

Critical Race Theory Is Dangerous. Here's How to Fight It

By SAMANTHA HARRIS

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Don't just use the same censorship tools its proponents do. Fight back with the law.

A NEW orthodoxy has taken over our educational institutions with frightening speed. People who likely never heard the phrase “critical race theory” (CRT) before this summer are now getting emails from their children’s schools about “Decentering Whiteness at Home.” They are discovering that their children’s elementary-school teacher has read them “a book about whiteness” that teaches them how much “color matters” and encourages them to confront “the painful truth” about their “own family” — i.e., that they are being raised by racists. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

This is a dangerous and divisive ideology, one that assigns moral value to people on the basis of their skin color. It is inconceivable that anyone could look back at human history and not see that singling out a particular racial or ethnic group as the cause of all societal problems can quickly lead us to a very bad place.

It is understandable, therefore, that the ascendancy of CRT in our educational institutions is deeply frightening to so many people. People feel like their children are being indoctrinated. In many cases, they are right. This ideology is not simply being presented as one way of looking at the world. It is being taught as the Truth with a capital ‘T,’ and you will be cast into outer darkness or punished for questioning it. Just ask David Flynn, the father of two children in the Dedham, Mass., public schools who was fired from his position as head football coach there after raising concerns about changes to his seventh-grade daughter’s history curriculum. (Flynn is now suing the school district.)

We need to fight the rise of this toxic and destructive orthodoxy if we want America to be a place where, as Martin Luther King said, our children are judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin. But we have to fight it in the right way, without compromising the very freedoms we seek to preserve.

Recently, a number of state legislatures have begun considering bills that would ban or severely restrict the teaching of CRT and its analogues. The Arkansas legislature, for example, is considering a bill that would prohibit any Arkansas public school from offering “a course, class, event, or activity within its program of instruction that . . . promotes division between, resentment of, or social justice for (A) Race; (B) Gender; (C) Political affiliation; (D) Social class; or (E) Particular class of people.” Anti-CRT bills are also under consideration in Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, and elsewhere.

Yet preventing supporters of this ideology from making their case is not the answer. We know what it is like to have our right to free speech suppressed, because it is happening day in, day out to the critics of CRT and other left-wing ideologies at educational institutions around the country. I understand why it is so tempting to fight fire with fire, but that won't advance freedom and equality in the long run.

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As journalist and author Jonathan Rauch has so eloquently written — in opposition to the kinds of hate-speech prohibitions common on campuses around the country — the tolerance of hateful speech is critical to freedom and progress:

I feel more confident than ever that the answer to bias and prejudice is pluralism, not purism. The answer, that is, is not to try to legislate bias and prejudice out of existence or to drive them underground, but to pit biases and prejudices against each other and make them fight in the open. That is how, in the crucible of rational criticism, superstition and moral error are burned away.

Rauch is right. The battle against these identity-based ideologies needs to be waged in the marketplace of ideas, not through censorship. Proponents of CRT, critical feminist theory, postcolonial theory, etc. have every right to argue for the validity of their positions, just as we have the right to argue for the validity of ours. We must recognize their rights even as we try to convince the world of the dangers of their arguments.

That does not mean, however, that they have the right to indoctrinate our children, or to create a hostile environment in which students or teachers are continually treated as “less than” on the basis of skin color. When these things happen — and they are happening — then we must fight back hard not only in the court of public opinion, but in courts of law as well.

Most people know that the First Amendment protects freedom of speech. But it also protects freedom of conscience — that is, the right to hold our personal thoughts and beliefs free from government intrusion. The freedom of conscience is why the Supreme Court ruled that, even during the darkest days of World War II, a public school could

not require its students to salute the American flag. Justice Robert H. Jackson, writing for the majority, explained that “if there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.”

The freedom of conscience is also why a Nevada mother is suing a Las Vegas charter school for forcing her son to participate in a mandatory class that “required students to reveal their race, gender, sexual orientation and disabilities and then determine if privilege or oppression is attached to those identities.” In the coming years, the First Amendment right to freedom of conscience will play a crucial role in the fight against the indoctrination of our children.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also prevents discrimination, including the creation of a hostile environment, at public and private institutions receiving federal funding (which include most private colleges and universities). Many of these critical race trainings, particularly when mandatory, may create a hostile environment by continually singling people out for criticism solely on the basis of their skin color — such as when an employee at Smith College expressed discomfort at discussing her race publicly and was berated in front of her colleagues and told that her distress was merely a “power play,” a manifestation of white supremacy. These trainings have even infiltrated the corporate world: A whistleblower recently leaked slides from a diversity training for Coca-Cola employees suggesting that they “be less white.”

State legislatures can also fight indoctrination and promote viewpoint diversity in schools without turning to censorship. In Florida, for example, the legislature is considering a bill that would require institutions of higher education “to conduct an annual assessment related to intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity,” in order to ensure that students are exposed to “a variety of ideological and political perspectives.” This could be done at the K–12 level as well, and would help the marketplace of ideas function properly rather than shutting it down.

The bottom line is that our future as a free society depends on fighting back against the pall of orthodoxy that has descended over our educational institutions. But we must resist the temptation to fight back with the traditional tools of our ideological opponents — censorship and repression — and instead stay true to the freedoms we are fighting for.

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