**A lie that ‘free speech’ crusader Greg Lukianoff keeps telling and dares not retract.**

*For some reason -- maybe it’s desperation to suppress his awareness of guilt -– Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, keeps popping up near the top of Google searches for “Jim Sleeper” claiming, falsely, that when I criticized FIRE years ago in the New York Times, I got him all wrong. What doesn’t show up in tandem with Lukianoff’s lies is the truth that I posted in response at the time, in AlterNet. Here it is, un-edited, unchanged from my original posting. It matters, because what’s at stake is not only Lukianioff’s and my credibility but the much larger danger of conservative-funded trolling that’s represented in his continually showing up claiming that I got him wrong. My response explains why Lukianoff is an interesting type of crusader who’s “an earnest fraud.” Now you can judge for yourself.*

1. [The Battle Between Sleeper and Lukianoff/FIRE over Political Correctness and Free Speech](https://www.alternet.org/2016/09/jim-sleeper-campus-political-correctness)
2. [The Battle Between Sleeper and Lukianoff/FIRE over Political Correctness and Free Speech - Alternet.org](https://www.alternet.org/2016/09/jim-sleeper-campus-political-correctness)

**The Battle Between Sleeper and Lukianoff/FIRE over Political Correctness and Free Speech**

[Jim Sleeper](https://www.alternet.org/author/jim-sleeper)

[AlterNet](https://www.alternet.org/author/alternet)

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You might think it a bit odd that I hope you’ll read “Jim Sleeper Gets It Wrong in ‘The New York Times,'” -- <https://www.thefire.org/news/jim-sleeper-gets-it-wrong-new-york-times> -- Greg Lukianoff’s angry [riposte](https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__www.thefire.org_new-2Dyork-2Dtimes-2Dcorrects-2Djim-2Dsleeper_&d=CwICAg&c=-dg2m7zWuuDZ0MUcV7Sdqw&r=nTkoE3YtEebE9f2jmjB7Zlw4RWz8yGc-2s6-FgpG8zw&m=zfyAIiysnbecKRH_i9E9zW_ekDGsX_RCj9IVq4C3g-Y&s=f7LSZ8mLSvDrzOLko4KcIp4Q83b-xUY93eawno0TSJk&e=) on his Foundation for Individual Rights in Education’s (FIRE’s) website to my Sunday, Sept. 4, [column](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/political-correctness-and-its-real-enemies.html) about the conservative long game his organization is playing in its crusade for freedom of speech on our nation’s campuses.

Soon, I’m sure, FIRE will also respond to an even longer, "wronger” [column](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0) I posted the same day on AlterNet, -- “What the Campus ‘Free Speech’ Crusade Won’t Say” - [**https://www.alternet.org/2016/09/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0**](https://www.alternet.org/2016/09/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0) **--**- reporting a lot more about the free-speech-on-campus crusade’s funding, premises and strategy.

Politically, Lukianoff, president of FIRE and a First Amendment lawyer for many years, has become a peculiar American type that I call the “earnest fraud,” at once pious and duplicitous. The left has had Henry Wallace, FDR’s commerce secretary, and for one term, his vice president, who believed with passionate sincerity in a crusade for which he fronted by denying, to himself and others, the dark side of what its far-left backers and strategists were trying to achieve.

With Lukianoff, free-speech absolutism is a cover for his funders’ and their network’s obsession with expanding free markets, a reality that he would deny but that I explain in [the long essay](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0).

Read what Lukianoff says about my column, followed by my responses:

**“This morning, readers across the country woke up to a New York Times**[**op-ed**](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/political-correctness-and-its-real-enemies.html?_r=0)**by Yale University lecturer Jim Sleeper that contains patently false charges about FIRE and me.**

**"I’ve deliberately ignored Sleeper’s multiple screeds over the past year. He’s posted thousands of words at outlets like Salon and AlterNet attacking me, Jonathan Haidt, Conor Friedersdorf, Todd Gitlin, Jeannie Suk, and others…”**

Unfortunately for Lukianoff’s effort to seek protective cover by associating himself with others I’ve written about, I’ve never attacked Todd Gitlin (whom I’ve admired and quoted for many years) or Jeannie Suk.

