

# Critical Race Theory

## *Contrived White-Wing Moral Panic – the Stream of Fakery, Collusion and Propaganda*

By Lloyd Guthrie Oct 2, 2022

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### Commentary

This week, the Douglas County School Board voted to keep equity policy on the front burner. In a split vote, the Board directed Superintendent Kane to gather input from stakeholders, culminating in a March 2023 report compiling recommended changes in the policy.

The majority's decision is yet another right-wing play designed to maintain high political heat and local ideological divisiveness. With this vote, the conservative majority ensures the issue of equity and race in public education will remain in the public eye for the 2022 mid-term elections, and the 2024 presidential election as well.

Working with conservative think-tanks and GOP operatives, the DCSD majority will maintain an array of public education policy discussions front-and-center, as a prime tool in the string of fake moral panics offered up to keep the base riled and get out the vote for conservative candidates and causes.

In this vein, we should expect to see continuation of the agenda of hot-button issues including public school policy, gun rights, health decisions, individual rights, religion in politics, SCOTUS, government overreach and immigration, among others. Similar right-wing efforts in communities across the state and nation will build-up to the 2024 election.

Local opposition to this effort to dismantle public education can pull together a deeper grassroots plan of organization, messaging, and legal action. As local history shows, the genuine answer is voting extremism out of institutional decision-making...DCSD, county, local and state government.

Until then, our community should be prepared for a constant stream of right-wing strategies and tactics - equity policy, teachers unions, charter schools, vouchers - cloaked in the collusion and propaganda of contrived right-wing moral panics driven by the national plan.

*(Note: Following are published articles and commentaries on the topic of Critical Race Theory, and the role of contrived moral panics in activating and maintaining right-wing extremism.)*

### DCSD to Engage Community on Equity Policy

#### **Douglas County NewsPress**

Sept 29, 2022, by McKenna Harford

*"In a split vote, the Douglas County School Board directed the superintendent to compile recommendations to change the equity policy and present them in March. During the Sept. 27 meeting, the board voted 5-2 to officially waive a Sept. 1 deadline for Superintendent Erin Kane to recommend changes to the equity policy as laid out in a January resolution, so that Kane can gather input from parents, students and teachers throughout this year."*

## The Tea Party to the 10th Power

### **Politico**

June 6, 2021, by Theodore Meyer et al

*"This is the Tea Party to the 10th power," Steve Bannon, who has zeroed in on local school board fights over critical race theory, said in an interview. "I look at this and say, 'Hey, this is how we are going to win.' I see 50 [House Republican] seats in 2022. Keep this up," Bannon said.*

## Critical Race Theory's Merchants of Doubt

### **Time Magazine**

August 1, 2022, by Victor Ray

*"Conservative media and think tanks, fearing a lost battle in the war of ideas over racism in American life, counter-mobilized. Morality plays need villains, and conservative activists conjured a caricature of critical race theory—a forty-year-old academic framework—as an ominous and pervasive evil."*

## Republicans, spurred by an Unlikely Figure, See Political Promise in Targeting Critical Race Theory

### **New York Times**

June 21, 2021, by Laura Meckler and Josh Dawsey

*"President Donald Trump was watching Fox News one evening last summer when a young conservative from Seattle appeared with an alarming warning, and a call to action. Christopher Rufo said critical race theory, a decades-old academic framework that most people had never heard of, had "pervaded every institution in the federal government." "Critical race theory," Rufo said, "has become, in essence, the default ideology of the federal bureaucracy and is now being weaponized against the American people."*

## White Backlash Is a Type of Racial Reckoning, Too

### **FiveThirtyEight**

Jan. 6, 2022 by Hakeem Jefferson and Victor Ray

*"Ultimately, there is little evidence that the promise of racial progress has borne much fruit, at least for those who live closest to the margins of American society. But a racial reckoning that ushers in racial progress is only one type of racial reckoning. Racial backlash is a kind of racial reckoning, too. And the racial reckoning of this moment — one characterized by white backlash to a perceived loss of power and status — seems poised to be much more consequential."*

## There Is No Debate Over Critical Race Theory

### **The Atlantic**

July 9, 2021, by Ibram X. Kendi

*"Pundits and politicians have created their own definition for the term, and then set about attacking it. The United States is not in the midst of a "culture war" over race and racism. The animating force of our current conflict is not our differing values, beliefs, moral codes, or practices. The American people aren't divided. The American people are being divided."*

## **DCSD to Engage Community on Equity Policy**

**Douglas County NewsPress copyright**

Sept 29, 2022, by McKenna Harford [\(return\)](#)

“In a split vote, the Douglas County School Board directed the superintendent to compile recommendations to change the equity policy and present them in March.

During the Sept. 27 meeting, the board voted 5-2 to officially waive a Sept. 1 deadline for Superintendent Erin Kane to recommend changes to the equity policy as laid out in a January resolution, so that Kane can gather input from parents, students and teachers throughout this year.

Board members Susan Meek and David Ray voted against the waiver, having voiced concerns about unclear language in the original resolution.

Board members have disagreed on how to move forward with the resolution, which was passed by members Becky Myers, Mike Peterson, Christy Williams and Kaylee Winegar earlier this year. In recent discussions, members Elizabeth Hanson, Meek and Ray have advocated for a monitoring report on the policy, while the other members support an implementation plan with potential changes based on community feedback.

As part of the Sept. 27 discussion, Ray proposed an amendment to the original resolution, which would have waived the deadline and directed the superintendent to conduct a monitoring report on the policy to examine implementation.

The amendment failed 4-3, with Myers, Peterson, Williams and Winegar dissenting, but sparked further discussion on how the district should approach the equity policy.

Ray said the idea behind the amendment was to focus on the impact of the policy and not the wording.

Hanson and Meek supported the amendment, with Meek saying she felt it addressed concerns about clarity while also respecting the intent of the resolution.

“I ask my colleagues, if you truly believe students are being harmed through this policy, why would you refuse to take real action?” she said. “Why would you refuse to ask for a monitoring report that would demonstrate in an accountable way whether there is a true need to change language?”

In his comments, Peterson said he supported the original resolution without the amendment because the themes covered in the equity policy overlap with the district’s end goals, which are already monitored.

“I think we can include elements of this policy throughout our monitoring reports that support other goals,” he said.

Myers, Williams and Winegar also supported the original resolution. Winegar, who introduced the resolution in January, said she supported moving forward with Kane’s community engagement plan, presented on Sept. 13.

“When this resolution was drafted, we had a different superintendent that I felt wasn’t taking action and that’s a big reason why I was a proponent of it,” Winegar said. “Since then, a lot has happened and changed, and that’s why I’m OK with this date being waived. The superintendent has presented a

plan on her interpretation of this resolution, and I think it's a great plan, so I don't agree with changing the current resolution."

Myers said she believes the equity policy has similarities to critical race theory, adding she'd like to begin conversations.

