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The Nondebate about Critical Race Theory and Our American Moment

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Abstract

This is a decisive moment in the US reckoning with truth, reconciliation, collective knowledge, and the pursuit of an inclusive, equitable democracy.

Struggles over understanding the past and over the intersection of past, present, and future intertwine at countless junctures. The ways in which the political, social, and cultural realms conflict over control of the present reflect contradictory visions of the past and future.

I call the fictitious “debate” about teaching critical race theory in American elementary and secondary schools “the second big lie.” Willfully misunderstood, it is not a debate but a battle over basic facts and partisan politics as educators, parents, and legislators clash over the role of race in American history, contemporary US society, and our future.

This is a decisive moment in the US reckoning with truth, reconciliation, collective knowledge, and the pursuit of an inclusive, equitable democracy. Battles over the past and over the intersection of past, present, and future intertwine, competing in extreme and dishonest ways.

I call the fictitious debate about teaching critical race theory in American elementary and secondary schools “the second big lie.” It is *not* a debate; it is a battle over basic facts *and* partisan politics in clashes about understanding race in the United States.

Today’s conflicts are unusual, resulting from a nationally organized, well-funded, right-wing disinformation campaign. Fox News’s Tucker

Carlson provides a bullhorn for propagandist Christopher Rufo. A failed documentary filmmaker and pseudo-journalist, Rufo is promoted by USA Today and receives contributions from the Heritage Foundation (Rufo 2021a; Wallace-Wells 2021b). Right-wing activists, propagandists, and supporters rely on an unprecedented degree of misrepresentation and outright lying. Some claim historical grounding, others assert their basis in Christian doctrine, and yet others simply propagate fabrications (Graff 2021e, 2022c).

Teachers, scholars, and other education advocates are refuting the lies professionally and responsibly—*thus quietly*—sometimes fearing reprisals. Educational associations speak out, invoking First Amendment free speech rights to counteract censorship and protect academic integrity and students' social and intellectual growth. In the summer of 2021, more than 140 professional and scholarly organizations issued a strong public statement (AAUP et al. 2021).

The legitimate media fail to conduct basic fact-checking of the propagandists' assertions. I blame the decline of mainline media under economic strains, the growth of social media, and the shift from news reporting to unchecked opinion writers. National newspapers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* publish more opinion essays about "critical race theory" than news reports, rarely investigating questionable claims.

Throughout US history, schools and education have continually been focal points of conflict (Katz 1987). Battles accelerated after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling that "separate is not equal." Increasing in the 1970s and 1980s, conflicts over race and class grew with efforts inside and outside the law to maintain or reestablish restrictions and advance novel forms of segregation.

The Past

The past is always a battleground. History is, in part, a contest to control the present and alternative visions of the future. But the current contest between fact and truth, on the one hand, and fiction and fabrication, on the other, is unique.

Competing Projects

The false competition over the “origins” of the American experience—as if there were a single point of origin—between the award-winning *1619 Project: A New Origin Story* by New York Times journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and colleagues (2021) and “patriotic” education projects that invoke 1620, 1776, or 1836 encapsulates today’s nondebate.

Note the declarations of “project.” The 1619 Project is a specific proposal to reorient American history by systematically including peoples of color whose enslaved forebears arrived in Virginia that year. Unlike patriotic competitors, the project’s creators readily admitted to errors when presented with credible evidence and arguments correcting them (Graff 2022d; McKenna 2021; Norris 2021; Perez-Moreno 2021).

The 1619 Project *never* claimed to date all of American history from 1619. It underscored that singularly important symbolic date for understanding American history. The project is subjected to often unwarranted scrutiny including trivial “fact-checking.” It is called “racist” and “un-American,” when its foundations are the opposite (Hannah-Jones et al. 2021; compare to 2019 *New York Times Sunday Magazine* version; see also Gyarkye 2019; Silverstein 2020; and *New York Times* 2021).

Without acknowledging rivals, each competing “project” claims the status of gospel, presuming to account for all of American history while almost completely *excluding* racial and minority groups, most immigrants, and women. None admit to the need for correction (Wood 2020; President’s Advisory 1776 Commission 2021; Texas State Legislature 2021a, 2021b; Serwer 2019; Cobb 2021; McKenna 2021).

