

Chapter 10

Public Schools, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and the Christian Right

How Trump Refueled Family Value Politics

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On September 17, 2020, just weeks before the election, Donald Trump issued an executive order announcing the creation of the 1776 Commission, an advisory committee to support “patriotic education” over the supposedly unpatriotic 1619 Project published by the *New York Times*. A journalistic endeavor, the 1619 Project launched in August of the previous year with the publication of a hundred-page issue of the *New York Times Magazine* to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans to the English colony of Virginia. A synthesis of recent conversations and new research, the wildly popular publication featured provocative and wide-ranging essays narrating how the development of the United States was entwined in racial dynamics that predated the Declaration of Independence. The attention provoked a backlash. In Trump’s broadcast remarks, he acknowledges this, saying, “The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies.” His action would counter “propaganda” and obstruct “a radical movement” (Trump 2020).

According to Trump, the 1776 Commission was an intervention to counter the “twisted web of lies” regarding systemic racism being taught in US schools, resulting from “decades of left-wing indoctrination,” and even went so far as to call curriculum teaching on race “a form of child abuse.” Trump said, “American parents are not going to accept indoctrination in our schools, cancel culture at work, or the repression of traditional faith, culture and values in the public square. Not anymore” (Madhani and Riechmann 2020). In his speech, the president zeroed in on three words that would come to drive Christian Right activism: critical race theory (CRT). These three words, the president argued, are “being forced into our children’s schools,

it's being imposed into workplace trainings, and it's being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families" (Trump 2020).

What motivated the focus on American public education? According to historian John Fea (2020), "The Trump administration believes that an attack on the 1619 Project, critical race theory, and what they claim to be 'unpatriotic history' *will help Trump win white evangelicals and other conservatives in November*" (our emphasis). Historian Ron Radosh (2020) similarly wrote, "Its central purpose was not to promote history but to use history to fuel the culture wars." Indeed, since the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump made a point of explicitly associating himself with policies that aligned with the conservative social positions of white evangelicals (Martí 2019, 2020). In recent years, some scholars have suggested that the culture-wars framework has been replaced by economic and class-based discussions (see, e.g., Hartman 2018). But the battle over CRT shows that the culture wars are far from over (see also McDaniel, Heise, and Barranca in this volume). Rather, the current debate is a new version—a kind of transformation—of this decades-long battle over the meaning of America. The culture wars have been fought over symbolic issues in education, the arts, family matters, and the law that deal with what kind of country the United States is and should be and what it means to be a good American (see also Djupe and Lewis, respectively, in this volume). White evangelicals, and their Catholic and Jewish allies, have pitted themselves against feminists, secularists, and multiculturalists (Hunter 1991; see also Campbell, Layman, and Green in this volume). The fault lines today are very much the same, but with a different vocabulary. To borrow Michael Kazin's pun, today's complaints about CRT are a matter of "old wine, new bottles" (2016).

The anti-CRT movement entered an already-existing conversation and supercharged the debate. In this chapter, then, we will highlight the message promoted by Christopher Rufo, one of the chief architects of the anti-CRT campaign, and trace the history of the ideas that culminated in the ubiquitous anti-CRT slogans found in school district meetings, news reports, and legislation to remove supposedly CRT-infused curricula from American classrooms. While CRT as a scholarly discourse is not new, the recent agitation from conservatives against CRT is. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar considered to be a founder of this area of scholarship, told *The New Yorker* that "the main thing is that it [the movement against CRT] had been championed last fall [2020] not by conservative academics but by Donald Trump, then the President of the United States," and then further amplified "by many leading conservative political and media figures"

(Wallace-Wells 2021). Rufo himself leveraged his anti-CRT message into considerable influence, including his “part mercenary and part emissary” political appointment by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis as the youngest member of the Board of Trustees of the New College of Florida (Kruse 2023). In short, the surge of discussion against CRT did not occur in the form of an academic debate but rather as a political tool, one that abstracted the extensive and insightful contributions of critical race theory into a three-letter caricature and then weaponized it to represent a set of polarizing ideas that lacked any substantive connection to existing CRT scholarship.

Trump, #BlackLivesMatter, and the Anti-CRT Movement

Initiated in part as a response to the 1619 Project developed by the *New York Times*, which centered the institution of slavery in the founding and shaping of the United States of America, the eighteen-person 1776 Commission held its first meeting on January 5, 2021.¹ The meeting date is significant in that 1) Trump had already lost the national election to Joe Biden, but nevertheless 2) he and his surrogates continued to contest the election as stolen and pressured Vice President Mike Pence to stop certification of electoral votes; this culminated in the violent Insurrection on the Capitol the next day, January 6. Those meeting together in Washington, DC were just a few hundred feet away from the planning underway for the consequential rally to be held on the National Mall. The commission consisted of mostly male conservative educators (most with no historical training). The group hastily assembled a report, largely cribbed from already existing writings from conservative sources, including think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute. The announcement coincided with an abruptly broadcast discussion convened in the Great Hall of the National Archives, titled “White House Conference on American History,” a panel assembled with no input from professional historical associations and filled mostly with non-historians and culture warriors.² The event was so surreptitious in nature that it was not listed on the National Archives’ calendar of events. The panel was touted on the White House Twitter feed as “a diverse group . . . to address distortions of U.S. history in education and discuss a more balanced and accurate approach” (The White House 45 Archived 2020).