"I'm comfortable with Superintendent Kane and us reaching out now more to the community, having some forums or one-on-one meetings with our community, but I would like to see a more diverse involvement from the community," Myers said.

With the deadline waived, Kane is planning to start engaging the community on four central questions around implementation of the equity policy, including what people want to see happen, what fears they have, what questions they have and how to measure success of the policy.

Kane's plan includes conversations with the district's equity advisory council, staff, students and parents, as well as a presentation of her finding at the March 31 meeting.

The equity policy was enacted in 2019 and remains in effect as it was approved."

## **The Tea Party to the 10th Power: Trumpworld Bets Big on Critical Race Theory** **Politico copyright**

June 6, 2021, by Theodore Meyer et al [\(return\)](#)

"Republicans aren't coy about what they are trying to do. It's not just about changing curricula. It's about taking back Congress.

Former top aides to President Donald Trump have begun an aggressive push to combat the teaching of critical race theory and capitalize on the issue politically, confident that a backlash will vault them back into power.

These officials, including Trump's former campaign chief and two former budget advisers, have poured money and organizational muscle into the fight. They've aided activists who are pushing back against the concept that racism has been systemic to American society and institutions after centuries of slavery and Jim Crow. And some of them have begun working with members of Congress to bar the military from holding diversity trainings and to withhold federal funds from schools and colleges that promote anything that can be packaged as critical race theory.

The immediate goal, two Trump alumni said, is to get legislative language included in a must-pass bill. The larger one is to harness a national movement that could unseat Democrats.

"This is the Tea Party to the 10th power," Steve Bannon, Trump's former adviser who has zeroed in on local school board fights over critical race theory, said in an interview. "This isn't Q, this is mainstream suburban moms — and a lot of these people aren't Trump voters."

Concerns about critical race theory, which examines how race and racism permeates society, have been percolating for months in what activists describe as a sincere grassroots phenomenon led by parents. Critical race theory dates back to the 1970s, but as the country remains in a prolonged conversation about race following George Floyd's death, a new political battle over how to teach American history has emerged.

It has increasingly become a major focus of the Republican establishment, which has sought to capitalize on the angst even as some officeholders have [failed to define](#) what critical race theory is and the threat it poses. (Critical race theory, for example, does not imply white students should feel guilty about past civil rights issues and is not taught in many of the schools where lawmakers are seeking to ban it).

Their efforts to elevate the issue have worked.

Google searches for “critical race theory” skyrocketed on March 18, for example, the same day that Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis [proposed banning it](#) from Florida’s school curriculum. Fox News mentioned nearly 1,300 times over a three-and-a-half-month span, according to an analysis done by the liberal watchdog Media Matters for America. Last week, Texas became the fifth state that passed a law taking aim at critical race theory or similar topics, and legislation has been proposed in more than a dozen other states.

Democrats, liberal political analysts, and even celebrities have used the power of the Black press and broadcast news to push back.

Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association and a friend to the Biden White House, supported a thorough teaching of American history — including the more painful parts — in an [NBC interview last week](#). “We have made many mistakes in this country, but our kids, our kids deserve to learn all of that truth,” she said.

Journalist and author Ta-Nehisi Coates and Hollywood actress and LGBTQ activist Lena Waithe, along with dozens of academics and writers, are also backing efforts to support teaching students about systemic racism. They [penned an open letter in The Root](#) in support of Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the New York Times Magazine’s 1619 project, which many Republicans see as a key tool for pushing critical race theory.

They are combating the decision of major Trump World and other national Republican figures who are increasingly entering the fray. Earlier this month, Republicans at the North Carolina GOP’s annual convention jumped to their feet with enthusiastic applause when Trump called for a ban on critical race theory from the local school level to the federal government. Some top Republicans aren’t coy when they talk about the electoral benefits that stoking such a culture war issue could provide.

“I look at this and say, ‘Hey, this is how we are going to win.’ I see 50 [House Republican] seats in 2022. Keep this up,” Bannon said. “I think you’re going to see a lot more emphasis from Trump on it and DeSantis and others. People who are serious in 2024 and beyond are going to focus on it.”

Jessica Anderson, executive director of the Heritage Foundation’s advocacy arm, said critical race theory is one of the top two issues her group is working on alongside efforts to tighten voting laws. A former Office of Management and Budget official in the Trump administration, Anderson’s Heritage Action for America [put out a pamphlet](#) on Monday calling critical race theory a “destructive” ideology and urging voters to call on their lawmakers to support anti-critical race theory bills introduced by Reps. Chip Roy (R-Texas) and Dan Bishop (R-N.C.). It also urges voters to use Freedom of Information Act requests as a tactic to identify critical race theory-tied elements in schools’ curricula.

“It could turn out to be one of the most important conservative grassroots fights since the Tea Party movement,” she said.

In addition to Heritage Action, a new group called Citizens for Renewing America, an outfit started by Russ Vought, Trump's former Office of Management and Budget director, has rushed in to bolster anti-critical race theory efforts.

As OMB director, Vought [drafted a September memo](#) warning federal agencies that Trump wanted them to "cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions." More recently, Citizens for Renewing America has circulated [a 33-page document](#) titled "An A to Z Guide on How to Stop Critical Race Theory and Reclaim Your Local School Board."

In Washington, Heritage Action is pursuing a long shot strategy to try to shoehorn anti-critical race theory language into must-pass legislation such as the annual defense spending bill. Vought's group, meanwhile, is pushing for Republicans to force the provisions in Bishop's bill to be included in legislation to raise the debt limit this fall.

"We believe it's necessary for us to find leverage points to get that onto bills that must pass," Vought said in an interview.

Slightly outside Washington, another prominent Trump alum has been active on one of the other major frontlines of the critical race theory debate.

Ian Prior, a former Justice Department spokesperson in the Trump administration whose children go to Loudoun County, Va., schools, is spearheading an effort to recall six Democratic school board members in that Washington D.C. suburb. Heritage Action helped organize a rally there earlier this month after a [Loudoun County High School teacher complained](#) that white students "are being told to check their white privilege."

But Prior, who has become a semi-regular on Fox News to discuss the matter, insists that his group, Fight for Schools, isn't "some astroturf thing that's powered by big money."

"We just sat on a back porch and started it," he added. "There is an energy here that transcends political parties."

Polls don't quite show that the issue is cutting across party lines. A new Morning Consult/POLITICO survey, for example, found that while the majority (54 percent) of Republicans believed critical race theory was negatively impacting society, a plurality of Democrats (48 percent) and Independents (46 percent) said they didn't have a sense of any impact. The survey found that the population was fairly split on whether it should be taught in K-12 schools: 32 percent supporting it and 36 percent opposing it.

Few of the organizations working to oppose critical race theory disclose their donors. Heritage Action and Citizens for Renewing America don't and Prior said he did not have donor information to share. So, it is impossible to know which big-moneyed interests, if any, are funding the anti-critical race theory initiatives those groups are undertaking.

