

September 22, 2025

Dr. Donde Ashmos Plowman
Chancellor
University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Via email: dplowman@utk.edu

Subject: Response to Notice of Grounds for Termination

Dear Chancellor Plowman,

I do not envy your position, especially at this very difficult time. Being a Chancellor at a major research institution is an incredible accomplishment and as a woman, I look up to you as someone who has achieved it and has succeeded in many endeavors in that position.

Admittedly, the Facebook comment I made, privately and not in my capacity as a UT professor, was ineloquent and heartless. It was insensitive and, I assure you, uncharacteristic of me as a person, a mother, a friend, and someone who advocates for social justice and respect for all. And, for that, I apologize. These were words, written out of anger and grief, which now haunt me as so many people have read them. I assure you that had I known that more than a handful of friends were going to see these words, that they were going to be leaked into the public, I would have never made that comment.

However, in no way did the words I used endorse, incite, or suggest that anyone should resort to violence. While I despise his bigoted, often hateful rhetoric, Mr. Kirk did not deserve to be killed for his words. No one does. Indeed, as a cultural anthropologist who has read volumes on the question of political violence and its social, political, and cultural effects, I know for certain that violence does not solve social problems but always makes the situation far worse. One of my scholarly heroes, the linguist Noam Chomsky, once said about political violence:

Wrong in principle, and tactically self-destructive. When we move to the arena of violence, the most brutal guys win – that's the worst outcome (and, incidentally, it's not us). The right response is to use the opportunity for education and exposure, not to give a gift to the hard right while attacking fundamental principles of freedom of speech...There could be a constructive response that would not simply be a welcome gift to the far right and those elements in the state yearning for a pretext for repression: to use the opportunity for education and organizing.

I have been a long-time advocate for peace, as I see peace and civility as the only means to the making and sustaining of a world where everybody's rights and safety will be protected. This has been the main throughline of all of my scholarship and teaching, including but not limited to at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

My comment, which I have deleted because it was extremely insensitive, was a crude response to a friend's private Facebook post. In the post, my friend wrote:

I've unfriended four people since Kirk's assassination. I get it, they're mourning him because of his message but the content to his message was full of hate, genocide apologia and bigotry yet they're treating him like the next best thing since Jesus. So my secular sensibilities find that to be blasphemous and a lil delulu. I guess we "grew" apart.

My friend's initial post was clearly about the content of Mr. Kirk's messages and her disbelief that people supported such messages—not a celebration of how Mr. Kirk died. It even noted that some people treated him "like the next best thing since Jesus." I have since seen Facebook posts comparing Mr. Kirk with Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, Jr., Abraham Lincoln and, yes, Jesus. I think such beliefs are extremely misplaced and should have said so in a much more eloquent and effective manner.

Dr. Plowman, I want to note my state of mind at the time that I wrote that insensitive comment. For the last twenty-three months, I have been very closely following what the United Nations calls a genocide in Gaza, where tens of thousands of children have been killed, maimed, or left starving and without shelter. As an Armenian woman, a descendant of genocide survivors, and as someone born in Lebanon, which has heavily been impacted by this conflict that has been ongoing for decades, the horrific violence in Gaza feels very personal for me. At the time that I saw my friend's post on Facebook, I had been scrolling through my social media and seeing a mix of posts about the genocide on the one hand and outpouring of grief for Mr. Kirk on the other. I recalled a statement that I once saw him make in a widely circulated video, from a live appearance on The Alex Stein Show aired on December 14, 2023:

You know, I used to say hey, if you as a gay person were to go to Gaza they would throw you off of tall buildings, right? Now they don't have any tall buildings left, so I don't....wait, is that too soon? Maybe you shouldn't kill Jews, you stupid Muslims!

After this statement, Mr. Kirk, Alex Stein on the stage with him, as well as the audience, laughed. Seeing the juxtaposition of posts about the genocide and posts grieving Mr. Kirk's death with celebratory remarks about him made me quite emotional and put me in a state of grief. I commented on the private post emotionally rather than rationally.

The joke about tall buildings in Gaza was not the first time that Mr. Kirk mocked the dead. In 2021, following the 2020 brutal killing of George Floyd, who was choked to death for nearly eight and a half minutes, televised over and over again for his family to have to witness, Mr. Kirk responded by calling Mr. Floyd a "scumbag" because of his criminal background. He also made various accusations about the events surrounding Mr. Floyd's death, suggesting that he had not been killed but that he died of a drug overdose. Mr. Kirk referred to Martin Luther King Jr. – to whom he is now being compared, as they are both slain public figures – as an "awful" person.