The release of the “1776 Report” was one of the last official acts by the White House under the Trump administration. It occurred on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, just two days before the inauguration of Joe Biden. Although the report was to offer a framework for properly centered patriotism—featuring the 1776 Declaration of Independence, the 1787 ratifying of the Constitution, and gratuitous mentions of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr.—the report was only about forty pages (half of which are appendices), haphazardly asserting a more noble and sentimentalized vision of America that would vindicate America’s founding fathers. Central to the document is the glorifying of America’s founders, reducing the centrality of slavery, and criticizing progressive politics. It warns that the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century worked against our best American ideals. Elevating love for country, the report saw danger in the spread of “false and fashionable ideologies” portraying America’s history as one filled with “oppression and victimhood.” The report characterizes American universities as “hotbeds of anti-Americanism,” with professors spreading “destructive scholarship” that aggravates our country’s divisions and “so much of the violence in our cities” (18). The “intellectual origins” of this kind of identity politics, the report claimed, was CRT. The authors described the theory as a part of a European Marxist, revolutionary theory to overthrow Western civilization using culture once the revolutionaries failed to rally a class-based revolution (30).

In contrast to the report’s distorted characterization of CRT, critical race theory is an academic perspective developed out of American legal studies from the scholarship of people like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Patricia J. Williams, whose theoretical emphases have been informing developments in the humanities and the social sciences since the 1990s. Often referred by shorthand as CRT, it consists of a multifaceted perspective that enriches the development of scholarship, which means it is difficult to summarize here (see, e.g., Bell 1980; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Williams 1991).⁴ It is, however, fairly easy to summarize how people who are against CRT characterize it. The essentialization (and weaponization) of CRT is simplistic, yet rhetorically effective. And it tells us less about how this academic perspective originated, how it has developed, and the insights that it generates, and much more about the priorities and fears of the American culture warrior right wing.

The anti-CRT movement came on the heels of unprecedented and nation-wide protests against a string of brutal deaths suffered by Black people often at the hands of police officers. In 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot by an overzealous neighborhood

watch captain convinced this Black teenager was dangerous. Polarized responses to the killing forced African Americans to reframe their discussions of race, finding ways to communicate their circumstances and promote greater understanding of their history. The following year, after the controversial acquittal of Martin's killer, the Black Lives Matter movement went mainstream.

The grief and outrage represented by Black Lives Matter expanded further with the deaths of a string of unarmed Black men and women across the nation, including Eric Garner (New York), Michael Brown (Missouri), Tamir Rice (Ohio), Freddie Gray (Maryland), Sandra Bland (Texas), Alton Sterling (Louisiana), Philando Castile (Minnesota), Keith Lamont Scott (North Carolina), and Breonna Taylor (Kentucky). President Barak Obama spoke at a funeral in honor of nine Black members of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the victims of a horrific mass shooting of Bible study attendees by a white supremacist. Added to the mourning of all these deaths was the shocking murder of Ahmaud Arbery, who was jogging in a white neighborhood in Georgia when he was chased down by three white men in cars and fatally shot at point-blank range. Each incident added yet another occasion for a slew of new articles and books, as well as new training in the workplace and new curricula in schools.

Then came the death of George Floyd. In May 2020, Floyd was suspected of using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill at a corner store in Minneapolis and restrained on the street outside by local police. One officer knelt on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes, while onlookers used their cell phones to record the scene, pleading to let him go. "I can't breathe," he said. "I can't breathe. I can't breathe." In his final breaths, Floyd called out to his mama. Floyd's horrific and heartrending death, captured on video, struck a deep chord across the country. Floyd's dramatic death happened after people had spent time at home to halt the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The pandemic hit Black communities harder than white communities, another testimony of the entrenched inequalities of American life. Protests immediately broke out not only on Minneapolis streets but also streets across America, the largest mass demonstrations for racial justice in the history of the United States. These protests were supported by a majority of Americans across the racial and political spectrum (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020). The protests also were largely nonviolent, with frequent images of mothers marching along with their children holding up signs. But in some cases, protests turned into riots that to many looked

similar to the race riots in the 1960s and the violence that erupted after the beating of Rodney King in 1992.

It was against this background that the anti-CRT movement emerged. One man came to play a key role in shaping the language of the anti-CRT movement: Christopher Rufo. His engagement grew out of chaotic clashes between protestors in Portland, Oregon after Floyd's death. Portland, the "whitest city in America," as Rufo (2021c) described it, had been overrun by violent, anti-racist thugs. What explained the depth of the conflict and the strong feelings behind the protest, he wondered? To answer this, he ventured into a months-long investigation into what was being taught in the local schools. The key was the classroom, which he believed was taken over by leftists intent on building a new America one child at the time. As he saw it, "teachers and administrators, ensconced in the public bureaucracy and secured by the public trust, engage in an absurd theater of cultural Marxism, spinning stories about the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' to their privileged, suburban, predominantly white students." Rufo was alarmed. "In the language of the Left," he argued, "the political education programs in Portland-area districts constitute a 'school-to-radicalism pipeline': a training ground for child soldiers."

Some have attributed Rufo's appearance on the Fox News program *Tucker Carlson Tonight* in September 2020 as the catalyst that prompted Trump to issue his executive order banning the use of CRT (see Greenfield 2021, Wallace-Wells 2021). Warning about what he believed was CRT creeping into all levels of American government, Rufo urged conservatives "to wake up" and face what he claimed was an "existential threat to the United States." Because of CRT, American government bodies were now "even under Trump . . . weaponized against core American values." He then turned directly to the President: "And I'd like to make it explicit: The President and the White House—it's within their authority to immediately issue an executive order to abolish critical-race-theory training from the federal government. And I call on the President to immediately issue this executive order—to stamp out this destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology." As reported by Wallace-Wells (2021), the day after his appearance, Chief of White House Staff, Mark Meadows, called Rufo, "reaching out on behalf of the President." He saw the segment, "and he's instructed me to take action." Rufo was brought to Washington, DC, and helped write the executive order, which prohibited (among other things) any form of race stereotyping or scapegoating or that a person would feel "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any form of psychological distress" on account of race.