But some deep-pocketed individuals are contributing to the cause.

Anderson, for one, said Heritage Action had "huge donor interest in this." Other donors have started new groups of their own — including some who revved up the budding Tea Party movement a decade ago.



Frayda Levin, a longtime libertarian donor who's served on the Club for Growth's board, recently started her own group, Color Us United, which aims to be a counterweight to Black Lives Matter in the press.

"Our side is really gearing up to push back against what we call the race industrial complex," Levin said.

And 1776 Project PAC, which was founded to support local school board candidates against critical race theory in schools, has raised over \$135,000 from 1,600 donors in less than a month, said its founder Ryan Girdusky, a 34-year-old former political operative who created the PAC after listening to complaints from friends with kids. "It really isn't this organized effort on the part of, like, a right-wing intelligentsia or political think tank or some plan for us to have a boogeyman so we can get the suburbs back," Girdusky said. "I'm sure it would be a lot more interesting if we were all meeting up in a castle somewhere."

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## Critical Race Theory's Merchants of Doubt

Time Magazine copyright

August 1, 2022, by Victor Ray ([return](#))

*Ray is the author of the forthcoming [ON CRITICAL RACE THEORY: Why it Matters & Why You Should Care](#)*

"Protests over George Floyd's 2020 murder were the [largest civil rights demonstrations in American history](#). The brutal footage of officer Derek Chauvin's suffocating knee on George Floyd's neck led many white Americans to, at least briefly, acknowledge the [reality of structural racism in policing](#). In response, corporations questioned their diversity policies, "defund the police" became an activist rallying cry, and books on anti-racism became [unexpected bestsellers](#). A narrative arose that America experienced a "racial reckoning" that challenged white racism's worst excesses.

Conservative media and think tanks, fearing a lost battle in the war of ideas over racism in American life, [counter-mobilized](#). Morality plays need villains, and conservative activists conjured a caricature of critical race theory—a forty-year-old academic framework—as an ominous and pervasive evil.

*Conservative groups claimed their villain was everywhere—from the federal bureaucracy to elementary schools—and fomented a moral panic over anti-racist education.*

Pundits credited Virginia Governor Greg Younkin's win to his scaring white parents into thinking their children might learn about the nation's history of white supremacy.

Conservative lawmakers have exploited the panic, attempting to remake the educational landscape with banning so-called "divisive concepts" that might make white kids uncomfortable.

*Propaganda victories are victories, nonetheless. And killing the messenger can destroy the message (if you can't beat them, ban them).* “Facts don’t care about your feelings” has become a conservative rallying cry. But critical race theory’s merchants of doubt, by legislating against accurate teaching of America’s racial history, put their feelings over empirical facts.

But victories aside, propaganda exposes its proponents’ intellectual bankruptcy. Conservative caricatures of critical race theory are [unrecognizable to scholars familiar with the idea](#).

According to the [Washington Post](#), Christopher Rufo, the principal architect of the anti-critical race theory of moral panic admitted his crusade distorted the meaning of critical race theory when he tweeted: “We have successfully frozen their brand—’critical race theory—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”

Incoherence and confusion are virtues for opponents of anti-racist teaching. And Rufo and his fellow travelers are simply updating the misinformation campaigns targeting accepted scholarship that elements of the right have trafficked in for decades. Heedless of both the actual content of critical race theory and the human cost of their panic, conservatives turned to propaganda because the weight of empirical evidence undermines their ideological preferences.

In their classic book *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, the historians of science Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway outline a series of propaganda campaigns designed to undermine the scientific consensus on many of our most pressing collective problems. Conservative scientists, politicians, and think tanks sowed confusion over the link between cancer and smoking, acid rain’s environmental impact, and [civilizational threats over global warming](#). Conspirators exploited the structure of scientific inquiry—which contains inherent uncertainties—to cast doubt on settled facts. Conspirators also played the media, manipulating the [false objectivity](#) of both-sides framing to claim equal time for scientific consensus and quackery. The strategy of sowing confusion works not because anti-empirical claims are correct but because manufactured uncertainty is often enough to bring political action to a halt.

Anti-scientific campaigns, whether focused on acid rain or climate change, often relied upon a close-knit cabal of think tanks, funders, and individual scientists (who sometimes lacked subject area expertise). Corporate profits and individual livelihoods were at risk if facts about the harms of smoking or environmental crisis were acknowledged and regulated. For short-term financial or political gain, anti-science propagandists made progress on long-term collective problems difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. In the meantime, these propagandists profited as the harms from industries they were protecting were passed onto an unsuspecting and credulous public.



Critical race theory's merchants of doubt use strategies similar to those of previous anti-intellectual propaganda campaigns. And like these prior movements, the moral panic over critical race theory rests on a weak intellectual foundation.

No serious analyst doubts that American society is rife with racial inequality. Yes, there is debate among social scientists about the cause of racial inequality. But the consensus among honest scholars is that racial inequality is a long-standing, complex, intractable, and pressing social problem. The empirical evidence on structural racism and the inequality it produces is [massive, overwhelming, and hard to contest](#). From unemployment to life expectancy, it is difficult to find a domain of American life where Black people aren't worse off. Critical race theorists developed a flexible set of tenets that showed how often seemingly neutral social processes reproduce racial inequality. And these tenets were so useful they've been adopted by scholars of education, public policy, and sociology. Critical race theory's main principles—that [race is a social construction](#) and [racial progress is fragile](#) and easily overturned—have [substantial empirical support](#).

Intellectual weakness on race matters doesn't make the anti-critical race theory campaign any less dangerous. Desperation and ruthlessness born of knowing facts aren't on their side may make the campaigns more treacherous. Accuracy isn't necessary to terrify teachers into changing lesson plans and avoiding basic truths about the American past (and present) or mangling lectures to make understanding difficult. Teachers are worried that clear explanations of slavery and [Native American genocide](#) may run afoul of the law and have received [physical threats](#) for vowing to teach the truth about American history.

I'm hardly the first analyst to connect attacks on critical race theory and prior ignorance promoting campaigns. Several [historians](#) have shown the similarities between the [Scopes Monkey Trial](#) - perhaps the paradigmatic case of anti-intellectual campaigns in U.S. history - and the moral panic surrounding critical race theory. Adam R. Shapiro notes that [“Darwinism had been around for about half a century,”](#) when it became the object of conservative ire. Shapiro claims that it wasn't Darwin's theory, *per se*, that led to opposition. The scientific consensus around Darwinism was representative of larger cultural trends that worried conservatives. Evolution stood in for a broad swath of economic, cultural, and political changes. The backlash to critical race theory is driven by a similar set of fears of lost white prerogative amidst cultural and demographic change.