As Gitlin wrote in*openDemocracy,*the exemplary UK website that interviewed both [him](https://www.opendemocracy.net/todd-gitlin-rosemary-bechler/safe-spaces-void-between-and-absence-of-trust) and [me](https://www.opendemocracy.net/jim-sleeper-rosemary-bechler/safe-spaces-view-from-yale) barely a month after Lukianoff claims that I’d “attacked” him:

**“To disappoint any recruiters for circular firing squads, I agree almost completely with Jim. The repellent disingenuousness of the Roger Kimballs and other Buckley wannabes is well worth underscoring… That said, I offer a question sincerely, not in a gotcha spirit. How can 'a civic-republican society... weave [cultural identities] into a larger civic culture'? What's at the core of that civic culture? As Jim rightly says, me-me-me individualism is unbridled and trumps (sorry) the commonality values. I do not expect leaders of corporate-financed higher education to enunciate the higher civic-republican virtues.”**

I did assail Lukianoff himself, and his co-author Jonathan Haidt, most notably in an [essay](http://www.salon.com/2016/05/22/the_right_fears_free_speech_donald_trump_and_conservatives_wage_war_on_pc_to_disguise_their_own_relentless_assault_on_independent_thought/), “The Coddling of the Conservative Mind,” and I did lampoon some of Conor Friedersdorf’s Atlantic [coverage](http://www.salon.com/2015/11/25/we_the_people_remain_filled_with_rage_a_nation_spinning_apart_on_thanksgiving/) of controversies at Yale and other campuses. But Friedersdorf and I have corresponded several times since then to air our differences.

There’s nothing reprehensible in this, as Lukianoff, the “free speech” champion, should be the first to understand. Instead, he likens it to what is certainly my attack on FIRE.

Next, though, Lukianoff grasps at a straw man to charge that I’m distorting the record of his provocateuring work at Yale last fall:

**“In his [New York Times] op-ed, Sleeper claims that**[**the video**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD_JVYd0)**of the confrontation at Yale last fall between professor Nicholas Christakis and a number of angry students 'was shot by Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and posted under a headline, "Meet the Privileged Yale Student Who Shrieked at Her Professor," with photos of her and her parents’ suburban Connecticut home.'**

**“Anyone reading the sentence would believe not only that I shot the video, which I did, but also that I identified the student and gratuitously posted irrelevant photos of her family’s home. That’s simply a lie. The article Sleeper refers to was published by The Daily Caller after the video went viral. FIRE has never released the name of any of the students involved in the confrontation. Indeed, I’ve been**[**publicly critical**](http://mimesislaw.com/fault-lines/cross-greg-lukianoff-lighting-the-first-amendment-fire-on-campus/7510)**of The Daily Caller for doing so.**

**“Sleeper knows that FIRE didn’t name or dig up photos of the student or her house; the source of the article is correctly identified in one of his**[**AlterNet rants**](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/blame-campus-liberals-campaign-targets-yale)**. I caught**[**the flagrant misrepresentation**](https://archive.fo/2016.09.04-001528/http:/www.nytimes.com/2016/09/04/opinion/sunday/political-correctness-and-its-real-enemies.html?_r=2)**on Saturday, and I immediately wrote the New York Times for a correction. The paper quickly issued one, changing the online version of Sleeper’s truth-challenged attack to read slightly more honestly."**

If he were doing due diligence, Lukianoff would acknowledge that I’ve reported not once but in several times and places that The Daily Caller is to blame for packaging Lukianoff’s video so badly. I reported it long before I wrote the *Times* column—in Salon, on November 25, 2015, in an [AlterNet](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/tea-party-and-right/why-bashing-politically-correct-campuses-hurting-conservatism) essay on January 26, 2016, and in [AlterNet,](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/blame-campus-liberals-campaign-targets-yale) Truthdig, and Huffington Post on February 14, 2016, and [here](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0) again on September 4, the same day the *Times* column was published.)

So why is Lukianoff making so much of the fact that didn’t I report it in the *Times*? Actually, I did report it there, too, before the column got reduced to 900 words for reasons of placement and space. Here’s the relevant part of the column I sent to the *Times*, on August 18, and that the*Times* accepted (I’ve saved the email messages):

***“But the video also damaged free speech by driving the student into hiding when it was posted by the conservative Daily Caller under the headline, ‘Meet the Privileged Yale Student Who Shrieked at Her Professor,’ with a photo of her parents' suburban home and a caption noting its assessed value.”***

Even the revision that was published doesn’t assert that FIRE posted the video in the reprehensible way it got posted, although I agree that, as worded, leaves that impression.

