

Chair Fowler Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Brennan, and Members of the Committee,

I ask this committee to join me in making current event connections to the history of this nation. When we look around, not just in Ohio but across America, we see a country deeply fractured in many ways. One of the most damaging divisions is in how we are choosing to remember and tell our history.

I left this committee last Tuesday feeling disheartened, and not simply for myself. I was disheartened because of the confusion on my eight-year-old son's face as we drove home. As we prepared dinner, he looked at me and asked, "Daddy, was Charlie Kirk a good guy?"

I paused for a long time, trying to find a way to answer with honesty and fairness, allowing him to draw his own conclusion, the same way I have always encouraged my students to think for themselves. I explained that there is a movement happening in this country, one that Mr. Kirk is a part of, and that many see him as a leader within it.

Before I go further, I want to do what I have always done as an educator, which is to make the historical connections that give our current moment context.

At this nation's foundation, Africans were kidnapped, captured, and enslaved for centuries. Within those centuries were a few who fought to end that evil, too few, but their moral courage led to a Civil War that lasted four years. That war was fought over the question of whether people who looked like me, and like my son, had a rightful place in this country as human beings or property.

Those who took up arms against the United States lost, were imprisoned for treason, and were later pardoned by President Andrew Johnson. Many went on to serve again in local, state, and federal office. History shows that their policies did not advance liberty for African Americans. Instead, they built the Black Codes, upheld sharecropping, and authored Jim Crow, systems that legislated inequality and terror well into the next century.

The Civil Rights Movement rose to challenge that legacy. Yet Mr. Kirk has called that movement a mistake. That alone should give this committee pause.

We cannot pretend that history's influence stopped at some convenient date. The Daughters of the Confederacy reshaped education to protect the Confederate image, and today Moms for Liberty has taken up a similar mission, banning books, silencing truth, and hijacking terms like "woke" to turn awareness into a threat. Both movements seek to control how Americans understand themselves.

It is also undeniable that the former President of the United States and millions of his supporters are connected to Mr. Kirk's network and to organizations like Moms for Liberty, creating a powerful force that distorts how our nation remembers its own past.

Mr. Kirk has said publicly, “If I see a Black pilot, I’m going to be like, boy, I hope he’s qualified.” He has called Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. “awful.” He has promoted the so-called “Great Replacement Reality,” a theory that inspired a white supremacist to murder ten Black Americans at Tops Market in Buffalo, New York.

So I ask every member of this committee, before you vote on this bill, how do we disconnect these modern ideologies from the history that produced them? How do we ensure that the rhetoric we uplift in the name of patriotism does not repeat the patterns that divided this country before?

When my son heard those quotes, he looked at me again and asked, “Daddy, why would they do something like that?”

And I have the same question for all of you. Why would we do something like this? What message does it send, not just to me as an educator who loves this country, but to the children who are listening and learning from our choices?

I ask this committee to reflect on the voices of millions of Ohioans who have lived with the consequences of these inherited ideologies, people whose stories are often overlooked but whose belief in America remains. We can tell the truth about our history and still love this country. In fact, that is the only way to heal it.

Thank you, Madam Chair and Members of the Committee.