Building on this momentum, Rufo's mobilization against CRT expanded quickly. In October 2020, Rufo set up a tip line to receive informal reports on experiences from anti-racism programs across America (Wallace-Wells 2021). Soon after, opposition to CRT using his ideational framework formalized further in the form of state laws prohibiting anti-racist teachings. By the summer of 2021, anti-CRT bills had been introduced in twenty-one states and become law in five states (Idaho, Iowa, Tennessee, Texas, Oklahoma), and by March 1, 2022 legislative efforts had expanded to another twenty states (PEN America 2021; Schwartz 2022).⁵ The efforts continued across the country after the 2022 elections. In March 2023, PEN counted eighty-six "educational gag orders" (PEN America 2023). The texts of anti-CRT bills are similar, often cut-and-pasted for convenience, only changing the name of the state or school board targeted. Indeed, Rufo himself has advised the writing in at least ten states (Wallace-Wells 2021).

Rufo told the *New Yorker* that conservatives have been fighting a culture war against progressive racial agendas since President Obama was in office yet lacked the ability to discuss it effectively, saying, "We've needed new language for these issues." Given Rufo's central role in shaping the current anti-CRT movement, his caricature of CRT is a handy guide to the emerging institutionalization of discourse by opponents of CRT. Especially notable is how CRT quickly became a catch-all term to refer to any program addressing inequality, particularly those involved in teaching about racism or LGBTQ+ issues. Conservative activists advocated a revolt against CRT, aiming at workshops and seminars in the workplace and especially targeting curriculum decisions governed by public school boards. In doing so, Rufo aligned himself with deep reactionary currents.

The Blackboard Tyranny: The Christian Right and the Public School

Rufo's dire warnings about our schools as a "training ground" for American children taps into an enduring anxiety among conservative parents in the United States over public education, which has existed since long before the Obama years. In particular, the reasoning—and institutional support—for his anti-CRT crusade builds on ideas and networks growing out of the conservative

turn of the 1970s. Rufo's own conservative ties are clear. At the time, he was a fellow at the conservative, New Right think tanks Manhattan Institute (est. 1977) and the Heritage Foundation (1973). He had formerly been employed by the creationist Discovery Institute (est. 1990). But Rufo does not think of himself as a stuffy think tanker. To staff writer Benjamin Wallace-Wells (2021) of the *New Yorker*, Rufo characterized himself as "a brawler." In the piece, the magazine portrayed Rufo as a political opportunist who has gained tremendous influence by working in the comforts of home to reframe anti-racism seminars as "a distinct ideology—critical race theory—with radical roots."

Rufo's complaints about the education establishment echoed the writings of fellow former Heritage Foundation staffer Connaught (Connie) Marshner. She warned against leftist teachers' unions radicalizing youths in her 1978 book *Blackboard Tyranny*. Marshner argued that the National Education Association (NEA) had become the foremost promoter of left-wing radicalism. "The precise intent of the rhetoric is open to speculation," she admitted, "but a good guess is that the NEA hopes to raise millions of teenage shock troops to campaign for its favorite radical-liberal politicians" (1978: 54). She described the organization as enmeshed in "ideological orgies," and warned that the NAE "has issued a sweeping endorsement of civil rights activism, culminating in a call for training students in political action." The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had been even more radical, she argued. After all, the union had filed an amicus curiae to support the end of segregation in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Later, the AFT ran "freedom schools" when school districts in the South refused to follow the order to desegregate in the early 1960s (Marshner 1978: 48–49).

Blame centered on a larger federal government. For Marshner, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was the turning point in the history of American public education. This act, she wrote, gave progressive educators and bureaucrats control over American education. As Marshner saw it, John Dewey and other progressives had tried to make school a training ground for left-wing radicals since the 1930s. Starting then, "the progressive educators," she wrote, no longer saw "preserving Western civilization" as the end-goal of education. Rather, they wanted to "teach our children a 'quick readiness to engage in bold social experimentation.'" The progressive grip on American education had loosened after revelations of the flaws of progressive education during the Cold War era and when parents called for more accountability and traditional means of education. But the 1960s increased federal meddling with

local schools after *Brown*, and the ESEA meant that progressive educators, inspired by teachers' unions that wanted to socially engineer a new America, now steered American education in what she believed was a totalitarian direction (Marshner 1978: 31, 54).

Blackboard Tyranny provided a carefully crafted approach to the history of American education, seeking to mobilize conservatives for action. Even at that time, it was far from the first time that white, Christian parents had protested changes in schools. But Marshner represented a new kind of Christian activist who organized in new ways in the 1970s. Indeed, she was one of the most important organizers in the Christian Right. A seasoned activist with experience from conservative groups such as Young Americans for Freedom and the Heritage Foundation, Marshner helped launch a broad, new, grassroots coalition of conservative Christians. Armed with intellectual and organizational expertise, she led the conservative charge against the feminist agenda at the 1977 International Women's Year convention in Houston and the 1980 White House Conference on the Family, and she was one of the speakers at the 1980 American Family Forum. That forum gathered a host of Catholic and evangelical activist leaders concerned with the fate of the nation (Ribuffo 2006; Martin 1996: 174–181).