But why did Lukianoff himself shoot and post the video at all? He has [said](http://mimesislaw.com/fault-lines/cross-greg-lukianoff-lighting-the-first-amendment-fire-on-campus/7510) he did it to prevent the student’s outburst from threatening freedom of speech (which she was exercising, very badly!) or Prof. Christakis’ job.

C’mon! Lukianoff had collaborated with Prof. Christakis and his wife in years past and was energetically constructing a myth that his comrades’ jobs were endangered by a confused, belligerent shouting students. As I showed in “[The ‘Blame the Liberals’ Campaign Targets Yale](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/blame-campus-liberals-campaign-targets-yale),” anyone with some courage and fair-mindedness would have known there was no silencing.

Since Lukianoff shot the video, why doesn’ he tell us how *The Daily Caller*learned the student’s name? Christakis knew it because she’d worked as an aide in his office. Since Lukianoff was staying overnight in Christakis’s residential college, he may have learned her name over a drink that evening.

To his credit, Lukianoff has stated publicly that *The Daily Caller* was wrong to reveal her identity. (Indeed, it smeared her, prompting threats that drove her into hiding, and the FIRE did post a notice deploring the threats.) But what’s all this about my lying about FIRE’s role when it was Lukianoff who shot the video andit was I who’d condemned *The Daily Caller*’s malfeasance three times?

The conservative noise machine, taking a cue from Lukianoff, is ballyhooing the “lie.” It won’t stop doing so even now that it knows that it’s wrong. FIRE will send a letter to the *New York Times* repeating the charge. Someone at the *Wall Street Journal* will write damningly about it. James Taranto, that newspaper’s resident troll, has already [retweeted](https://twitter.com/jamestaranto/status/772555711813476355) John Podohoretz’ tweet about my “slander” of Lukianoff.

The ironic consequence of this lockstep is that it reinforces my explanation of how FIRE serves a conservative strategy, notwithstanding the organization’s professed First Amendment absolutism and the protective coloration it seeks when it supports liberal, radical, and other non-conservative victims of censorship on its blog and in its letters to college administrators.

The crusade to rescue free speech on campus from political correctness has a lot in common with the conservative crusade to rescue the election system from voter fraud by enacting Voter I.D. laws. Although Voter I.D. laws have been thwarted in the courts, both crusades, funded by the same conservative foundations, claim to expand rights that they’re actually chilling: The voter I.D. strategy would disenfranchise millions of poor and minority voters. The “free speech” strategy often blames campus timidity and/or censoriousness on “progressive,” “politically correct,” “feminist,” and Afrocentric pedagogy, protests, and administrators, in hopes of chilling their speech.

As the author of [*Liberal Racism*](https://www.amazon.com/Liberal-Racism-Fixating-Subverts-American/dp/0742522016/?tag=alternorg08-20), I have body scars to show from combating political correctness**.** To understand why most of the blame for chilling free speech lies elsewhere read my *Times* column and the more extensive analysis and explosive information about the FIRE in my [*AlterNet* essay](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0).  
  
Politically incorrect though I proudly am, I can't resist noting Lukianoff's complaint that I'm "conveniently ignoring the incredible political diversity of our staff." In that sentence and throughout his post, he conveniently ignores any other kind of diversity in FIRE's staff itself, which is pictured here:

[[{"type":"media","view\_mode":"media\_original","fid":"616056","attributes":{"alt":"","class":"media-image","height":"252","style":"width: 461px; height: 252px;","typeof":"foaf:Image","width":"461"}}]]

Lukianoff writes:

*“Readers should know that we have tried multiple times to engage Sleeper in good faith. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he’s ignored the mountains of facts about our work to refute his simplistic narrative.”*

I challenge Lukianoff to produce one e-mail message, letter, or phone call log to show that FIRE ever responded to messages from me such as the following, which I sent to the foundation’s press officer three times:

**From: Jim Sleeper**

**To: Nico Perrino,**

**1. I gather that FIRE has opposed the Horowitz "Academic Bill of Rights"—quite rightly so, in my view—but I can't find a direct statement on it by Greg Lukianoff or someone else speaking for FIRE. Is there a statement making clear what FIRE's position has been on this measure, assuming that Horowitz himself is still promoting it?**