Before continuing, it is important to note some other comments that Mr. Kirk did, in fact, make:

1. "If I see a Black pilot, I'm going to be like, boy, I hope he's qualified." – The Charlie Kirk Show, January 23, 2024.
2. "The single woman issue is one of the biggest issues facing a civilization." – The Charlie Kirk Show, April 20, 2024.
3. On Black women in positions of power: "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 be taken somewhat seriously." – The Charlie Kirk show, July 13, 2023.
4. "It's time to ban third world immigrants, legal or illegal. We've reached our limit and we have a huge cultural, educational, housing, financial, and essential services problem to fix now because of it. We need a net-zero immigration moratorium with a ban on all third worlders." – Charlie Kirk X post, June 5, 2025.
5. "Ketanji Brown Jackson is a diversity hire. She is only there because she's a Black woman." – Charlie Kirk X post, June 27, 2025.
6. "If you actually watch his trial, it's obvious Kyle Rittenhouse did nothing wrong." – Charlie Kirk X post, November 10, 2021.
7. "Zero people from Gaza should be allowed to come to America. Period." – Charlie Kirk X post, July 14, 2025.
8. "There shouldn't be a Transgender Day of Visibility. Cancel it." – Charlie Kirk X Post, May 31, 2024.
9. "Prowling Blacks go around for fun to target white people – that's a fact." – The Charlie Kirk Show, May 19, 2023
10. In response to a question about Black people and their per-capita income today, "They were actually better in the 1940s. It was bad. It was evil. But what happened? Something changed. They committed less crimes." – Jubilee's internet television Show "Surrounded" on September 8, 2024
11. On protestors: "If somebody has had enough of your antics and has to run you over to get somewhere, they shouldn't face any penalties." – Charlie Kirk X Post, April 15, 2024.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and a person who prides themselves on their humanity (though, admittedly, my comment was far from humane), I was disgusted by things Mr. Kirk said and got his followers to believe. I wrote that "the world is better off without him in it." I believe that the world is better off without messages of bigotry and hate. Such a statement is not a "call to action." When I wrote that "his kids are better off living in a world without a disgusting psychopath like him," I was thinking about my own child and what it means for children in America today to be growing up with so much hate speech, hateful ideas, and active endorsements for intolerance and injustice. I am afraid for my child to live in a world where victims of a genocide can be mocked openly and publicly and where that mockery receives praise; a world where trans people are told that they are living a "foundational lie" (as he posted on X on April 20, 2023). I am concerned about my child living in a world in which there are people, such as Mr. Kirk and his followers, advocating for children to see public executions (as he stated on *The Charlie Kirk Show* in February 2024). As a stepmother to three Black children, I am terrified of the anti-Black rhetoric that Mr. Kirk fomented regularly. While my statement was crude, cold, and unfeeling, it does not celebrate, tolerate, or advocate for violence. If Mr. Kirk had died of natural causes in his old age, peacefully in his bed with his family by his side, which is how I wish that all people pass into the afterlife no matter who they are, my feelings would have been the same. My comment, as

insensitive as it was, did not make any reference to the way in which Mr. Kirk died. If I had commented on that, I would have said, and will still say, that it is terrible and that political violence – indeed any violence – puts all of us at risk.

Mr. Kirk created his platform by threatening my profession. His organization Turning Point USA founded the website Professor Watchlist. Professor Watchlist took entries from students at universities who did not like the content of their courses, protected by academic freedom. Many of my colleagues around the country were listed. This was called by many faculty at the University of Tennessee as well as all over the country the “hit list,” because once on it a professor would regularly receive hate messages (including death threats and rape threats) and be in the position of their employer also receiving demands to fire them. Faculty placed on the Professor Watchlist were regularly harassed on social media, with their addresses, phone numbers, and other private information about them shared. When on March 13, 2025, Mr. Kirk came to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville he told students to pressure their universities to fire “liberal” professors. In a response to a student who spoke about her “liberal” professors who teach her that gender is a choice and a spectrum, Mr. Kirk responded, “all these professors who are pushing this stuff, fire them all and defund this place and teach the basics.” The topics of gender, and sexuality, as social constructs – proven by now over fifty years of social scientific as well as biological research – is precisely what I teach in my courses. Mr. Kirk was targeting me and my livelihood.

I understand, however, that no matter how bigoted and hateful his comments were, and how much his events targeted my colleagues’ and my livelihood, how much they incited students to take action against their professors and defund universities such as the one over which you preside as Chancellor, that Mr. Kirk had the right to free speech to express such ideas. And that is one of the things that I value most about our country.

My private comment was somehow discovered by an anti-DEI activist, Robby Starbuck, who once produced a documentary perpetuating the same conspiracy theory spouted by disgraced commentator Alex Jones – that toxic chemicals are causing children to identify as LGBTQ+. Mr. Starbuck shared my comment with his hundreds of thousands of followers and added, “Why do we even have queer theory or queer anthropology specialists at University of Tennessee? Insane.” He also posted a picture of me along with a portion of my bio that only stated “SPECIALTIES. Research areas: queer anthropology, queer.”