The Christian Right's crusade for the school was entwined with uncertainties and hostilities toward changing race relations. In the 1950s and 1960s, white conservative Christians had been among the primary opponents of the Civil Rights Movement. Some groups supported racial segregation as divinely ordained (Dailey 2004). White Christian parents were among the staunchest opponents of school integration. Many saw it as part of a globalist, communist plot to end American society as they knew it (McRae 2018). Many white Christian families chose to send their children to private Christian schools, to homeschool, or to move to areas where there were fewer non-white families (Martin 1996: 171–173). When Christian schools came under scrutiny by the IRS in the late 1960s for being so-called segregation academies tailored to keep Black and white students separate, white conservative Christians rallied to protect what they believed was their God-given right to choose for their children and joined the ranks of a more organized Religious Right (Crespino 2008). In cities such as Boston, white parents took to the streets to protest what they saw as government overreach when the city implemented busing programs to integrate schools. This propelled even more white flight to the largely white suburbs. Foreshadowing the anti-CRT activists' use of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.,

some white parents in the busing protests claimed to act in the spirit of the civil rights leader. Like King, they argued, they used civil disobedience to protest an unjust society (Hall 2008).

Marshner did not claim the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, but her writing on the issue revealed deep-seated worries about its values and ideas. As she saw it, busing had nothing to do with improving the education system but was instead using children as pawns in a social experiment. “Busing for racial balance,” she wrote, “is not busing for education, and therein lies the rub.” Parents did not resist racial integration per se, she argued, but were worried that their children would be “outnumbered in a potentially dangerous and probably hostile environment” if they had to go to a majority Black school. Marshner blamed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil rights groups for the calamity. They had not allowed for the “wheels of bureaucracy” (Marshner 1978: 128–129) to do its job but had launched lawsuits to speed up the process of integrating American schools.

Blackboard Tyranny was therefore much more than an ideological treatise. It was also a how-to manual on parental engagement with school issues. The book came together after the 1974 Kanawha County, West Virginia textbook conflict. Tensions in the mountain town ran high—the conflict included bombings, shootings, and death threats—and revealed just how deep the divide was between diverse groups of Americans. Marshner had gone to Kanawha and lent her expertise to local organizers to stop a new multicultural curriculum. The new curriculum had been initiated after a state-wide move to a more multicultural reading list including texts by Black radicals such as Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X. The NEA sent their own people to support the other side (Mason 2009; Laatz 2015). Marshner saw the conflict as a clear demarcation of America’s political fault line: between patriotic, Christian Americans, and arrogant, progressive elites. NEA’s “learned conclusion,” according to Marshner, “was that the hillbillies were bigoted Bible-thumpers who really needed multiethnic, pluralistic books to bring their children into the world” (1978: 232–234).

Kanawha county’s Alice Moore, homemaker-turned-school-activist and hero of the Christian Right, led the parents in the charge against the new curriculum. She feared the multiethnic curriculum would encourage white children to join the revolution. In particular, she deemed literature written in African American vernacular English dangerous. The historian Carol Mason observed that Moore “apparently . . . felt the entire curriculum . . . was full of hatred for white people.” Responding to those who criticized her for overreacting, Moore had replied “by

saying ‘now don’t tell me these books don’t say to go out and join the revolution and kill the white enemy’” (Mason 2009: 155). Such textbooks, Moore feared, would ultimately “produce a new breed of brainwashed citizens.” To avoid such a scenario, Moore successfully pushed for putting together guidelines for textbook adoption. The guidelines, listed in Marshner’s 1978 book, sound remarkably similar to some of the anti-CRT laws Rufo helped launch in the spring of 2021. The guidelines demanded that textbooks avoid “ridicule of the values and practice of any ethnic, religious, or racial group”; neither should the books “encourage or teach racial hatred” or “encourage sedition . . . or teach that an alien form of government is superior” (Marshner 1978: 232–234).

After Kanawha, Marshner teamed up with the Texas-based textbook activist Norma Gabler. Gabler had become one of the most influential women in the conservative movement and a spokesperson for concerned mothers worried about what students were taught. Together with her husband Mel, in 1973, she launched Educational Research Analysts to combat communist, secular humanist, and other anti-American ideas in textbooks. The organization made powerful connections, gaining the trust of Beverly LaHaye’s Concerned Women for America, Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum, and Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, as well as other groups in the Christian Right (Wallace 1980; Martin 1982). The Gablers had sprung into action in the early 1960s. They were horrified by how their son’s history textbooks downplayed the Tenth Amendment and its emphasis on states’ rights—a perennial rallying cry for white Southern leaders since the Civil War and Reconstruction Era. And not least, Norma Gabler argued that the true purpose of history education was not to criticize America but to promote patriotic stories that would “stir your heart” (Gabler 1962).

The Christian Right and the Battle over the National History Standards

Many parents had the same reactions to history education as Norma Gabler during the battle over the National History Standards for American public schools in the 1990s (see also Nazworth’s discussion—in this volume—of the Christian Right’s activities in past decades). In many ways, the conflict reflected the same discord over American history that emerged in the aftermath of

the 1619 Project. Lynne Cheney, head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of the bodies that had funded the development of the standards, voiced her concern over national standards in an op-ed with the conservative newspaper the *Wall Street Journal* in 1994.

According to Cheney, history standards had shifted away from the defining people and events in American history to fringe issues, world history, and minority perspectives; as she saw it, the proposed changes were not driven by academic rigor, but by ideology. Even further, Cheney believed the professional historians in the American Historical Association were hostages of a politically correct agenda that downplayed America's greatness. At heart, Cheney's message was that for students to become good Americans, they needed to believe in the goodness of America (Cheney 1994).⁶

What followed was a massive public debate over the meaning of American history and the purpose of education. The social historian Gary Nash, one of the creators of the standards, argued that Cheney's understanding of scholarly history was stuck in the past. To him, "it made no more sense to base [the history standards] on the historical knowledge of the 1920s or 1940s than for the science educators to have based the chemistry and physics standards on pre-Einsteinian science." Professional historians had broadened the field of American history to include women's history, Chinese American history, African American history, working class history, and more, beyond the white men who had been the politicians, industrialists, and writers shaping public debate. Academic historians, Nash argued, "expose and critique the past in order to improve American society and to protect dearly won gains." To Nash, this was the true, patriotic history that would make good Americans. "In a country priding itself on having a government of, for, and by the people," he explained, "it was thought that a history of, for, and by the people might befit a democracy" (Nash 1997).