The 1619 Project included professional historians as well as veteran journalists, but the “alternatives” rarely involved scholars, with Wood’s 1620 a notable exception. The 1776 Project did not list its contributors. Wood proposes the founding of the white, Protestant, Mayflower Covenant as an alternative to 1619. That date and events are significant but do not compare in impact or symbolism with the establishment of slavery. Wood ignores the relationships of Massachusetts Puritans to Native peoples and bitter divisions among English Protestants and other Christians.

The Trump-endorsed 1776 Project is faux history with gaping holes, a rotten Swiss cheese of history. A favorite of right-wing media and financially supported by the Heritage Foundation, Bradley Foundation, and Robert Gates, the project begins with the revolution. It erases race, gender, and most conflict in favor of a relentless march for “freedom,” equated with an undefined “patriotism.” Its narrow, highly selective, sanitized, and uninclusive history panders to the Right.

The Texas state legislature’s (2021a, 2021b) 1836 Project, also promoted by the governor, is the most idiosyncratic. Excising Texas’s actual past and excluding Mexicans, Spaniards, and Native Americans, it celebrates a distortion of the Battle of the Alamo, framing it as the event that created Texas and modern America. This memorializes an unsuccessful battle fought by opponents of remaining under Mexican authority because the latter abolished slavery, an unacceptable position for many white Texans.

Collectively, these “projects” erase Indigenous peoples, Native Americans, Spanish colonists, Mexicans and Black people, Catholics and other non-Protestants, non-British immigrants, and most women and children. Only a limited range of conflicts tied to patriotic victories enter these annals.

Promoting the “Second Big Lie”

These alternative histories are laughable, but they do not stand alone. They are promoted nationally and funded by an unprecedented campaign of right-wing activist groups. Overshadowed only by the “big lie” about the 2020 election and January 6 insurrection, lies are broadcast in books, sermons, and across media. “Handbooks” and “toolkits” are effective vehicles on the websites of Heritage Action, the 1776 Project, Citizens for American Renewal and their affiliates, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee peddles a line of books for youngsters. Yet they campaign to ban other books.

These efforts are as inseparable from the “second big lie” on teaching about race, falsely conflated with critical race theory. Widely publicized websites include forms to report (undefined) unacceptable examples of

teaching that “shame,” “blame,” or “hold responsible” innocent young people for the “problems” of the past, which “long ago ceased” to be concerns.

Guides for “combatting critical race theory” distort it with no mention of ordinary instruction in American history and civics in K–12 education. Without attribution or documentation, propaganda sites claim that critical race theory is Marxist or communist, and that it advocates the abolition of private property and the overthrow of capitalism—following the inventions of Rufo, who admits to fabricating quotations to incite public outrage. His USA Today “op-ed” is titled “Critical Race Theory Is State-Sanctioned Racism” (Rufo 2021b).

Such perversions allege that critical race theory is anti-American and racist and that antiracism is itself racist. These activists fabricate origin myths for it that include not just Marx but also the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the Frankfurt School in pre-Nazi Germany, the New Left, critical literary theory, deconstructionism, and more—a disconnected, fake genealogy.

The handbooks are cited by media, online parents’ groups, school boards, state legislatures, and Congress, convincing some state legislatures, boards of education, unsuspecting parents, and media figures and providing legislators with sample bills to copy. In my state, Ohio, the sponsors of companion bills in the state house and senate are too ill-informed to answer questions from reporters or other politicians.

More than a dozen attorneys general from Republican-controlled states demand that the US Department of Education refuse to endorse teaching of the 1619 Project or critical race theory, which is not taught explicitly in K–12 education and rarely in universities outside law schools. State boards of education heatedly debate bans versus endorsement of teaching accurate and equitable history and civics, to the detriment of the young (Graff 2021a, 2021b).

Almost twenty Republican state legislatures and governors have proposed or passed unconstitutional legislation banning teaching critical race theory and—in awkward, unenforceable ways—teaching or even discussing race, racial relations, and slavery. These state actions violate First Amendment free speech rights of both teachers and students.

Courtroom challenges seek to reverse progress led by free speech and civil liberties groups, teachers' organizations, and academic societies. Teachers report that they will either ignore bans or consider early retirement.

Commenting on bills in the state house and senate, Ohio governor Mike DeWine declared his support for teaching "the good and the bad." In his next breath, he opposed teaching anything that can be construed as "divisive." When asked to reconcile this contradiction, his office had "no further comment" (Stavers 2021; Graff 2021d).