I then received a significant amount of hate mail, which include phrases such as:

1. “Take a toaster bath you n*#&er loving c*_+
2. I hope someone buries u so deep that it would take an eternity to find ur filthy tongue
3. BURN ALIVE IN HELL FOREVER
4. You are the sick piece of shit who deserves a big d*#^ in your a*@
5. Please go back to your country of origin
6. Fu#%in’ fa^#ot
7. You are a MAN!!! Son of Satan

I have not had the courage, or psychological capacity, after all of this hate mail to look at the social media posts about me, but the few that I have accidentally seen have included phrases

such as “I smell Juden,” “Cancel his HB1 [sic] visa and deport him to back to India,” and one – that with the help of concerned citizens was eventually taken down on X – that said “wink wink, im not saying to do anything but here is her address and phone number” followed by my current address and phone number.

According to media reports, after Mr. Starbuck’s post, at least two elected representatives, U.S. Rep. Tim Burchett (who, in a blatant display of sexism and racism, once claimed that Vice President Kamala Harris was merely a “diversity, equity and inclusion hire”) and Tennessee Rep. Jack Zachary (who sponsored a House Bill that would protect businesses that refuse service to LGBTQ+ people like me), reached out to the University. Mr. Burchett posted that he was “on it” and “delivered the message” and Mr. Zachary claimed that he had spoken with UT System President Randy Boyd, who later (incorrectly) posted that my comment advocated violence and murder. Feeling empowered by Mr. Boyd’s statement on the afternoon of Monday, September 15, that I celebrate violence and murder, the number of hateful messages sent to me and comments made about me on social media increased, now celebrating that University administration have complied to the pressure of these public figures and their followers.

Which takes me back to why I stated that I do not envy your position.

If you had done nothing or failed to act after complaints from the legislature, I am confident that Mr. Starbuck, Mr. Burchett or Mr. Zachary would have asked for your resignation and/or said that you too were a “DEI hire,” as is often their modus operandi with women.

Perhaps they would have even threatened to pull funding from the University of Tennessee to answer Mr. Starbuck’s questions regarding queer theory and queer anthropology specialists – as, apparently, things like diversity, equity and inclusion are now punishable.

In 2016, a University of Tennessee law professor urged motorists to run over demonstrators who, angered by the police shooting of a Black man, blocked traffic in Charlotte, North Carolina. The white, male professor, who was a USA TODAY and Knoxville News Sentinel columnist, tweeted “Run ‘em down.” Such a statement was clearly endorsing violence.

While UT recognized that the tweet “offended many members of our community and beyond,” the University did not take any disciplinary action against the professor. I am at a bit of a loss as to why the University is now punishing me when it did nothing after one of its own used words that are clearly designed to provoke violence – clearly an order to commit violence.

I am also at a loss when so many people (including but certainly not limited to Mr. Starbuck, Mr. Burchett, Mr. Zachary and President Boyd) fail to speak out when others (including people who are supposed to act as leaders) openly use words designed to provoke and incite violence. A very notable white man, who acts as a leader to all of us, has made numerous statements that, unlike my comment, endorsed and promoted violence.

1. In 2015, in response to a Fox News host asking about a heckler at his rally, he stated that, “maybe he should have been roughed up.”

2. On February 1, 2016, he stated at a rally in Iowa that “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you?”
3. On October 18, 2018, after then-Representative Greg Gianforte pled guilty to a misdemeanor charge for physically assaulting a reporter, he said, “Any guy that can do a body slam, he is my guy!”
4. On May 29, 2020, during protests and riots in Minneapolis after George Floyd was killed, he posted, “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.”
5. In a January 6, 2021, tweet before the election certification took place, he tweeted, “Get smart Republicans. FIGHT!” That same day, in a video message to violent insurrectionists at the Capitol, he stated, “We love you. You’re very special.”
6. When talking about Representative Liz Cheney, he said, “Let’s put her with a rifle standing there, with nine barrels shooting at her, OK? Let’s see how she feels about it, you know, when the guns are trained on her face.”

Unlike my comment, which did not endorse violence, statements made by this man over and over again clearly and blatantly endorsed violence against people who didn’t back him or go along with him.

After research, I can find no instance of Mr. Starbuck, Mr. Burchett, Mr. Zachary or Mr. Boyd speaking out about the bigoted, hateful, sexist rhetoric spewed by Mr. Kirk. In fact, while Mr. Kirk incited fear in many students at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville – especially LGBTQ+ students, Black students, and Muslim students – he was allowed to come and speak to them on campus earlier this year.

I also could find no instance of Mr. Starbuck, Mr. Burchett, Mr. Zachary, or Mr. Boyd speaking out about the violence that a man openly encouraged, endorsed and incited over a course of many years, time and time again. Or the fact that the same man pardoned individuals who brutally attacked and beat police officers.

The only conclusion that I can draw, if I were to be honest, is that they are either scared of him or they agree with him.

Regardless, I do not endorse violence and never have endorsed violence. While I despise Mr. Kirk’s bigoted, often hateful rhetoric, he did not deserve to be shot. No one does.

I ask, considering the above, that you change your mind and allow me to continue to return to things that I love: scholarship and teaching students. If not, I will appeal any and all decisions within the University and, if necessary, go to court to protect my First Amendment rights. It is, however, my hope that all of that will not be necessary.

Sincerely,



Tamar R. Shirinian, PhD