

The Delray Democrat

Republicans' 50-Year Assault on Education, Teachers, and History¹

Michael K. Cantwell

As if speaking not just to his contemporaries but to our own time as well, Thomas Jefferson [warned](#) of the need for an educated populace if democracy was to endure:

In every government on earth is some trace of human weakness, some germ of corruption and degeneracy, which cunning will discover, and wickedness insensibly open, cultivate, and improve. Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe their minds must be improved to a certain degree.

An uneducated citizenry is easier to manipulate and less likely to think independently or question authority. Republicans fear an educated citizenry for the same reason Jefferson found it essential.

An educated citizenry also provides a country with a competitive advantage. America first established a compulsory, universal, tax-supported system of primary school education in 1918. Over the next quarter century, secondary schools were added, and following World War II college became available through the GI Bill to many who were not born into wealth. This increasingly educated public powered the economic engine that created The American Century.

Disgracefully, however, the tuition grants and other GI Bill benefits (such as low-interest, federally guaranteed loans that allowed White veterans to enter the middle class and create inter-generational wealth) were unavailable to Black veterans because of Jim Crow laws. Rather than being honored for their service, many became “strange fruit” hanging from Southern trees.

Pell grants and loans made college increasingly available to ordinary Americans, and raised alarm among Republican leaders. In 1970, Vice President Agnew complained that, “College – at one time considered a privilege – is considered a right today.” He added that there were “too many” Blacks in college and condemned “the violence emanating from Black student militancy.”

At the time he was speaking, Black Panthers were feeding hungry kids breakfast before school while the FBI was assassinating Panther leaders in their beds. It was also shortly before Agnew was indicted for his own criminal activities and forced to resign in disgrace.

Later that year, Roger Freeman, an advisor to Ronald Reagan’s campaign for governor of California, [warned](#), “We are in danger of producing an educated proletariat. That’s dynamite! We have to be selective on who we allow to go through higher education.”

The two great public university systems at that time were the City University of New York and the University of California, and neither of them charged tuition. Reagan eliminated free tuition at

¹ The Delray Democrat, August 2022, page 4.

the University of California in 1970 and six years later Gerald Ford demanded that New York City end free tuition at CUNY as a condition of bailing out the city from its financial crisis.

That didn't completely foreclose college for middle-class and lower-income students. Instead, it opened a new profit center for the banks, as we began the half-century-long march to our current unworkable situation, where some 55 million students owe some \$1.75 trillion in debt. But that's the subject for another article.

It's Not Only *Who* Is Educated but *How* They're Being Educated

In 2006, long before Ron DeSantis saw racist dog whistles as a freeway to a second term, the Florida Republican Party amended the Education Law to effectively prohibit the teaching of Black history by adding this Orwellian passage:

American history shall be viewed as factual, not constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable, and shall be defined as the creation of a new nation based largely on the universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.

The language is Orwellian because it demands the equivalence of irreconcilable opposites. War is not peace, night is not day, and slavery is the antithesis of the most iconic principle set forth in our founding document, namely, that "all men are created equal."

A fact-based rendition of American history would teach that the new nation was built largely upon the backs of the enslaved. It would teach that America's original sin was not expiated by the Emancipation Proclamation or by Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, but lived on in other forms: the white terrorism of the post-Reconstruction era that left the formerly enslaved little better and often worse off than before, followed by a century of Jim Crow and a half-century of the New Jim Crow (a.k.a. "the War on Drugs") that have prevented the descendants of the formerly enslaved from achieving anything remotely resembling equality.

Finally, a fact-based rendition of American history would dispel the myth that the Civil War was fought to preserve "states' rights." ***The only states' right the Civil War was fought to preserve was the right to own another human being.***

Although the amendment of Florida Education law attracted controversy at the time, it does not appear to have been enforced. The language resurfaced in a [directive](#) issued by education commissioner Richard Corcoran last year.

It coincided with Fox News's sudden obsession with "Critical Race Theory," a complex subject taught for decades in graduate-level seminars and never taught to students in elementary or secondary schools. Abandoning reality for the dog-whistle racism that has rewarded Republicans since Richard Nixon first announced his "Southern Strategy," Ron DeSantis began proclaiming that he wouldn't sit still while Florida schoolchildren were being taught to be ashamed of their Whiteness.

Republicans responded to this absurd claim by quickly passing the Orwellian-titled "Act Relating to Individual Freedom." DeSantis is now calling it the "Stop Woke Act" in order to further inflame the knuckle-dragging Neanderthals he hopes to lead in an unholy war against the "universal principles" stated in the Declaration of Independence.

The law commands that a student “should not be instructed that he or she must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions, in which he or she played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.” That effectively bars the teaching of Black history. How is it possible to teach the horrors and humiliations suffered by Blacks for centuries without causing distress in all but budding sociopaths and racists? It’s not. Period.

The “Parental Rights in Education” bill (more raw, red meat for the wingnuts) followed soon after. Better known as the “Don’t Say Gay” law, it is another solution in search of a problem. It bans “teaching students in kindergarten through third grade about topics involving sexual orientation or gender identity,” although that has never occurred and is extremely unlikely ever to occur. For older grades, the law imposes the unconstitutionally vague requirement that lessons be “age appropriate.”

But DeSantis is not content to simply prevent the teaching of a history based on actual facts. He wants to require the teaching of “alternative facts,” that is, a history based on intentional lies and distortions. Teachers are not indoctrinating schoolchildren, but DeSantis is trying to indoctrinate teachers.

His Orwellian-titled “Civics Excellence Initiative” seeks to catechize teachers on what must be taught. Those who attended a recent three-day workshop complained that trainers sought to indoctrinate them in Christian and conservative ideology and to whitewash the history of slavery in America.

Attendees were instructed that “the colonies didn’t buy nearly as many enslaved people during the transatlantic slave trade as has been portrayed” because “[most enslaved people in the country were born into slavery](#)” – as if claiming ownership over the children of people one has purchased and holds in bondage is somehow less despicable than the act of purchasing them in the first place. They were falsely told that the Founders didn’t really intend there to be a strict wall between Church and State, something contradicted not only by history but over 70 years of Supreme Court precedent. And the Supreme Court decision striking down school prayer was compared to the Supreme Court decision that upheld segregation.

DeSantis and Republicans are intent upon rewriting history in order to raise an army of uneducated, unholy warriors for what can only be characterized as a Second Civil War. Nothing is more important than defeating DeSantis in November.