Historical connections between the Scopes Monkey Trial and the current moral panic aren't simply analogies. Christopher Rufo, who has been credited with taking the moral panic mainstream, is a former employee of the anti-evolution [Discovery Institute](#). Perhaps better described as an anti-think tank, the Discovery Institute promotes misinformation around evolutionary theory, arguing that in place of the scientific consensus, schools should “teach the controversy.”

Of course, there is little controversy among biologists aside from what the Discovery Institute itself foments. Claiming there is a scientific controversy where none exists muddies the waters, allowing unscrupulous actors to push their political agenda. Conspiracy theories travel in packs, and the

Discovery Institute also [promotes climate change denial and raises questions about the legitimacy of the 2020 election](#).

Ideas from critical race theory can help explain moral panic. [Moral panics are immoral exercises](#), designed to create group cohesion, target ideological or political enemies, and shape norms. Critical race theorists draw attention to structural racism to find solutions to racial inequality. Critical Race Theorists maintain that structural racism is a profitable political system for the system's beneficiaries. Finding solutions to climate change and tobacco addiction threaten those who benefit from emissions and smoking.

And finding solutions to racial inequality threatens those who [benefit from structural racism](#). 2020's protests put these beneficiaries on notice, so it's no surprise they responded to defend their interests. Banning teaching about racism is a justification of existing racial inequality and a prelude to producing more. Barring teaching about diversity distorts basic facts about American life and creates the idea that difference is strange or dangerous.

Legislators claim they want to stop divisive teaching and are worried about lessons that demonize white people. But what is more divisive than outlawing basic descriptive facts about American history?

Critical race theory doesn't demonize white people. But by blocking teaching about America's segregationists, eugenicists, and white citizen councilors, legislators may end up demonizing themselves.

Dr. King warned about the dangers of this racial ignorance when he said, "Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn."

Academic knowledge production depends upon good faith and verifiable fact. And when facts about structural racism make their way into the schools, they ban books and threaten teachers. It makes collective problems harder to solve."

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## **Republicans, spurred by an Unlikely Figure, See Political Promise in Targeting Critical Race Theory**

**New York Times copyright**

June 21, 2021, by Laura Meckler and Josh Dawsey

"President Donald Trump was watching Fox News one evening last summer when a young conservative from Seattle appeared with an alarming warning, and a call to action.

Christopher Rufo said critical race theory, a decades-old academic framework that most people had never heard of, had "pervaded every institution in the federal government."

"Critical race theory," Rufo said, "has become, in essence, the default ideology of the federal bureaucracy and is now being weaponized against the American people."

Critical race theory holds that racism is systemic in the United States, not just a collection of individual prejudices — an idea that feels obvious to some and offensive to others. Rufo alleged that efforts to inject awareness of systemic racism and White privilege, which grew more popular following the murder of George Floyd by police, posed a grave threat to the nation. It amounts, Rufo said to a “cult indoctrination.”

Spurred by Rufo, this complaint has come to dominate conservative politics. Debates over critical race theory are raging on school boards and in state legislatures. Fox News has increased its coverage and commentary on the issue. And Republicans see the issue as a central element of the case they will make to voters in next year’s midterm elections, when control of Congress will be at stake.

It’s the latest cultural wedge issue, playing out largely but not exclusively in debate over schools. At its core, it pits progressives who believe White people should be pushed to confront systemic racism and White privilege in America against conservatives who see these initiatives as painting all White people as racist. Progressives see racial disparities in education, policing and economics as a result of racism. Conservatives say analyzing these issues through a racial lens is, in and of itself, racist. Where one side sees a reckoning with America’s past and present sins, another sees a misguided effort to teach children to hate America.

The reaction to Rufo’s [appearance that evening](#) on Fox News was swift. The next day, Trump demanded action. Two days later, his budget chief issued [a memo](#) laying the groundwork for the federal government to cancel all diversity trainings. An [executive order](#) followed, and Rufo was invited to the White House a few months later for a meeting.

The order was [rescinded](#) by President Biden on his first day of office, but in the months since, complaints voiced by Rufo and others have only grown louder. Rufo, 36, has become an in-demand activist who has advised, by his count, hundreds of leaders across the country, including school board candidates, state legislators and members of Congress.

Rufo has played a key role in the national debate, defining diversity trainings and other programs as critical race theory, putting out examples that legislators and others then cite — though not all of Rufo’s details hold up to scrutiny.

He continues to appear regularly on Fox News to discuss the issue and often offers strategic advice over how to win the political fight. In March, [he wrote on Twitter](#) that his goal was to conflate any number of topics into a new bucket called critical race theory.

“We have successfully frozen their brand—‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category,” Rufo wrote. “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”

Rufo said in an interview that he understands why his opponents often point to this tweet, but said that the approach described is “so obvious.”

“If you want to see public policy outcomes you have to run a public persuasion campaign,” he said. Rufo says his own role has been to translate research into programs about race into the political arena.

“I basically took that body of criticism, I paired it with breaking news stories that were shocking and explicit and horrifying, and made it political,” he said. “Turned it into a salient political issue with a clear villain.”

## **A surge of support**

Among the GOP base, the issue has caught fire. During a recent speech in North Carolina, Trump's comments opposing critical race theory were the largest applause line of the evening.

Trump has told advisers he was surprised at how much traction the issue has gotten on the right and wants to include comments about it in future speeches. He has drafted on the topic as well, spokesman Jason Miller said. "The Democrats are taking the bait and keeping wokeness alive."

Former vice president Mike Pence also recently raised the matter in Hillsborough, N.H., during a speech, drawing applause. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) has regularly brought it up with donors and supporters. NBC News [counted](#) 165 local and national groups battling against race- and gender-based lessons.

A national group called Parents Defending Education is collecting stories and filing complaints with the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights. The group also conducted a [poll](#) that posed questions about various race-based lessons using terms employed by opponents and publicized results as: "Americans Overwhelmingly Reject 'Woke' Race and Gender Policies in K-12 Education." The survey also asked voters if implementation of these ideas would impact their vote in school board elections.

Tim Phillips, who leads the Koch-funded group Americans for Prosperity, said he, too, has been taken aback at how many Republican and conservative activists raise the issue unprompted as he travels the country to meet with activists in places such as Pittsburgh, Dallas and Augusta, Ga. Phillips said his group is not planning to focus on the issue, but that the issue is energizing many to get involved in politics for the first time.

The National Republican Senatorial Committee recently polled on the topic and found that it could be a potent issue with voters, said a Republican strategist involved in Senate races. This person said the issue ranks below the economy, taxes, government spending and energy policy but that Republicans trying to win the senate will use the issue, along with other cultural ones, to paint Democrats as "leftist and extreme." The strategist said that some voters did not know precisely what it was — but viewed it as part of a broader cultural shift they feared.

"The question is how much it actually drives voters," the strategist said. "Is it really affecting anyone's life and is it going to move actual votes?"