Democracy rejected these new history standards. Congress voted to stop the standards that many—not just right-wingers, but "even a nonpartisan review by a large panel of historians"—believed were just too pessimistic about America's past (Ravitch 2005). Just how to deal with the complexities of America's past remained a challenge. Writing in the aftermath of the conflict, education historian Jonathan Zimmerman noted that although textbooks have become more diverse, they do not necessarily lead to more nuanced history lessons. Rather, publishers have often downplayed conflicts in the past to make the books more marketable and less offensive to different readers. "The price for diversity in American history," Zimmerman

(2002: 214) writes, “has been banality in its tone, a single and often suffocating triumphalism that blots out most traces of misery, tragedy, and especially self-doubt.”

White conservative Christians were the most fervently against imperatives for a broader, and in many ways truer, approach to American education. They believed there was an over-emphasis on historical wrongs and the denigration of white Christians. In Texas, Mel and Norma Gabler were worried about anti-white, multicultural, and politically correct textbooks. Foreshadowing the anti-CRT movement, they criticized multicultural education material for promoting skewed versions of history, where white people were presented as perpetual oppressors and people of color as perpetual victims (see, e.g., Gabler and Gabler 2001: 2–3). Instead, the Gablers celebrated history books by fundamentalist Christian publishers A Beka Book/Pensacola College and Bob Jones University Press, key presses in the Christian private schools and homeschooling movements that bloomed in response to the integration and secularization of public schools. “Unlike secular texts,” they wrote, “both avoid political correctness (no stereotypes of whites as oppressors and people of color as victims, of men as oppressors and women as victims, or of Christians as oppressors and pagans as victims)” (Gabler and Gabler 2003: 4).

Teachers’ unions, globalism, and communism remained the stated foes of the Christian Right as they tackled multicultural education. “This year,” anti-communist and anti-feminist crusader Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum wrote in 1995, “the NEA rechristened ‘global education’ with the new name ‘multicultural education,’ which it defines as teaching children the ‘cultural diversity of U.S. citizenry’ and ‘interdependency in sharing the world’s resources’” (1995a). Schlafly’s warning about “global education” echoed the American right’s fear of communist infiltration and supranational organizations that would take control over the country that had shaped conservative activism over the school for decades. The NEA’s ideas were not benign, Schlafly warned. Rather, they signalled an anti-American stance. “‘Global’ and ‘interdependent,’” she explained, “are code words for teaching children not to be patriotic. ‘Multicultural’ means Western Civilization is bad. ‘Sharing the world’s resources’ means U.S. taxpayers should finance the rest of the world.” Describing the NAE as “the people who control America’s public schools,” Schlafly warned that the group had “approved the usual list of extremist resolutions presented by the professionals who run this very political union.”

Schlafly's scepticism extended to include new programs for bilingual and multilingual education. She argued that bilingualism did a disservice to children and hindered their full assimilation into American culture. But more important, she saw bilingual education as nothing but a front for radical revolutionaries. She blamed activist federal bureaucrats. They did not promote bilingual education as an educational tool but as a "cultural . . . issue." The goal, she argued, was "to make foreign language and culture an integral part of American society." This could end America as they knew it. Bilingual educators were, she warned, promoting "ethnic separatism," which could lead to Spanish-speaking Americans call for the secession of parts of America like the French-speaking Canadians did in Quebec (Schlafly 1995b: 4-5).

The Obama Years: Critical Race Theory Enters the Conversation

The Christian Right's warnings against anti-American education have sounded remarkably similar to Rufo's rhetoric and the narratives used in the many anti-CRT laws launched in 2021. But when did this specific language emerge? White religious conservatives seem to have begun using the term "critical race theory" and similar terms in the late 2000s as America was about to elect the country's first Black president. When the then presidential candidate Barack Obama's ties to former student radical Bill Ayers came under public scrutiny, Schlafly soon zeroed in on Ayers's influence on American schools. "The code words for the Ayers curriculum," wrote Schlafly (2008), "are 'social justice,' a 'transformative' vision, 'critical pedagogy,' 'liberation,' 'capitalist injustices,' 'critical race theory,' 'queer theory,' and of course multiculturalism and feminism." According to Schlafly, Ayers was just as dangerous to the American public as he was in his days as a member of the Weathermen Underground when he planted bombs in government buildings in the late 1960s. Ayers, Schlafly argued, now used his position as Professor of Education to promote ideas that meant to tear America apart from within. Instead of bombs, he now used ideas such as critical race theory (Schlafly 2008).

The Obama years brought heightened attention to multicultural education and ethnic studies. In 2010, Arizona in practice banned the teaching of Mexican American studies in public schools. The Mexican American Studies (MAS) Program in the Tucson Unified School District

was launched in 1998, two years before the state banned bilingual education after a referendum. But the MAS program came under fire after a 2006 high school visit by Dolores Huerta, a veteran of the Mexican American civil rights movement. During her visit, Huerta had claimed that “Republicans hate Latinos.” Shortly after, the Republican Latina politician Margaret Garcia Dugan, sent by the Republican Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne, visited the school to show that Huerta was wrong. The visit did not go well. Some students walked out in protest. The details of what happened are unclear. But the key point is that the superintendent found the reaction not only offensive but also racist and dangerous. He believed the teachers in the Mexican American Studies program indoctrinated their students to become activists for a racist and anti-American cause (Cabrera, Meza, and Rodriguez 2016). When Arizona passed House Bill 2281 to ban ethnic studies in Arizona public schools, it echoed the guidelines from Kanawha and foreshadowed recent bills against critical race theory in schools. The bill banned classes that: “Promote the overthrow of the United States government. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.”⁷