The handbooks provide scripts for disrupting school board and school meetings. "Protesting parents" or "mad mothers" use them, garnering national publicity despite their small numbers. Not one publicized case refers to a child's classroom experience or a textbook's "offending passage."

A noteworthy case is the respected private Columbus Academy in Ohio. In an incident receiving national attention, two mothers spoke on a right-wing podcast, condemning their children's school. They disrupted a school meeting and admitted later to following a script from a website. Their daughters were disenrolled from the school, which received public support and contributions (Neese 2021a, 2021b; Law 2021), but that is not always the result. Inadequate reporting emphasizes the "protests" rather than their content or results (Stavers 2021; Mitchell 2021).

The handbooks also instruct readers about running for local and state boards of education to be reactionary "change agents." Scattered national and local reports suggest that this is taking place in small numbers (Mitchell 2021).

The combined promotion of One America News Network, Newsmax, and Fox amplifies the reach of these otherwise inconsequential handbooks and their lies. Trump chimes in with his scurrilous attacks on "divisive and radical critical race theory" in statements that few read. But they lead to rants from attention-seeking, wannabe presidential candidates and a handful of parents (Trump 2021).

Senators Ted Cruz (who holds Princeton and Harvard degrees), Josh Hawley (who earned a Stanford BA in American history and a Yale law degree), Tom Cotton, and others parrot these falsehoods in and out of Congress. Cruz ranted at the Faith and Freedom Coalition's convention:

critical race theory (which he likely studied at Harvard Law School) is “as racist as Klansmen in white sheets.” Cotton won passage, by a vote of 50 to 49, of an amendment authorizing federal “defunding” of schools that teach critical race theory to the bill opening debate on the \$3.5 trillion infrastructure proposal (Kruse 2021; Howard 2021). Other right-wing representatives imitate these appeals when speaking to sympathetic and, they hope, impressionable audiences who share fears and grievances.

Explaining Critical Race Theory and Teaching About Race

Critical race theory bears no resemblance to its misrepresentations. For introductions by reputable scholars, see Delgado and Stefancic 2017, Kendi 2019, and anthologies like Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1995 *Critical Race Theory* (as well as George 2021a, 2021b; Kendi 2021; Rosenberg 2021; “Culture War” 2021; Berkshire 2021; and Norris 2021). Critical race theory was founded and remains a fundamental field in legal studies and is often a required course in law schools.

Right-wing activists who battle for control over history and education purposefully or ignorantly confuse or conflate a law school concentration with ordinary, usually uncontroversial, teaching about race as an inescapable part of American history. Critical race theory originated at Harvard Law School in the mid-to-late 1970s, principally by the scholar Derrick Bell in coordination with students like Kimberlé Crenshaw, who developed the field at UCLA and Columbia law schools.

The founding principle of the field of study is that race—and racism—is embedded in our institutions, laws, government and corporative policies, business arrangements, and the like. This is undeniable, and critical race theory stimulated decades of foundational scholarship and teaching that have influenced many levels of education and policy, but it is not a formal subject in K–12 schools.

Current K–12 and undergraduate textbooks and instructional content originated in the transformational “new histories” of the 1960s and the following decades. Black history was among the emergent fields of research and teaching, alongside histories of labor, women and gender, families, and urban communities. I benefited as an undergraduate and graduate student, without being aware of critical race theory, and later

contributed books on the history of literacy, children and families, and cities indebted to these academic foundations.

Prelude to the Present, 1954–2021

Understanding today means seeing the paths from the post–World War II emergence of civil rights movements and the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. The white counterreaction accelerated after the passage of mid-1960s civil and voting rights legislation. It galvanized nationally organized, right-wing activist resistance movements of the 1990s and 2010s that exploded in late 2020 and 2021. The “history wars” of the third quarter of the twentieth century pale in comparison to what I call the “new white fright and flight” (Graff 2022a, 2022e).

Deeply rooted in a complex of fears and anxieties, today’s conflicts are easily manipulated by propagandists. Political subterfuge sparks fears and resentments that developed over the previous half century and longer. We acknowledge the intersecting roles of decades of school and residential desegregation, and their exaggeration, on the one hand, and neighborhood change, minority residential deconcentration, and white and minority suburbanization, on the other. Conflicts over zoning, including redlining and its patchwork retraction, opportunity zones, and fair and alternative housing, undergird today’s fears and actions. They are also at the core of critical race theory.