Any reticence is a mistake, said Russell Vought, director of Trump's White House Office of Management and Budget and the man who drafted and published Trump's executive order. Since leaving office, Vought has been working behind the scenes to help advance state legislation and advising Republican candidates to embrace the issue.

He now heads a group called the Center for Renewing America and says fighting critical race theory is the group's top mission. He's working to help state legislators draft and promote bills on the subject as well as crafting political strategy.

The battle, Vought said, is partly within the Republican Party. He said some GOP political consultants are wrongly advising lawmakers to stay away from the issue.

"If you think you need to avoid these issues because you think they are too risky, then you are not aware of where your people are," he said. "There's a good chunk of the Republican Party that wants to avoid issues that are hard to talk about and this one potentially is hard to talk about because you're dealing with race, and you want to be very careful about how you do it."

For now, there's considerable action on the state level. [Idaho](#), [Texas](#), [Tennessee](#), [Arkansas](#) and [Oklahoma](#) have passed bills banning teaching of certain race-

related issues in schools and elsewhere, with legislation pending in many other states. This month, the Florida State Board of Education [banned teaching](#) that racism is “embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons.” Another bill is under consideration in South Carolina.

Keith Ammon (R), a New Hampshire state representative who has spearheaded the effort to ban critical race theory there, said Rufo has been helpful. “He has a way of distilling down information to make it digestible to the public, which is a very useful skill,” Ammon said.

[\*Texas bill to ban teaching of critical race theory puts teachers on front lines of culture war over how history is taught\*](#)

### **From filmmaker to activist**

Rufo is something of an unexpected activist as he urges states on. A California native, he worked for years as a documentary filmmaker, with films broadcast on PBS. In recent years, his work has grown more political, and more conservative. Today, he lives in the Seattle area, where he has campaigned for a more enforcement-oriented policy toward homeless people living on the city streets. He mounted a short-lived campaign for Seattle City Council before [dropping out](#), saying he and his family were [being harassed](#). He has worked with conservative think tanks including the Heritage Foundation, the Manhattan Institute and the Discovery Institute in Seattle.

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In an interview, Rufo said he turned to reporting about two years ago. He refers to himself as an investigative reporter and often labels his posts on Twitter, where he has more than 169,000 followers, with the word “SCOOP,” as reporters sometimes do.

He says that in recent months he has advised hundreds of lawmakers, and this month he published a [“briefing book”](#) on critical race theory debates including incendiary comments from anti-racism figures, advice on how to win the “language war” by using terms such as “race-based Marxism,” a compilation of anecdotes from schools and elsewhere, polling data and suggestions for legislative action.

In March, he participated in [a forum](#) for New Hampshire lawmakers, where he advised them to use specific examples to make their case against critical race theory.

“Once you actually lay down the specifics, say, ‘Hey, I support diversity, I support inclusion, I support equality, but this is what they’re doing in practice,’ and then make your opponents defend those specific incidents,” he said. “I can provide a range of reporting.”

Rufo said he began reporting on this issue a year ago, when he got a tip that the city of Seattle had invited White employees to [a program](#) about “internalized racial superiority” and their “complicity in the system of white supremacy.”

That led to a flood of tips and documents about similar programs across the country, he said. “I had naively thought this is probably a crazy Seattle thing.”

Then Tucker Carlson invited Rufo to deliver his show’s opening monologue with him. Rufo saw it as a unique opportunity to lay out his reporting on the federal government and to ask Trump directly to issue an executive order.

“People don’t get what they want because they don’t ask for what they want,” he said. “I rehearsed in my mind the line as I was driving to the studio: ‘I call on President Trump to immediately issue an executive order ...’”

The next morning, he got a call from White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows saying that Trump had seen the show and wanted to know more. Within days, officials across the government were canceling already scheduled events.

### **Questionable evidence**

Some of the allegations Rufo laid out that evening is not supported by the evidence he produces, and others are stretched beyond the facts.

He pointed to three examples of what he said were woke politics gone amok inside the federal government — at the [Treasury Department](#), Sandia National Laboratories and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The Treasury Department, he said, had hired a diversity consultant named Howard Ross who “told Treasury employees essentially that America was a fundamentally white supremacist country and, I quote, ‘Virtually all White people uphold the system of racism and white superiority.’”

Rufo said that Ross was “essentially denouncing the country” and asking White Treasury employees “to accept their White privilege, accept their white racial superiority.” A post about this training on Rufo’s website is headlined, “Treasury Department tells employees all white people are racist.”

To support these conclusions, Rufo posted a 33-page document prepared for the Treasury on his website, but the document does not say that all White people are racist or that America is a fundamentally white supremacist country. It does not ask White people to accept “their white racial superiority.”

The document does advise participants not to “shy away from language like ‘Whiteness,’ ‘racism,’ ‘white supremacy’ and ‘allyship.’” It includes, as part of a list of resources, a link to a YouTube video of Robin DiAngelo, author of “White Fragility.” The document summarizes the video by saying she “discusses the roots of White supremacy, of which she asserts virtually all White people, regardless of how ‘woke’ they are, contribute to racism.”

A Treasury Department spokesperson did not dispute the authenticity of the document but said Rufo’s characterization of it was “completely false.” The online, town hall-style event was for Treasury staff to gather after the Floyd murder, the spokesperson said, and was meant as an opportunity “to have meaningful discussions with one another and build trust and understanding.”

She said that participation in this event was voluntary, but thousands of employees chose to attend. The agency continues to host diversity and inclusion events for employees across the department, she said.

Rufo’s second target on Fox News was Sandia National Laboratories, a contractor to the Energy Department that works on nuclear weapons and national security. The lab sent White men in senior leadership positions to a four-day training program. Some of Rufo’s characterizations appear to be accurate, but others do not.



[Documents](#) Rufo posted show that sessions focused heavily on White and male privilege, and the company that sponsored the program confirmed as much. One-page lists more than 60 examples of White privilege such as “not being rejected for a loan,” assuming local schools are of good quality and being accepted into a country club.

In one session, participants appear to have been encouraged to volunteer assumptions about White men. Rufo noted that phrases mentioned included highly negative terms such as “KKK,” “mass killings” and “Aryan Nation.” But many other words were also on the page, including “patriotic,” “baseball,” “football,” “capitalist,” “Founding Fathers,” “boss” and “beer.”

Rufo also alleged that the program “forced (participants) to write letters of apology to women and people of color,” but there is no evidence of that.

Participants were asked to write statements “directed at women, people of color and other groups” about the meaning of the event. Several people wrote that they had a better appreciation for other people’s perspectives or that they came to understand that they had privileges others do not, though most did not apologize. At least one person did, saying he was sorry “for the times I have not stood up for you to create a safe place” and “for the time I’ve spent not thinking about you.”

The goal of the event was to create a safe space where White men could talk openly about their experiences and feelings, said Wayne Pignolet, the chief operating officer of White Men as Full Diversity Partners, the company that sponsored Sandia’s program. Ultimately, he said, this will lead to more inclusive leaders and workplaces.