Schlafly celebrated the ban on ethnic studies. Relaying Tom Horne’s account, Schlafly (2010) argued that the main message taught in Mexican American Studies classes was that Mexican Americans “were and continue to be victims of a racist American society driven by the interests of middle- and upper-class whites.” The real goal of these classes, then, was not to teach history but to radicalize students for a political and anti-American agenda. Coupled with politically correct portrayals of Islam in the textbooks, she fretted, such ideas had the potential to tear America apart. “Among the goals listed for the Mexican-American Studies,” Schlafly (2010) wrote, “are ‘social justice’ and ‘Latino Critical Race Pedagogy.’” These ideas were revolutionary, she warned, noting that an MAS classroom was “decorated with ‘heroes’ such as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.”

From Ethnic Studies to CRT

The irony is that the ban on ethnic studies in Arizona, which lasted from 2010 to 2017, led to the spread of similar classes in other cities and states (Phippen 2015). One of them was Portland, Oregon, the object of Rufo’s article on the danger of such pedagogy. In his warnings about the

city's education system in 2021, Rufo rehashed Schlafly and other Christian Right crusaders' warnings against ethnic studies. He singled out the 2017 implementation of ethnic studies in the city as a turning point in the process of radicalizing the schools for subversive causes. "As a term," he wrote, "'ethnic studies' is another euphemism that obscures more than it reveals," he wrote. "It connotes a cheerful pride in cultural tradition, but the actual discipline is rooted in cultural Marxism" (Rufo 2021d).

Rufo concluded that it would be a more effective strategy to give the entire range of multicultural and anti-racist pedagogy the single label "CRT." In March of 2021, Rufo made it clear in a Twitter exchange that he had zeroed in on critical race theory as a useful tool for leveraging white America's anxieties over race (Rufo 2021c). Rufo's goal was to provide language for a spreading volunteer army of anti-CRT parents and other advocates who are especially concerned with their experiences in the workplace and the classrooms of their children. As Rufo himself Tweeted in March 2021, "The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory'" (Rufo 2021c). Rufo's focus on stigmatizing CRT is explicit. He continued, "We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans." As evidenced by conservative talk radio, pastoral sermons, voices at PTA meetings, changing university policies affecting curricula, new advocacy organizations, and GOP campaign rallies, Rufo's efforts have been remarkably successful. As Rufo himself attests, "We have successfully frozen their brand . . . steadily driving up negative perceptions" (Rufo 2021b).

Rufo's tweet about using CRT was part of an exchange with James Lindsay, one of the authors of *Cynical Theories*, which has become a new handbook for the anti-CRT movement. An atheist himself, Lindsay joined forces with Michael O'Fallon of the Christian nationalist group Sovereign Nations to combat what he believes are anti-Western ideologies (Smietana 2021). Lindsay found a friendly audience among white Christians such as Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In September 2020, he visited Al Mohler's podcast to share his warnings against any forms of postmodernism and critical theory (Mohler 2020). Mohler had been pushing for the adoption of "Resolution 9: On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality" at the 2019 Southern Baptist Convention meeting. During the discussion, Mohler argued that, "both critical race theory and intersectionality are a part of the continuing transformative Marxism" (Gray 2019). He was also one of the six presidents of theological

seminaries in the Southern Baptist Convention announcing in 2020 that “Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and any version of Critical Theory is incompatible with the Baptist Faith and Message.” The then president of the denomination J. D. Greear commented, “The Gospel gives a better answer” (Schroeder 2020).¹⁰ Overall, Rufo’s arguments were adopted by conservative Christians in the SBC and beyond who had already viewed CRT as contrary to their own religious values (Gardner and Martí 2022).

Rufo’s Anti-CRT Message

In March 2021, Hillsdale College brought Rufo’s anti-CRT message directly into the homes of millions of readers. Hillsdale is a private Christian college that prides itself on teaching classical liberal arts programs with a heavy focus on Western, canonical literature and one that has initiated more conservative school curricula (see Joyce 2022). Adapting a speech Rufo delivered on campus, Hillsdale made an article by Rufo the focus of its monthly pamphlet, *Imprimis*, an influential mailer that is distributed to over 5.6 million mailing addresses. The single article was titled, “Critical Race Theory: What It Is and How to Fight It.” The *Imprimis* article spelled out this “existential threat,” highlighting Rufo’s self-claimed expertise on the dangers of CRT. In it, Rufo calls himself “an investigative journalist” who produced a series of reports in 2020 and developed a database related to the detrimental effects of CRT (Rufo 2021a). Just as Rufo had done in his speech, the article conveys urgency: “We need to know what it is so we can know how to fight it.”

The narrative offers an insider perspective from a self-appointed, anti-CRT warrior: CRT originates with Marxism—which already screams to conservatives that CRT must be bad. For Rufo, a curious turn took place in the mid-twentieth century: Marxism was equated with Leftism, which was tied to “the social and racial unrest of the 1960s” (Rufo 2021a). At this point, all talk of class dynamics was abandoned and “they substituted race for class.” The new “political project” was now “to create a revolutionary coalition of the dispossessed based on racial and ethnic categories.” Rufo does not dispute that power imbalances exist, nor that there indeed exist striking inequalities based on race. The nature of inequality is not in dispute, only how to implement solutions. Consistent with previous conservative commentators (e.g., Bostdorff and Goldzwig 2005), a tamed version of Martin Luther King, Jr. emerges in Rufo’s article as an

appropriate racial representative endorsed by anti-CRT activists. By conveniently obscuring the more radical aspects of Dr. King's advocacy (see King 2015), Rufo (and others) emphasize that his approach to civil rights strived for "fulfillment of the American promise of freedom and equality *under law*" (our emphasis).