**2. I believe that FIRE posts have celebrated the Citizens United ruling as expanding the bounds of free speech, but, as you know, many people rightly doubt that the corporate fiduciaries of swirling whorls of publicly anonymous shareholders are the kinds of speakers whose speech the First Amendment was drafted to protect. Has FIRE taken a position on this? Has Greg Lukianoff commented on it?**

**Finally, I'd appreciate some clarification of FIRE's position, if there is one—or at least of Greg Lukianoff's comments, in blogs or public fora—about individual rights in employment at non-university business corporations, where, as we know, restrictions on freedom of speech, especially concerning labor unions, are pretty draconian.  
  
One can well understand the difference between a private, for-profit business corporation that produces widgets and a private university that explicitly makes freedoms of expression and inquiry central to its very mission. But, since Citizens United has given corporations the right to enter more directly than ever before into citizens' public decision making, including elections, shouldn't the employees of these corporations enjoy similar rights in the workplace?I do also understand that FIRE's own mission concerns only educational institutions. Still, it is in the nature of free discussion that comparisons and contrasts must be drawn between individual rights in education and individual rights in non-educational employment. Have FIRE's speakers commented on this? Has the organization posted or published anything clarifying such comparisons and contrasts?**

**Thanks. Jim Sleeper**

Finally, note the irony in FIRE’s claim to be open to all:

Harvey Silverglate, who co-founded FIRE in 1999 and chairs its board, insists, as does Lukianoff, that it’s not conservative. He even credits the old left for advancing individual rights: “Communists, labor organizers, war protesters—they are the people responsible for the majority of great First Amendment law,” he [told the *Times*](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/07/education/edlife/fire-first-amendment-on-campus-free-speech.html?_r=0) this summer.

But this is like Newt Gingrich’s seemingly generous claim, in his “inaugural” address as Speaker of the House in 1994, that “No Republican here should kid themselves about it:.. the fact is, it was the liberal wing of the Democratic Party that ended segregation…. And the fact is, every Republican has much to learn from studying what the Democrats did right.”

For those who knew enough history and political strategy, Gingrich was delivering a double message: Thanks to you liberals, we conservatives can now transcend you and carry on your work at a higher level—not with civil rights legislation, rulings, and enforcement—which we’ll roll back—but with freer markets that will sweep away the cobwebs of color and caste.

We can see how that’s worked out. And now Silverglate and Lukianoff and FIRE are trying to claim a progressive mantle when it suits their long game to liberate speech from progressivism itself in order to entrust it to free markets. “We don’t care what you say. If you are penalized for it, we’re there,” Silverglate told the *Times*.

“There” for what, exactly? Silverglate claims not to care about that, as long as free speech is protected. He’s right enough in noting that American Communists fought many noble, but carefully selected, battles for civil rights and civil liberties. They were disciplined. They were well-coordinated. And many of them were idealistic—too much so to worry about how they were being funded and what longer game their grand strategists were playing. In fact, of course, their network of seemingly all-American, civil-libertarian organizations were part of the Comintern, funded and directed from Moscow.

Today’s American conservative counterpart to the Comintern is what the journalist Jacob Weisberg has called the “Con-intern.” It’s not funded from abroad, but it’s sustained by decidedly reactionary plutocrats who are as un-American to my mind as the Communists called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s.

A big difference between the Comintern and the Con-intern is that the ideas of the latter’s funders’ were baked into American political culture so long ago and so deeply that many Americans swoon over their celebration in the musical “Hamilton,” which glorifies the man who did a lot of the baking.

The problem that Lukianoff, the FIRE, and the others are dodging is that today’s capitalism might appall even Alexander Hamilton, and certainly Adam Smith -- because-- as I explain in the long [column](http://alternettest.wpengine.com/education/what-campus-free-speech-crusade-wont-say-0) of two days ago—it’s draining and polluting the wellsprings of the American civic-culture of individual rights that Lukianoff and FIRE and the other crusaders think they can rescue with the First Amendment and millions of dollars from the Bradley, Scaife, Koch, and other foundations.

They can’t. (compare Trump, Donald) The old left’s Popular Front point men thought they could convince everyone that “Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism.” They couldn’t. Only earnest frauds kept on believing that they could.