Opinion
Guest Voices



Kevin Roberts, president of The Heritage Foundation, speaks at the National Religious Broadcasters convention at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center Feb. 22, 2024, in Nashville, Tenn. (AP/George Walker IV)



by Rone Tempest

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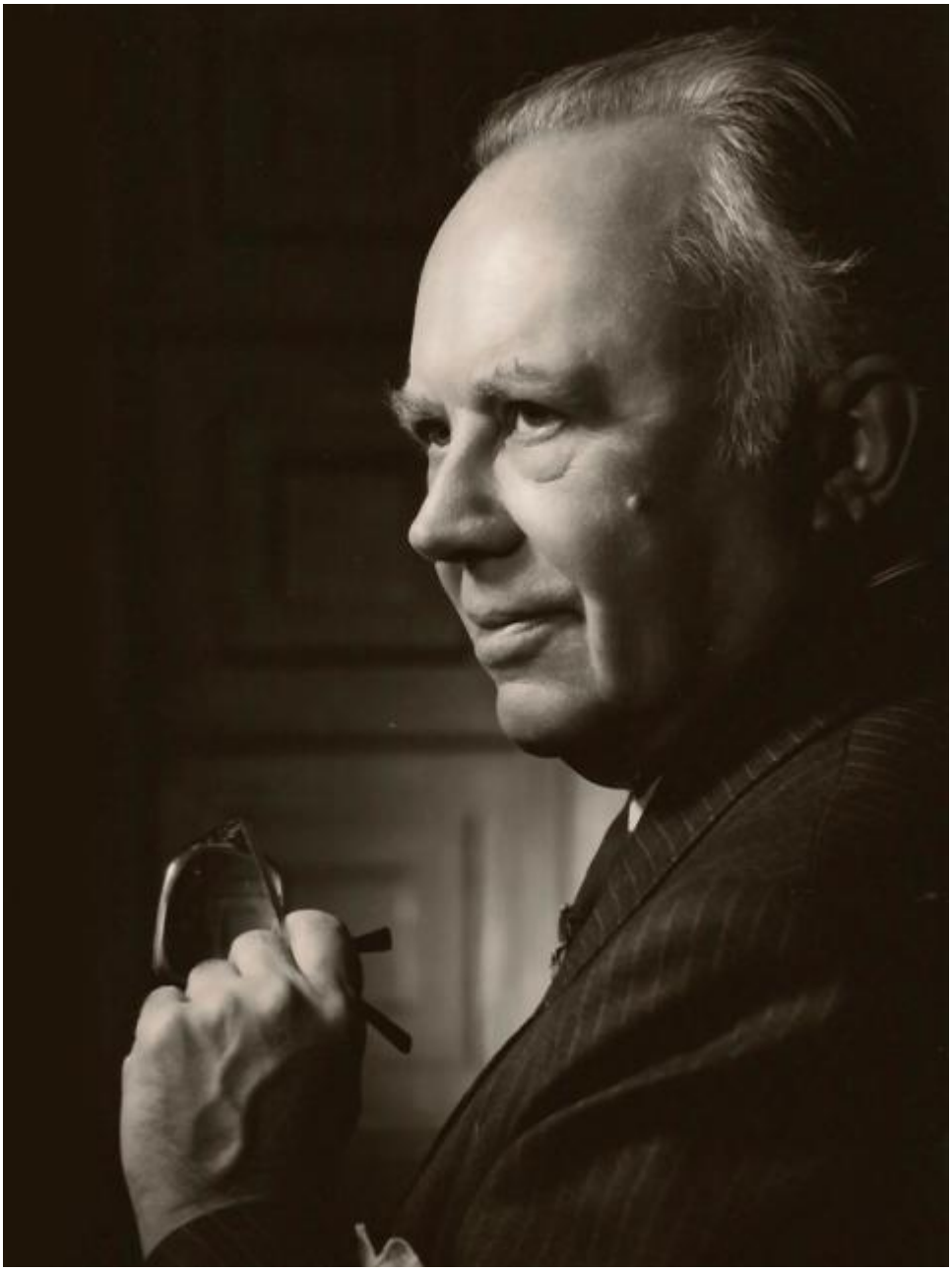
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In the bruising backlash over his defense of conservative commentator Tucker Carlson's interview with notorious white Christian nationalist Nick Fuentes, Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts faces similar accusations to those that plagued his two greatest political heroes.

Moreover, as a prominent critic of "cancel culture," a leading Catholic traditionalist and a shepherd of the controversial Project 2025 government reorganization plan, Roberts finds himself threatened with cancellation.

Roberts, 51, is the former president of tiny Wyoming Catholic College who vaulted into his $926,000-a-year position atop Heritage in 2021 after a four-year stint at the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Roberts describes himself as a "devotee" of Russell Kirk, who died in 1994.



(Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.5/Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal)

Kirk, who authored the canonical 1953 book *The Conservative Mind*, and Pat Buchanan, conservative political pundit and perennial presidential candidate, were repeatedly branded — many say unfairly — as anti Semites, mainly for their shared belief that Israel had too much influence over American foreign policy.

Roberts has described *The Conservative Mind* as "the most important book about conservatism ever written."

Buchanan, who retired from public life in 2023 and is now 87 years old, has long been Roberts' political idol and guiding star. As a college freshman in his native Lafayette, Louisiana, Roberts organized a rally for Buchanan's 1992 primary campaign against eventual nominee George H.W. Bush. Roberts also attended the Republican convention in the Houston Astrodome where Buchanan delivered his famous "culture war" speech.