Rufo finally arrives at his presentation of CRT. For him, CRT is foundationally and ultimately Marxism, and his use of words and phrases like "equity," "social justice," "diversity and inclusion," and "culturally responsive teaching" are all euphemisms for "neo Marxism" (Rufo 2021a). These terms appear "non-threatening" and are "easily confused with the American principle of *equality*." Rufo asserts that proponents of CRT subvert concepts of equality, seeing such terms only as vehicles for steering away from "white supremacy, patriarchy, and oppression." Indeed, equality is set against equity—which is "little more than reformulated Marxism." Rufo goes on to misrepresent arguments by legal scholar Cheryl Harris and historian Ibram X. Kendi (who Rufo labels a "critical race guru") to reveal how professors at top universities have been promoting dangerous subversion. The threat as Rufo sees it consists of suspending property rights, seizing land, and redistributing wealth "along racial lines." CRT proposals lead to nothing less than "the overthrow of capitalism." The result would be a "race-based redistribution of wealth" built on "active discrimination" through an "omnipotent bureaucratic authority." If CRT proponents have their way, they would "overturn the principles of the Declaration [of Independence] and destroy the remaining structure of the Constitution."

Among the more immediate developments Rufo attributes to CRT are workshop sessions at the FBI, Department of Homeland Security, and the Treasury Department about "microinequities" (he is mislabeling "microaggressions," perhaps softening the term), the idea that "virtually all white people contribute to racism," and the need to become "antiracist." With a handful of potent examples, Rufo argues that it is "not an exaggeration" that "critical race theory has permeated the collective intelligence and decision-making process of American government." According to him, "this is a revolutionary change."

But in Rufo's telling, it is not only members of government agencies and the capitalist elite who are victimized. It is also our children. He describes a first-grade classroom in Cupertino, California where children were "forced" to "deconstruct" their racial identity. Middle schoolers were also "forced" to indicate where they fell in "an oppression matrix," since "straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class and must

atone for their privilege.” In Philadelphia, fifth graders were “forced” to “simulate a Black Power rally to free 1960s radical Angela Davis from prison” and celebrate “Black communism.” For Rufo, our federal and state agencies, especially our educational institutions, were established as “neutral, technocratic, and oriented toward broadly-held perceptions of the public good.” Setting aside pervasive studies examining these societal institutions, these structures do not exhibit imbalances of power nor are they racialized. Instead of explicating the historically rooted inequalities of these entities, Rufo argues that it is the ideology of CRT that is subverting their good intentions. And since he sees the key site of intervention as the classroom, Rufo states emphatically that the nation’s public schools are “turned against the American people.”

Rufo admits that he is not attempting to represent the concepts and scholarship historically associated with CRT accurately. He understands, for example, that “a key tenet of CRT is the removal of racial hierarchies” (Greenfield 2021). But his goal is to associate “critical race theory” with a host of anxieties and fears already found among his conservative (and mostly white) audience. It is intensive, paradigm-fitting work being performed. He knows parents and others are ignorant of CRT, as they tell him, “These institutions that I believe in (schools, workplaces) are being devoured by an ideology I don’t understand” (Wallace-Wells 2021). Education and professional training in the workplace are used to overcome deep-seated bias and expose historical systems of privilege (e.g., Martí 2020). However, Rufo sees these as a threat, and his writing provides a toolbox of arguments to subvert these processes. And while the rhetorical reinventions that he and others promote take effort to master, his “explanations” are profoundly motivating, effectively stoking all kinds of invented outrage.

The ultimate goal of Rufo’s *Imprimis* article is to provoke conservative Americans to speak out. Rufo states that a Gallup poll shows that “77 percent of conservatives are afraid to share their political beliefs publicly” (2021a). The fear is based on worries “about getting mobbed on social media” or “fired from their jobs.” He goes on: “Worse, they remain quiet, largely ceding the public debate to those pushing these Anti-American ideologies.” It is conservatives who are being oppressed, specifically through “equality and inclusion departments” that operate punitively, “searching for and stamping out any dissent from the official orthodoxy.” He encourages readers to stick to the points laid out because CRT arguments are “like a mousetrap.” They are to be alerted to the “patronizing tone” of those who may explain “white fragility,” “unconscious bias,” or “white supremacy.” They should rebel when “instructed

to remain silent,” or told to “lean into the discomfort,” or to acknowledge “complicity in white supremacy.” Rufo concedes that American history includes injustices and abuses of power. Nevertheless, the implication—“its revolutionary conclusion”—that America is founded on racism and that “our way of life should be overthrown” is to be rejected. For Rufo, CRT is based on a “dishonest account of history.” Ultimately, CRT should be fought because it is “a tool of political power” that is “driving the vast machinery of the state.”

So, what are the tools to fight CRT? Rufo suggests that conservatives should use a “moral language of their own.” This language, he suggests, should focus on “*excellence*” over “diversity,” since the former is a colorblind approach to making sure all Americans may “achieve their potential.” Finally, Rufo asserts that “we must promote the true story of America,” which is “honest about injustices” but “places them in the context of our nation’s highest ideals and the progress we have made.” This history is “rich with stories of achievement and sacrifices that will move the hearts of Americans,” avoiding the “grim and pessimistic narrative.” “Above all,” writes Rufo, “we must have courage.” He preaches that we should have the “courage to stand and speak the truth.”