“I think a lot of it is creating enough safety to work through whatever resistance they have,” he said. “We don’t ‘reeducate’ or force anyone to do anything, nor do we shame or blame people. ... We help them create cultures where people feel like they can come to work and be valued.”

This program was not mandatory, but team supervisors, managers and other senior officials were required to choose an unconscious bias training to attend from a list of several options, an Energy Department spokeswoman said.

Rufo did not reply directly when asked to identify what, in the documents he has posted, supports his specific allegations about Treasury and Sandia, such as that Treasury employees were told to “accept their white racial superiority” or that Sandia workers were forced to apologize. He said the answer could be found in the original source materials but did not specify where.

[The third example](#) Rufo cited on Fox News related to the FBI and workshops it apparently planned on intersectionality, which looks at categorizations such as race, class and gender and how they create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination.

Rufo called intersectionality “a hard left academic theory that reduces people to a network of racial, gender and sexual orientation identities and intersect in complex ways and determine whether you are an oppressor or oppressed.” He added that White straight men are “obviously ... at the top of this pyramid of evil.”

The flier made none of those points. It spoke about how various identities “combine and multiply to result in unique forms of discrimination.” The FBI declined to comment.

[What is critical race theory, and why do Republicans want to ban it in schools?](#)

Since last summer, Rufo has focused much of his attention on schools. He often mentions a district in Cupertino, Calif., where [a controversial lesson about race and identity was prepared for third-graders.](#)

Information about the program was sent home to parents. As laid out, the program was supposed to ask students to choose “social identities,” including race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, family structure, religion and level of ability or disability. It then identified certain attributes as being part of the “dominant culture” that was considered “normal.”

Students were to then identify which of their personal attributes hold power and privilege and which do not.

Rufo published the seven-page slide deck sent to parents. He [said the lesson was delivered](#) as laid out in the slides, alleging that students “were forced to deconstruct their racial and sexual identities.”

Jerry Liu, president of the Cupertino Union School Board, said last week that the program was canceled before it ever began, after complaints from parents who saw the slides.

However, Superintendent Stacy Yao said Monday that the lesson was in fact introduced to students during one session, where students were asked to create an “identity map.” It was then suspended because of parental complaints.

“Parents reacted to the slide deck and the lesson did not continue after the initial introduction,” she wrote in an email.

Liu said: “The lesson provided to the 3rd-grade students was not age-appropriate and not part of the district’s curriculum.”

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## White Backlash Is a Type of Racial Reckoning, Too

FiveThirtyEight copyright

Jan. 6, 2022, by Hakeem Jefferson and Victor Ray

“On May 25, 2020, George Perry Floyd Jr., a 46-year-old Black man, was murdered in broad daylight by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer with the Minneapolis Police Department.

In the days and weeks following, [millions took to the streets](#) in the U.S. and around the world, with chants of “Black Lives Matter” and calls for racial justice that reimagined policing in America. Public opinion was [increasingly supportive of the protests](#). Given both the suddenness and the scale of the response to Floyd’s murder, something felt different. We weren’t always certain what that difference was, but there was *something* that seemed to distinguish this moment.

Pundits and politicians, including President Biden, said this was a moment of [“racial reckoning”](#) — a moment for some optimism, despite the tragedy of it all. This optimism seemed rooted in the belief that if there was ever a moment to unsettle America’s racial hierarchy, this was it. Now was the time, we were told, to bring relief to those who had long lived under a regime of racial oppression. [Some of us were skeptical](#), but the general consensus was that racial [progress was on the horizon](#) — that better, brighter, more equitable days were ahead.

But for a reckoning to occur, there has to be more than just an acknowledgement of injustice. There has to be action. Reckoning implied a reprieve for the Black Lives Matter activists who had spent the years since

Trayvon Martin's killing protesting police violence. Reckoning implied transforming public safety. Reckoning implied support for policies to intervene in the [yawning racial wealth gap](#), the [perpetual employment gap](#), and the [growing life expectancy gap](#).

In short, a reckoning suggested the country was on the cusp of lasting change. But to the extent that a reckoning occurred, it was [short-lived](#) and [didn't lead to fundamental changes](#).

Support for the Black Lives Matter movement, which peaked in the days following Floyd's murder, [declined precipitously](#). Police departments were, by and large, not defunded. Although some cities had minor cuts (often related to [pandemic austerity](#)), [law enforcement budgets remained stable — or even rose slightly](#). And in recent months, faced with outcries about public safety from residents, local government officials are turning to a familiar solution: [reinvesting in policing and the carceral state](#).

The economic and political fallout from the pandemic has also deepened [existing racial inequalities](#). The pandemic wiped out any progress made in the last decade in [closing the Black-white gap in life expectancy](#). It turned the job categories where [Black Americans are overrepresented](#) from dangerous and devalued [to deadly](#). America's [history of segregating Black Americans into substandard housing](#) also meant that many who were infected with COVID-19 couldn't quarantine effectively, spreading the disease to their families. Black and Latino children were about [two and a half times as likely to lose a primary caregiver than white children](#). Native American children were over four times as likely. Other markers of [inequality persisted](#), too.

Ultimately, there is little evidence that the promise of racial progress has borne much fruit, at least for those who live closest to the margins of American society.

But a racial reckoning that ushers in racial progress is only one type of racial reckoning. Racial backlash is a kind of racial reckoning, too. And the racial reckoning of this moment — [one characterized by white backlash to a perceived loss of power and status](#) — seems poised to be much more consequential.

Evidence of this racial reckoning was most stark on Jan. 6, 2021, when a mob of supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol to oppose the certification of Biden's victory over Trump. As one of us (Jefferson) [wrote that week](#), those who gathered in Washington, D.C., had “not simply come in defense of Donald Trump. They [came] in defense of white supremacy.”

This was especially clear from the symbolism of Jan. 6 — a Confederate flag carried into the Capitol, and a “[Day of the Rope](#)” gallows drawn from the white supremacist manifesto “The Turner Diaries.” Jan. 6 was a racial reckoning. It was a [reckoning against the promise of a multiracial democracy](#) and the [perceived influence of the Black vote](#).

Recent [research](#) suggests that those who participated in the insurrection were more likely to come from areas that experienced more significant declines in the non-Hispanic white population — further evidence that the storming of the Capitol was, in part, a backlash to a perceived loss of status, what social scientists call “[perceived status threat](#).”

Some Republican politicians [condemned the attack on the Capitol in its immediate aftermath](#), but they and the rest of the party soon [called for the country to move on](#), to forget this open and violent attack on American democracy. Similarly, businesses that [initially pulled support from those who backed](#) the open attempt at a coup nonetheless [returned to funding lawmakers](#) who supported Trump's "Big Lie" that the election had been stolen from him and inspired the violence we witnessed that day.

