

The Delray Democrat

DeSantis's Assault on History¹

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A protestor demanding that the Palm Beach County school board remove “White Advantage” from its Equity Statement insisted she wouldn’t allow anyone to “teach my child to be ashamed of his race.” Our grandstanding governor calls Critical Race Theory “the practice of ‘teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other.’”

Like the cartoon character below, the protestor has no understanding what she is opposing, but she is sure it’s dangerous because someone told her so. Of course, education *can* be dangerous, but the real danger is to those whose ability to rule depends upon an ignorant and easily duped public.

And that is the basis of Governor DeSantis’s crusade against Critical Race Theory, something that is not even being taught in Florida schools. He is not just pandering to Trump’s base, who *choose* ignorance; he is attempting to *enforce* ignorance by preventing Florida students from being educated in American history.

Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of CRT, the one offered by Marisa Iati of *The Washington Post* is [concise](#) and gives the lie to the hysterical fearmongering expressed above:

Critical race theory is an academic framework centered on the idea that racism is systemic, and not just demonstrated by individual people with prejudices.

CRT first emerged in the 1970s as academics sought to understand why the Civil Rights era had produced far fewer gains for African Americans than anticipated. For example, the fact that Black families currently possess 10% of the wealth of White families has been shown to result from (1) racist zoning laws and [redlining](#) by banks that barred Black families from acquiring homes in neighborhoods where wealth would accumulate; and (2) targeting of Black families for subprime loans during the leadup to the housing crisis. Similarly, to take just another example, we now understand how the so-called War on Drugs is responsible for the overrepresentation of African Americans in America’s prison population, thanks to Michelle Alexander’s rigorously researched book, *The New Jim Crow*.

CRT attracted little attention outside academia until recently – indeed the term was mentioned on Fox News shows only 132 [times](#) in 2020. Now, the latest entry in the culture wars, it has already been mentioned 1,860 [times](#) on Fox in 2021.

Their phony crusade against CRT is the wagon to which Republicans have hitched their hopes to win at the polls in 2022 what they failed to win at the polls in 2020 and failed to steal on January 6, 2021. As such, Republican demonization of CRT is the gravest threat currently facing our democracy since Trump descended his golden escalator. If DeSantis is reelected, he becomes the leading candidate for the role of “Trump with a brain” that crypto-fascists dream about and

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Democrats dread.

What began with the lie that CRT is being taught in Florida schools has morphed into a requirement to teach lies or remain silent. The new education [directive](#) reads as follows:

Instruction on the required topics must be factual and objective, and may not suppress or distort significant historical events, such as the Holocaust, and may not define American history as something other than the creation of a new nation based largely on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.

Only a propagandist schooled in the works of Orwell and Goebbels would agree to teach that such shameful episodes in American history as slavery, the Civil War, post-Reconstruction white terrorism, and Jim Crow, among others, are consistent with “universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.” The unacceptable alternative for an educator is to remove such episodes from the curriculum entirely. Also note that the Holocaust is deemed a significant historical event but slavery is not. This goes beyond mere pandering and represents an attempt to divide the Democrats’ two most loyal constituencies.

DeSantis’s intent is to force the Democratic Party to choose between White Democrats “uncomfortable” with the assertion that the color of their skin provides them with advantages and Black Democrats who live the truth of that assertion every day.

It is obvious where and with whom the Democratic Party must stand. It would be intellectually dishonest and morally gutless to pretend that we are a colorblind society in which everyone is equally advantaged. A starter list of those advantages, extracted from an excellent [article](#) by Jon Greenberg appears on the back cover of this newsletter, but there’s an easier way to settle the issue if you are White and you are honest. Simply ask yourself whether, were it possible, you’d choose to push a magic button and permanently become Black. I suspect that there would be few takers. I know I would lack the courage to do so.

We will be hearing an incessant drumbeat of “White Advantage” and “Critical Race Theory” over the next year, and why not? The principal reason Biden has only the narrowest of margins in the Senate is because of the field day Republicans had with “Defund the Police” and “Abolish ICE.” That they were able to do so was because of the chasm between the actual and the literal meaning of both terms and our failure to close that gap.

As we head into the midterms, it is critical not only *how* we play defense but *that* we play offense. “White Advantage” is undeniable and well-documented, as is the fact that racism is woven into our legal and other systems. It does not mean that every White person is a racist or that everything he or she has achieved in life was unearned, but it is a significant leg up and that should be acknowledged.

It also does not mean that we can ignore the fact that there are other forms of privilege, such as being born into a middle- or upper-middle-class family that emphasizes education. Poor Whites are likely to bristle at the use of the term “White Advantage,” claiming that it was not enough to lift them into the middle class.

While their resentment may make them unreachable, we must try to explain that their economic situation is being caused by Republicans who exploit their anger as a campaign strategy and then do nothing to help them once elected. In contrast, Democrats work to help the poor and middle class. Republicans have played poor Whites against Blacks since [Bacon's Rebellion](#), and it is high time to end that charade.

As for Critical Race Theory, we should be playing offense. DeSantis's ban on teaching CRT is not only an assault on history but an assault on democracy that would have done Joe Stalin proud. Yale history professor Timothy Snyder argues as much in a recent [essay](#) and offers the following response to those concerned that receiving an education in American history might cause discomfort for some students:

History is not therapy, and discomfort is part of growing up. As a teacher, I cannot exclude the possibility, for example, that my non-Jewish students will feel psychological distress in learning how little the United States did for Jewish refugees in the 1930s. I know from my experience teaching the Holocaust that it often causes psychological discomfort for students to learn that Hitler admired Jim Crow and the myth of the Wild West. Teachers in high schools cannot exclude the possibility that the history of slavery, lynchings and voter suppression will make some non-Black students uncomfortable. The new memory laws [such as the one rammed through by DeSantis] invite teachers to self-censor, on the basis of what students might feel — or say they feel. The memory laws place censorial power in the hands of students and their parents. It is not exactly unusual for white people in America to express the view that they are being treated unfairly; now such an opinion could bring history classes to a halt.