Using the authoritative mechanisms of the state is also crucial. Rufo supported Trump’s executive order for federal employees, and, unsurprisingly, came out against President Joe Biden rescinding that order on his first day in office. For him, Trump’s executive order is a model for governors and municipal leaders. Moreover, lawsuits are encouraged, and Rufo states that he has “organized a coalition of attorneys to file lawsuits against schools and governmental agencies that impose critical race theory.” The tools to be used in the judiciary include the First Amendment (free speech), the Fourteenth Amendment (equal protection), and (ironically) the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race). Rufo also advocates for “a multiracial and bipartisan coalition” to “battle against” CRT. Parents should continue “mobilizing against racially divisive curricula,” and employees should “speak out against Orwellian reeducation” at work. They should oppose the “race essentialism, collective guilt, and neo-segregation” that “violate the basic principles of equality and justice.”

Conclusion

It is no wonder, then, that Trump saw CRT as a potent weapon in his political crusade in the 2020 election. After his defeat, while still insisting that the election was stolen from him, it appeared he was geared to run for a second presidential term using the same tactics of agitation and polarization. Although President Joe Biden immediately terminated the 1776 Commission, the purposes of the initiative had caught fire, launching Hillsdale's widely adopted 1776 "classic education" K-12 curriculum for use in Christian charter and in homeschooling as well as energizing conservative activism by parents toward local school boards in public schools across the country. Rufo's own influence continues to grow. He has taken on roles as Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's education guru and as a trustee at the New College in Florida, and he has parlayed his message into a bestselling book appropriately titled, *America's Cultural Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything*. In short, the 1776 Commission died as a federal project when Biden took over the presidency, but the ideas behind it live on.

The power of anti-CRT ideas is likely to continue to be fundamental to the messaging of Republican political campaigns for the foreseeable future. As the country moved toward the midterm election in 2022, Trump amped up his anti-CRT rhetoric. Speaking to a dedicated audience, Trump emphasized that it was a "matter of national survival" that patriot Americans keep CRT out of American classrooms (Stanton 2022). "We have no choice," he warned, and declared that American patriots should be willing and prepared "to lay down their very lives" for the cause if needed. Relatedly, anti-CRT messages will likely provide Conservative Christians further grounding for a revamped culture warrior identity. With their continual support of the past-president, chances are that white evangelicals will answer Trump's rallying cry and try and vote out anything they believe smells of CRT. Private Christian schools are already acting on these beliefs; for example, administrators at Palm Beach Atlantic University, a private Christian university in Florida, terminated the contract of a long-term professor of English for including essay assignments reflecting on the topic of racial justice (Mara 2023).

What will happen in the years ahead remains to be seen. But there are many willing to take up the mantle of Trump's campaign tactic of using anti-CRT signals with similar hyperbole, including governors Greg Abbott (Texas), Ron DeSantis (Florida), Glenn Youngkin (Virginia), and Doug Ducey (Arizona). They and many others embrace anti-CRT rhetoric to promote an

idealized American past and stoke a generalized fear of the future for a voter base that believe their country and their families are under threat. Trumpism, after all, was always more than Trump. It was a ramped-up version of a decades-old conflict. The culture wars are far from dead, at least for now.

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Notes

¹ The 1619 Project introduced ideas common in the Black radical tradition as well as historical scholarship for a broader American public. A journalistic project, it painted American history in broad strokes and received criticism, especially the introductory essay by Nikole Hannah-Jones. This essay was criticized by historians like Gordon Wood (Mackaman 2019) as misrepresenting the causes of the American revolution and by Emily Sclafani (2022) for, among other things, promoting a "false dichotomy between 1619 and 1776." Sclafani, however, noted that the broader project built on mainstream, historical scholarship. The flagship academic journal *American Historical Review* published a forum in December 2022 that included both criticism and praise for the project (Gordon-Reed et al. 2022). **<AUTHOR: I tried to redistribute these references so it is a little clearer and consistent with style in other chapters. Please review in case they should be moved elsewhere in this note. Particularly, it's not clear what bits of the note Mackaman 2019 and Gordon-Reed et al. 2022 are references for.> HLS: I moved the reference to Mackaman after mentioning Wood, as his criticism was published there.**

² A YouTube video of the "White House Conference on American History" is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEhSp7FYleg>.

⁴ The theoretical approach of CRT grew out of legal scholarship. A basic premise among CRT scholars is that race is not a biological category but a social and legal construction. Efforts to overcome racial injustices, then, lie in recognizing the racialized aspect of seemingly colorblind arguments and decisions that are often obscured, which makes addressing institutional racism particularly difficult. Beyond this, CRT scholars may disagree on a number of issues. A frequently cited resource is Crenshaw et al. 1995.

⁵ PEN America updates a spreadsheet monthly that provides an overview of anti-CRT and related bills across the United States. See

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Tj5WQVBmB6SQg-zP_M8uZsQQGH09TxmBY73v23zpyr0/edit#gid=1505554870.

⁶ In recent years, the Cheney family has become the face of the anti-Trump in the Republican Party.

⁷ Arizona House Bill 2281 (2010),

https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/summary/h.hb2281_05-03-10_astransmittedtogovernor.doc.htm.

¹⁰ The SBC was just one out of many white evangelical groups to voice their concern over critical race theory. See, e.g., Family Research Council (<https://www.frcaction.org/updatearticle/20201203/critical-race>), Biola University (<https://www.biola.edu/blogs/think-biblically/2020/critical-race-theory>), Family Policy Alliance (<https://familypolicyalliance.com/issues/2021/05/21/we-stand-against-crt/>), Concerned Women for America (<https://concernedwomen.org/stand-against-racist-critical-race-theory/>), and Charisma News (<https://www.charismanews.com/opinion/85208-how-woke-race-theory-contradicts-christian-faith>).