Both Kirk, considered a father of the so-called "paleoconservative" movement, and Buchanan, a former advisor to Presidents Reagan, Nixon and Ford, faced accusations of antisemitism over statements about Israel and its purported outsized influence on American policy.

Kirk said in a 1988 Heritage Foundation lecture: "Not seldom it has seemed as if some eminent neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States." Midge Decter, Jewish director of the Committee for the Free World and wife of neoconservative mainstay Norman Podhoretz, attacked Kirk's comments as "a bloody outrage, a piece of anti-Semitism." Kirk also opposed the first Gulf War in 1990, calling it a "war for an oil can."

Buchanan, who grew up in a family steeped in the isolationist, antisemitic rhetoric of Catholic radio broadcaster Father Charles Coughlin and famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, also used similar language in his opposition to the Gulf War. On a 1990 television broadcast of "The McLaughlin Group", Buchanan declared "Capitol Hill is Israeli occupied territory." Later that year on the same show, Buchanan said "there are only two groups that are beating the drums for war in the Middle East — the Israeli defense ministry and its 'amen corner' in the United States."



Pat Buchanan autographs a campaign sign for a supporter outside a TV station in Baltimore Oct. 6, 2000. The Reform Party candidate told Catholic News Service that the most important thing the president could do ''is to alter the character of the Supreme Court and reconvert it into a pro-life constitutionalist court.'' (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Buchanan's comments inspired the wrath of the late New York Times editor and columnist Abe Rosenthal, and prompted a 40,000-word article examining conservatives' antisemitism by William F. Buckley Jr. in his National Review magazine. Comments by Rosenthal and others, including Holocaust survivor and author Eli Weisel, were scathing. Buckley was more forgiving. Buckley concluded: "If you ask, do I think Pat Buchanan is an antisemite, my answer is, he is not one. But I think he's said some antisemitic things."

Unlike Kirk and Buchanan, Kevin Roberts has publicly condemned antisemitism on several occasions. Under his leadership, Heritage unveiled "Project Esther" in 2024 to combat antisemitism.

But as a result of his comments defending Tucker Carlson after Carlson hosted white Christian nationalist Nick Fuentes, Roberts found himself in a similar pickle as his ideological role models, but with far greater potential consequences.

In a video statement, Roberts characterized criticism of Carlson as "slander" by a "venomous coalition" and said the outspoken former Fox News star will always remain "a close friend of The Heritage Foundation." Roberts said that while he "abhors" some things that Nick Fuentes has said, "cancelling him is not the answer either."



A red sign stating "Tucker is not MAGA," waved by college students attending the Republican Jewish Coalition conference in protest of the conservative talk show host's interview of right-wing podcaster Nick Fuentes, who has espoused antisemitic beliefs, is pictured at the Venetian Resort, Saturday, Nov. 1, 2025, in Las Vegas. (AP/Thomas Beaumont)

But the most damaging part of his defense may have been his comment that "Christians are entitled to critique the State of Israel without being labeled as antisemitic." Later he added, "…conservatives should not be compelled to automatically support any foreign government, regardless of the pressure from the globalist elite or their representatives in Washington." The term "globalist elite" is sometimes interpreted as an antisemitic trope.

Most of the immediate backlash focused on Fuentes and his well-established racist and antisemitic stances. The lead editorial in the Nov. 2 Wall Street Journal began "An old political poison is growing on the new right, led by podcasters and internet opportunists who are preoccupied with the Jews. It is spreading wider and faster than we thought and it has even found an apologist in Kevin Roberts, president of the venerable Heritage Foundation."

But the editorial also focused on Roberts' distinction between criticism of Israel and antisemitism. "This is what Hamas supporters on the left say: What do you mean? We were only criticizing Israel. Not exactly." The editors even borrowed a line from William Buckley's takedown of Pat Buchanan, calling Roberts "a pyromaniac in a field of straw men"

But while Kirk and Buchanan suffered few consequences for their controversial statements, interpreted by many as antisemitic, Roberts' future at Heritage seems endangered. In the wake of the dust-up, several staffers resigned or moved to other positions. Roberts issued another statement strongly condemning Fuentes.

On Wednesday, Roberts apologized before an all-staff meeting at Heritage headquarters in Washington. His contrite comments were leaked to the Jewish News Syndicate and Washington Free Beacon.

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"I made a mistake, and I let you down and I let this down this institution. Period. Full stop," Roberts told the staffers, according to the Jewish News and Free Beacon reports. He said the comments were written by his former chief of staff Ryan Neuhaus, who was subsequently removed from the position. But Roberts said it was his fault for not sufficiently reviewing the material before making his comments, released as a video on X.

"I didn't know much about this Fuentes guy. I still don't, which underscores the mistake."

He specifically apologized to Jewish staff members for using the term "venomous coalition" — an antisemitic trope — in his comments defending Carlson.

"And I very sincerely — very, very sincerely — apologize to you in particular, and to all of you for using that. It was not my intention to use a trope. I should have been

better."

A former national and foreign correspondent for the Los Angeles Times, Rone Tempest is the author of a 2024 profile of Kevin Roberts that appeared on the Wyoming news site WyoFile.com and in the National Catholic Reporter.