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Scott Adams's Unforced Error

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Offense of the Month, February 2023

Events selected as Offenses of the Month in these pages often are examples of oblivious blithering, tone deafness squared by those who then seem surprised to find themselves accused of offending their listeners. February's selection provides a triple helping of bemusement, irony, and consequence, because the Offender this month is Scott Adams, 65, creator of the widely syndicated cartoon "Dilbert." Since 1989, Dilbert has succeeded in skewering office policies and corporate procedures by dim-witted managers. At its peak, Dilbert ran in 2,000 papers, published in 65 countries and in 25 languages, according to the distributors' website. But late in the month, Adams's celebrity as a wit was eclipsed by his notoriety for a snit, aka a "racist rant," on a YouTube livestream show *Real Coffee with Scott Adams* that has likely taken his syndications to zero.

Black Americans, Scott said, are a “hate group,” and he urged white Americans to “get the hell away from” them, adding, “I don’t want to have anything to do with them.”

His outburst was ostensibly prompted by a poll taken by a conservative organization, Rasmussen Poll, which had tweeted the results of a survey published in its *Rasmussen Reports* indicating that nearly half of Black respondents either disagreed with the statement “it’s okay to be white” (26%) or they were “not sure” (21%). Rasmussen surveyed 1,000 adults (I have found nothing indicating how many of the total were Black).

The consequence was predictable. Overnight, hundreds of outlets announced they would cease publishing Dilbert: USA Today Network/Gannett (more than 300 newspapers), *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The San-Antonio Express-News*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Seattle Times*, *Kansas City Star*, MLive Media Group, the New York *Daily News*, many of the Hearst Group papers, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *The New York Times* international print edition (Dilbert did not run in the U.S. editions of the *Times*).

Within days, Dilbert vanished worldwide. The most serious consequence of Adams’s self-immolation was the announcement by Andrews McMeel Syndication, the licensing agency, that it was “severing our relationship” in “all areas of our business with Adams and the Dilbert comic strip.” The loss of his syndicator means that the strip is “effectively dead,” according to Mike Peterson, a columnist for the industry blog *The Daily Cartoonist*. Portfolio, an imprint of Penguin-Random House, announced that it

was abandoning plans to publish Adams's *Reframe Your Brain*, a self-help book that had been scheduled for next September. Adams's literary agent cut ties as well.

At this writing, his only big-name defender is, perhaps not entirely improbably, Elon Musk, at least sort of. Without criticizing Adams, Musk tweeted that "for a 'very' long time, US media was racist against non-white people, now they're racist against whites & Asians."

According to the Associated Press, Adams had shown signs for several years of interjecting increasingly unhinged views about American politics and culture into various appearances and writings. He did not compartmentalize his thoughts, instead tying them to himself as Dilbert's creator, even if they did not directly invade the comic space.

For his part, Adams seems resigned to his fate, without backing off his views. "Dilbert has been cancelled from all newspapers, websites, calendars, and books because I gave some advice everyone agreed with," he said in a tweet that on its face does not seem to make any sense. He acknowledged that "most of my income will be gone by next week" and that "my reputation for the rest of my life is destroyed."

What has led to Adams's self-destruction is unclear, at least to me. So far, no one has performed the requisite psychological autopsy, though there are some hints. A "senior contributor" to Forbes, Rob Salkowitz, suggested that the motive is monetary:

*It is impossible to imagine
Adams failed to see this coming.
He seems to be betting that*

reaching whatever mass market is available to him through traditional publishers and the quaint legacy business of running daily comic strips in newspapers is one of diminishing returns, and the really big money is in joining the ranks of the righteously aggrieved victims of the “woke mob.” That audience has shown a remarkable willingness to spend money on behalf of sympathetic martyrs, regardless of what they are peddling, and someone in Adams’s position probably considers it foolish not to join the parade.

That seems improbable to me, partly because Adams already has “really big money” and partly because he isn’t running for anything.

But the deeper issue is the nature and meaning of Rasmussen’s survey. Few of the news accounts to date have taken a close look at what was asked and who was asked it or the meaning of what was reported. As the Associated Press noted, Rasmussen asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement “It’s OK to be white.” The survey did not ask a closely related, but semantically distinct question: “Do you think it’s OK to be white.” The statement apparently originated as a trolling campaign in 2017 by members of *4chan*. The idea was to place the simple, neutral-sounding slogan on fliers to be distributed in public locations. The trolls assumed that “liberal” readers would remove the fliers, supposedly demonstrating that liberals did not think it good to be white. The campaign was co-opted by a variety of white supremacy groups, which approved the

slogan and spread the fliers across the country and even internationally.

I have not found a description of what the respondents in the Rasmussen Poll were told about the sentence or the reason for being asked their opinion about it. "Okay" in what sense? In the sense that if the answer is no, there's something to be done about it? Stay indoors? Don blackface? Become Rachel Dolezals? (Adams himself, during his rant, even claimed to be black identifying, "because I like to be on the winning team," but then claimed he changed his mind because of the Rasmussen poll.)

It's likely that many who answered understood the poll to be asking about the statement itself, and not the underlying sentiment. Consider whether being asked "do all lives matter?" is the same thing as being asked, "Do you agree with the slogan 'All Lives Matter'?" Answering No to the latter, as a political statement against diluting the political message "Black Lives Matter" would not preclude a Yes answer to the former question. Equally unexplained was how the Rasmussen sample was selected. But the blithe claim pushed by Adams and others that the poll (based on at most a few hundred Black responses to an easily misinterpreted query) showed that millions of Black Americans think it's not okay to be white will likely crumble on closer inspection. Ditto, how a vague question with no clear meaning asked of a small number of randomly selected respondents amounts to the "group" about which Adams complained of.

Moreover, as it will have occurred to you, if a quarter of the respondents answered No, then three-quarters of the Black respondents disagreed; and more than half of them said, apparently, it's okay to be white. What about that "group"? On his own logic, Adams should

have seen that more than half of Black Americans think it's okay for Adams to stay in his own skin. The knife duly stuck in, let's twist it another turn: Adams claims the Rasmussen survey showed that Blacks are racist on the purported opinion of about half that it's not "okay to be white." But in his YouTube rant, he concluded that "if nearly half of all Blacks are not ok with White people ... that's a hate group." But that was not the survey question. Respondents weren't asked whether they were "ok *with* White people." Even Scott Adams, master of mockery, ought to understand the difference between "ok *with*" and "okay *to be*."

We may mourn the inability of the mute, inglorious Miltons among the respondents to assess the question aloud, but then we would have missed the loud, vainglorious Milton that Scott Adams has been revealed to be. The enemy, it turns out, was in the mirror.