From the 1960s and increasingly after, fear, flight, and fight filled court dockets, state legislative agendas, and state and local school board sessions and elections. They link battles over “forced” busing and the historic shift against the prohibited use of public monies for private, parochial, and for-profit schooling, especially in the form of vouchers. Part and parcel are gatekeeping entrance exams for elite schools and pseudo “school choice.”

Minority gains, exaggerated and fleeting, are taken illogically and inaccurately as white “losses.” Opinion polls report popular support for advancing historically disadvantaged minority populations and fears of promoting reverse discrimination through affirmative action, for example. Proposals for reparations for slavery and truth and reconciliation commissions for Black and Native peoples are nonstarters

in the United States. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2021) writes, “The invented crisis of critical race theory is also intended to sow tension and suspicion among those who have an interest in solidarity and connection” (see also Graff 2022c; Wallace-Wells 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; and Crenshaw 2021).

Today’s campaigns differ from earlier ones in part because they are nationally organized, ideologically driven, and implicitly endorse white supremacy. Activists make even less effort to familiarize themselves with their targets or even provide anecdotal evidence, bombarding old and new media. Few journalists and opinion writers fact-check before repeating unwarranted assumptions and false equivalences (Foster et al. 2021; Walsh 2021).

These efforts are also distinct because of accelerating tactics to attract white parents and intimidate teachers, principals, school boards, and students. Constitutionally guaranteed free speech rights under the First Amendment are more important than ever (Harris 2021; Emba 2021).

Our historical moment is a backlash against incomplete civil rights victories for minorities and women—and a racist response to Barack Obama’s presidency. Trump’s election by a voting minority stimulated four years of divisiveness, stoked in part by Republicans who echoed his demands for the birth certificate of a US-born citizen. Trump galvanized decades of dissatisfaction into an ignorant assault on critical race theory.

White fear and flight shape resistance to the fair, open teaching and learning of an accurate, inclusive American history that embraces achievements and shortcomings. This radical rejection of common knowledge targets the young, whose growth and maturity provide a foundation for democratic citizenship. Especially since 2015, these political, social, cultural, and economic clashes are fueled by a new right-wing authoritarianism, confused with populism. The legacy of the forty-fifth president, as a symbol of that populist authoritarianism, threatens to be long-lasting (Zakaria 2021; Gerson 2021).

The People and the Teaching of History

Absent from almost all statements about “divisiveness” is the significant question of popular attitudes toward teaching history. Proponents of

“patriotic” historiography readily speak for the young and not so young with many dubious claims about what is presumed to “unite” or “divide” Americans.

Popular attitudes toward learning and teaching history are open and progressive. A right-wing refrain asserts without evidence that diversity, inclusion, and history that embrace the “good” and the “bad” spawn division and conflict. Opinion research contradicts those who endorse inclusive history but oppose teaching that they fear is “divisive” or “uncomfortable” (Graff 2022b).

Is “Patriotic” History and Education Really Less Divisive?

Supporting calls by true conservatives, moderates, liberals, and progressives, new research conducted for the American Historical Association, “History, the Past, and Public Culture,” reports that 77 percent of those surveyed believe that “it’s acceptable to teach about uncomfortable history, even if that teaching causes learners discomfort.” This holds across racial, political party, gender, education, and age groups: 74 percent of Republicans agreed, compared to 78 percent of Democrats; 81 percent of whites, compared to 79 percent of Blacks; 87 percent of college graduates, compared to 71 percent of those without a degree; and 77 percent of those 65 and older, compared to 79 percent of those aged 18–29 (American Historical Association 2021).

Respondents differ in interpretations of “uncomfortable” and “discomfort.” They vary by ideology. But the consistency of these findings speaks powerfully, underscoring the fallaciousness of claims that the experience of “discomfort” in learning history results from being “divisive,” “shaming,” or “blaming.”

Whither the Future?

For those who respect facts and logical arguments, the conversation must change. Historians are poor futurologists, but we know that understanding the past is the best path forward, even if we know better than to expect unanimity.

Reconciling differences widened by a mendacious nondebate is a challenging long-term process in which not everyone will join. Our losses

include teachers who leave teaching after suffering real or threatened intimidation, and students caught between factions.

My greatest concerns rest with the young, who are our best hope for an inclusive, democratic future. Our goal must be free and fair education that prepares and empowers everyone equally.

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