But as horrific as the events of Jan. 6 were, they were only the most vivid rendering of the racial reckoning currently taking place in the United States. In [Republican-led states](#) across the country, state legislators have [fast-tracked a series of voter suppression laws](#) reminiscent of laws passed post-Reconstruction in the late 1870s. These laws not only make it more difficult to vote, but also make it easier for Republican officials to supplant the will of the people by allowing state legislatures to replace local elections administrators with [ideologues who have publicly embraced lies about election fraud](#).

The counter-reckoning has even trickled down to Democratic strategists and center-left pundits who decry what they perceive to be [an over-emphasis on race and identity](#). To win white working-class voters, these strategists contend, the party must change course. Few have said it so bluntly, but in this moment of racial backlash, the lesson appears to be that the more racially progressive party should abandon its public commitments to racial justice, lest it upset those who have made their opposition clear.

Consider this. In the days and weeks following Floyd's murder, books about race and racism, including historian Ibram X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist," became bestsellers. Today, this text among others, including [The New York Times's 1619 Project](#), are targets of right-wing think tanks and Republican-controlled legislatures and local school boards. At least nine [states have passed legislation](#) (with at least 20 others considering similar laws) to ban the teaching of "critical race theory," a [legal scholarship framework](#) that has been coopted by the right as a buzzword meant to [encompass everything that children are learning about racial inequality](#) in schools. But many of these laws are so broad that the mere acknowledgement of racial inequality would seem to run afoul of the spirit, if not the letter, of the law.

[Americans love the mythology of racial progress](#) that highlights the brief flurries of progressive change around the period of Reconstruction and the civil rights movement. To be sure, the heroism of these movements was remarkable. A full accounting requires that we acknowledge the vast [political power](#) African Americans wielded in the aftermath of the Civil War, in a period known as Radical Reconstruction. But this racial reckoning, which promised to change the material and social conditions of newly freed Black people in the U.S., was met with another racial reckoning: The [birth of the Ku Klux Klan](#) and [racist Jim Crow-era policies](#) were reactions to Reconstruction-era progress.

Responses to the civil rights movement were similarly dramatic. White families [uprooted entire communities](#) to avoid integrated schools. Even relatively minor reactions — such as affirmative action in college admissions — were met with [decades-long programs of delegitimation](#). Such resistance hasn't ended but has evolved. The Supreme Court's [removal of the Voting Rights Act preclearance procedure](#) in 2013 eroded a signature achievement of the civil rights movement. In 2021, state legislatures introduced [hundreds of bills targeting voting rights](#), resurrecting Reconstruction-era tactics by proposing facially neutral policies

that are nonetheless racially targeted. And recent [attempts to outlaw and restrict constitutionally protected protest activity](#), for example, were clear reactions to the multiracial protests of 2020.

Yes, there are periods of racial progress that follow moments of reckoning that call the nation to live up to its ideals of liberty and justice for all. But what is more characteristic and consequential are the long periods where the status quo goes unchanged, where various forms of racial oppression are taken as given. In these moments, we see evidence of what civil rights lawyer and academic Derrick Bell called “[racial-sacrifice covenants](#),” or the trading of gains for Black Americans in the name of [white appeasement politics](#). This is precisely the moment in which we find ourselves today.

The idea that the racial reckoning of 2020 would last prey on some of the most pervasive myths about race in America — in particular, optimism about what would come out of the protests and activism of 2020. It required that one believed, as Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, that the “arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

But history presents a much more complicated story than an optimistic read of King’s famous quotation suggests. Racial [progress has never been linear](#), nor has it ever been wholly forward-moving.

Yes, there are moments of racial reckoning — fleeting though they often are — that go some way to improve the lives of racial and ethnic minorities. But these moments that hint at a change in the racial hierarchy and a change in the status and social position of Black Americans are never met with uniform support from the American public.

Instead, these moments are often met with [violent responses](#). They are also often met with new laws that attempt to [weaken the political power of Black people](#) while strengthening the political power of white people. And, yes, these moments are also often met by [attempts to ensure a particular telling of American history](#) that helps to maintain the mythology of racial progress that so many Americans find so deeply attractive.

For those committed to racial justice, the so-called racial reckoning of 2020 was likely a disappointment, for all the reasons we lay out above.

For those whose commitments to justice remain, there appears to be a long and cold winter ahead, because the racial reckoning of the current moment is moving full speed ahead, with no signs of quieting anytime soon.”

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# There Is No Debate Over Critical Race Theory

The Atlantic

July 9, 2021, by Ibram X. Kendi

Pundits and politicians have created their own definition for the term, and then set about attacking it.

The United States is not in the midst of a “culture war” over race and racism. The animating force of our current conflict is not our differing values, beliefs, moral codes, or practices. The American people aren’t divided. The American people are *being* divided.

Republican operatives have buried the actual definition of critical race theory: “a way of looking at law’s role platforming, facilitating, producing, and even insulating racial inequality in our country,” as the law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who helped coin the term, recently defined it. Instead, the attacks on critical race theory are based on made-up definitions and descriptors. “Critical race theory says every white person is a racist,” Senator Ted Cruz has said. “It basically teaches that certain children are inherently bad people because of the color of their skin,” said the Alabama state legislator Chris Pringle.

There *are* differing points of view about race and racism. But what we are seeing and hearing on news shows, in school-district meetings, in op-ed pages, in legislative halls, and in social-media feeds aren’t multiple *sides* with differing points of view. There’s only one side in our so-called culture war right now.

The Republican operatives, who dismiss the expositions of critical race theorists and anti-racists in order to define critical race theory and anti-racism, and then attack those definitions, are effectively debating themselves. They have conjured an imagined monster to scare the American people and project themselves as the nation’s defenders from that fictional monster.

The evangelist Pat Robertson recently called critical race theory “a monstrous evil.” And over the past year, that “monstrous evil” has supposedly been growing many legs. First, Republicans pointed to Black Lives Matter demonstrators. Three days after George Floyd’s murder last year, President Donald Trump recast the largely peaceful demonstrators as violent and dishonorable “THUGS.” By the end of July, Trump had framed them as “anarchists who hate our country.”

Then “cancel culture” was targeted. At the Republican National Convention in August, Trump blasted “cancel culture” as seeking to coerce Americans “into saying what you know to be false and scare you out of saying what you know to be true.”

Next came attacks on the 1619 Project and American history. “Despite the virtues and accomplishments of this Nation, many students are now taught in school to hate their own country, and to believe that the men and women who built it were not heroes, but rather villains,” read Trump’s executive order on November 2, establishing the President’s Advisory 1776 Commission.

And now the Black Lives Matter demonstrators, cancel culture, the 1619 Project, [American history](#), and [anti-racist education](#) are presented to the public as the many legs of the “monstrous evil” of critical race theory



that's purportedly coming to harm white children. The language echoes the rhetoric used to demonize desegregation after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in 1954.

