences based on the things he said and did publicly because we are also not colossally stupid. He built a large following, and acquired real political power saying these things—to young people, to the president and his minions, to deep-pocket right-wing donors—and there are far too many people who have been ready to suggest that he was able to do this through a combination of natural charisma and good old-fashioned hard work. Speaking about and addressing the late Texas Representative Sheila Jackson Lee, who is Black, he said, "It's very obvious to us you are not smart enough to be able to get it on your own. 'I could not make it on my own, so I needed to take opportunities from someone more deserving.'" Kirk was smart enough to ask his father for a check when he wanted to found Turning Point, and had always been happy to curtail opportunities for more deserving people when they failed to conform to his own ideology.

It's this that makes it particularly galling to see him cast by some as a free speech warrior. He created a professor watchlist explicitly designed to get academics fired who dared talk about the right's usual assortment of verboten topics—anything to do with race or gender, in particular. He also offered the standard right-wing complaint about left-wing indoctrination in American universities even as he went on campus tours trying to indoctrinate young people into his hard-right Christian nationalist worldview.

When we decline to speak ill of the dead, it's because we have compassion for the living. In this respect, I am sorry for Kirk's children. I don't know if Kirk was a good father, but if he was, that does little to mitigate the damage he did to other people's children. I can only hope for the sake of his kids that they have role models who will teach them that it is wrong to profit off the dehumanization of people because of who they are.

When asked about mass shootings he said, “I think it’s worth it. I think it’s worth it to have a cost of, unfortunately, some gun deaths every single year, so that we can have the Second Amendment.” Perhaps Kirk did not believe that his own life would be cut short by gun violence, but, like the rest of us, he has witnessed countless school shootings. When he said “some gun deaths” are acceptable, he surely knew he lived in a country where the deaths he deemed acceptable included those of children, some of whom were the age of his own. There is no inherent virtue in caring about your own children; that is the bare minimum requirement for effective parenting. Virtue lies in caring about the safety and well-being of children you don’t know.

On that front, I’m fairly sure Kirk did not care about my child. My child lives in Brooklyn, in a progressive family. His mother works and does not have a marriage where she is considered inferior to her husband or required to obey him, as Kirk arrogantly told Taylor Swift she should do after learning of her engagement. (“Reject feminism,” he said. “You’re not in charge.”) We also live in a Haitian immigrant neighborhood, and if you only listened to Charlie Kirk, you might be under the impression that [my neighbors eat pets](#). You would also be encouraged to believe that, simply by virtue of being non-white immigrants, they were “replacing” white people—and that, since they are also Black, they are dangerous. “Happening all the time in urban America,” he said, “prowling Blacks go around for fun to go target white people, that’s a fact.”

I do not believe anyone should be murdered because of their views, but that is because I don’t believe people should be murdered generally, regardless of who they are or what they’ve done. I am against the death penalty, pro-gun control, and believe war is a failure of humanity, not a necessary byproduct of it. Kirk was fine with murder as long as the right people were dying.

Some of the people valorizing Kirk insist that all of his toxicity was acceptable because at least he was open to debate—a bar so low, you’d have to dig into the Mariana Trench to get to it. And he certainly paid lip service to it. “We record all of it so that we put [it] on the Internet so people can see these ideas collide,” he said of his own streaming operation. “When people stop talking, that’s when you get violence. That’s when civil war happens, because you start to think the other side is so evil, and they lose their humanity.”

But Kirk’s actions undercut that notion every day. His entire business was saying the other side was evil and dehumanizing them. The debates were simply performances, and he could not have an entertaining public fight without opposition. Turning Point did not work to bring people together; it worked to bring about a country where anyone who wasn’t a white Christian nationalist wasn’t welcome. I won’t celebrate his death, but I’m not obligated to celebrate his life, either.

Correction: A previous version of this article attributed a quote to Charlie Kirk incorrectly. Kirk said, “If we would have said that Joy Reid and Michelle Obama and Sheila Jackson Lee and Ketanji Brown Jackson were affirmative action picks, we would have been called racists. Now they’re coming out and they’re saying it for us. They’re coming out and they’re saying, ‘I’m only here because of affirmative action.’ We know. You do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously. You had to go steal a white person’s slot to go be taken somewhat seriously.”