In the 1950s and '60s, the conservators of racism organized to keep Black kids out of all-white schools. Today, they are trying to get critical race theory out of American schools. "Instead of helping young people discover that America is the greatest, most tolerant, and most generous nation in history, [critical race theory] teaches them that America is systemically evil and that the hearts of our people are full of hatred and malice," Trump wrote in an [op-ed](#) on June 18.

After it was cited 132 times on Fox News shows in 2020, critical race theory became a conservative obsession this year. Its [mentions](#) on Fox News practically doubled month after month: It was [referred to](#) 51 times in February, 139 times in March, 314 times in April, 589 times in May, and 737 times in just the first three weeks of June. As of June 29, 26 states had [introduced](#) legislation or other state-level actions to "restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism," according to *Education Week*, and nine had implemented such bans.

I have been [called](#) the father of critical race theory, although I was born in 1982, and critical race theory was born in 1981. Over the past few months, I have seldom stopped to answer the critiques of critical race theory or of my own work, because the more I've studied these critiques, the more I've concluded that these critics aren't arguing against me. They aren't arguing against anti-racist thinkers. They aren't arguing against critical race theorists. These [critics are arguing against themselves](#).

What happens when a politician falsely proclaims what you think, and then criticizes that proclamation? Is she really critiquing your ideas—or her own? If a writer decides what both sides of an argument are stating, is he really engaging in an argument with another writer, or is he engaging in an argument with himself?

Take the journalist Matthew Yglesias. [In February](#), in *The Washington Post*, he wrote that I think that "any racial gap simply *is* racist by definition; any policy that maintains such a gap is a racist policy; and—most debatably—any intellectual explanation of its existence (sociological, cultural and so on) is also racist." But nowhere have I written that the racial gap is racist: The policies and practices causing the racial gap are racist. Nowhere have I stated that *any* intellectual explanation of the existence of a racial gap is racist. Only intellectual explanations of a racial gap that point to the superiority or inferiority of a racial group are racist.

Was Yglesias really arguing against me, or was he arguing against himself? What about the columnist Ross Douthat? In a recent [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*, he did what GOP thinkers keep doing to Americans striving to construct an equitable and just society: re-create us as extremists, as monsters to be feared for speaking out against racism. Douthat accused me of "ideological extremism that embarrasses clever liberals," comparing me to the late Rush Limbaugh. I've spent my career writing evidence-based historical scholarship and demonstrating my willingness to be vulnerable; Limbaugh had no interest in being [self-critical](#), and for decades [attacked](#) truth and facts and evidence.

Douthat claimed that I have a "Manichaeian vision of public policy, in which all policymaking is either racist or antiracist, all racial disparities are the result of racism—and the measurement of any outcome short of perfect 'equity' may be a form of structural racism itself."

Where did he get *perfect* equity? In [How to Be an Antiracist](#), I define racial equity as a state “when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing.” I proposed that an example of racial equity would be “if there were relatively equitable percentages” of racial groups “living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties.” By [contrast](#), in 2014, 71 percent of white families lived in owner-occupied homes, compared with 45 percent of Latino families and 41 percent of Black families. That’s racial inequity.

What we write doesn’t matter to the people arguing with themselves. It doesn’t matter that I consistently challenge Manichaeian racial visions of inherently good or evil people or policy making. It doesn’t matter that I don’t write about policy making being good or evil, or that I write about the equitable or inequitable outcome of policies. It doesn’t matter that I’ve urged us toward relative equity, and not toward perfect equity.

If you want to understand why I’ve made these arguments, you first need to recognize that for decades, right-wing thinkers and judges have argued that policies that lead to racial inequities are “not racist” or are “race neutral.” That was the [position](#) of the conservative Supreme Court justices who recently upheld Arizona’s voting-restriction policies. Those who wish to conserve racial inequity want us to focus on intent—which is hard to prove—rather than the outcome of inequity, which is rather easy to prove. Case in point: GOP state legislators are claiming that the 28 laws they’ve [enacted](#) in 17 states as of June 21 are about election security, even though voter fraud is a practically [nonexistent](#) problem. They claim that these laws aren’t intended to make it harder for Black voters or members of other minority groups to cast ballots, even as [experts](#) find that’s precisely what such laws have done in the past, and predict that’s likely what these new laws will do as well.

These critics aren’t just making up their claims as they go along. They are making up the sources of their criticism as they go along. Douthat [argues](#) that work like mine “extends structural analysis beyond what it can reasonably bear, into territory where white supremacy supposedly explains Asian American success on the SAT.” Who is giving this explanation other than Douthat? I’m surely not. I point to other explanations, including the history of [highly educated](#) Asian immigrants and the [concentration](#) of score-boosting test-prep companies in Asian (and white) neighborhoods.

White supremacy does explain why [more than three-quarters](#) of the perpetrators of anti-Asian hate crimes and incidents before and during the pandemic have been white. Asian American success as measured by test scores, education, and income should not erase the impact of structural racism on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. This group now has the [highest](#) income inequality of any racial group in the United States. Asian Americans in New York experienced the highest [surge](#) of unemployment of any racial group during the pandemic. Do the critics of critical race theory want us to think of the AAPI community as not just a “model minority,” but a model monolith? Showcasing AAPIs to maintain the fiction of a post-racial society ends up erasing Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

Critical race theory has been falsely labeled as anti-Asian. Helen Raleigh, an Asian American entrepreneur, [defined](#) critical race theory as a “divisive discriminatory ideology that judges people on the basis of their skin color” in *Newsweek*. “It is my practice to ignore critics who have not read the work and who are not interested in honest exchange,” [responded](#) one of the three Asian American founders of critical

race theory, Mari Matsuda, a law professor at the University of Hawaii. “But I do want to say this for the record: Asian Americans are at the center of CRT analysis and have been from the start.”

How should thinkers respond to monstrous lies? Should we mostly ignore the critics as Matsuda has, as I have? Because restating facts over and over again gets old. Reciting your own work over and over again to critics who either haven’t read what they are criticizing or are purposefully distorting it gets old. And talking with people who have created a monologue with two points of view, theirs and what they impute to you, gets old.

But democracy needs dialogue. And dialogue necessitates seeking to know what a person is saying in order to offer informed critiques.

As a scholar, I know that nothing is more useful than criticism to improve my scholarship. As a human being, I know that nothing is more constructive than criticism to improve my humanity. I’ve chronicled how criticism and critics have been a driving force on my journey to be anti-racist, to confront my own racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist ideas—and their intersections. Constructive criticism often hurts, but like painful medical treatments, it can be lifesaving; it can be nation-saving.

But what’s happening now is something entirely different and destructive—not constructive. This isn’t a “culture war.” This isn’t even an “argument.” This isn’t even “criticism.” This is critics arguing with themselves.