

Harvey J. Graff,

There Is No Debate About Critical Race Theory: How GOP politicians and conservative activists and Republican are trying to create controversy where there is none.

Washington Monthly Sept. 4, 2021

<https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/09/04/there-is-no-debate-about-critical-race-theory/>

On August 10, Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas proposed an inappropriate amendment to the \$3.5 billion infrastructure bill being considered by Congress. The provision, which passed [\[EC1\]](#) [\[HJG2\]](#) 50-49, says that teaching critical race theory, especially in K-12 schools, should be federally “defunded.”

Cotton and his Republican peers—as well as Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia—followed the direction of Tucker Carlson and his peers at Fox News, who have been mounting a scare campaign to convince white America that radical educators nationwide are blaming their children and grandchildren for the sins of our nation’s past.

The blatant misconception of critical race theory—a branch of legal scholarship centered on the idea that racism is systemic, not merely in the hearts and minds of individuals—[emanates](#) from the self-admitted false claims of Christopher Rufo, an activist at the conservative Manhattan Institute, and further propagated by a well-funded and nationally organized network of right-wing groups such as Heritage Action, 1776 Project, Citizens for American Renewal, and others.

Cotton’s motion [follows](#) in the footsteps of Republican governors and GOP-controlled state legislatures and school boards to amplify the lies and thwart

teachers from imparting America's complicated history to their students. It's a subject that has only grown more urgent since the brutal police killing of George Floyd in May 2020. Even the more moderate Republican officials, such as Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, have joined the histrionic and deceitful chorus. On August, 30, the *Columbus Dispatch* reported that his office claimed he opposed critical race theory because "it divides, rather than unites, Americans." Indeed, Republicans in the Ohio State House are advancing legislation to keep critical race theory out of the state's K-12 classrooms.

Given the constant flow of news stories about Republicans rebelling against critical race teaching, it would be understandable for the average U.S. news consumer to think this is a raging issue in America. But it's not. Critical race theory is never taught in K-12 education. In fact, it's seldom found in undergraduate curricula. Rather, it's almost exclusively taught in law schools.

The Republican outrage operation is both an attempt to stop conventional teaching about race in U.S. history and civics classes—but even more so, to invent a crisis that scares enough of their base into donating money into the GOP coffers and vote for Republicans in the midterms.

That's why it's essential for media organizations to stop reporting on "the debate" over critical race theory. In reality, there is no debate. It's a manufactured controversy and grifting scheme.

It comes from an organized publicity campaign from right-wing activists. Not only do the activists secure airtime and put out endless posts on social media, but they follow a detailed playbook. Just listen to Tucker Carlson on Fox interviewing

Rufo. Or listen to the “protesting parents” interviewed on Fox News or OANN. Almost methodically, they all use the same language. Students are being “shamed,” “blamed,” and “made to feel responsible” for American slavery or institutionalized racism.

The parents and their amplifiers follow, almost word for word, the scripts circulated in the “handbooks” and “toolkits.” [\[EC3\]](#) [\[HJG4\]](#) For example, this summer, two mothers of students at the private preparatory Columbus Academy (Ohio) took their admittedly scripted remarks to a right-wing national podcast as well as to school meetings. The gambit backfired. The children lost their places in the school for violating their contract [\[EC5\]](#) [\[HJG6\]](#), and second, increased support for the school. [\[EC7\]](#) [\[HJG8\]](#)

The anti-critical race theory movement stems out of a pattern of dishonesty. In widely repeated comments, for instance, Rufo created [\[EC9\]](#) [\[HJG10\]](#) false quotations supposedly from highly reputable critical race theory scholars that, he said, showed them to be “Marxists who advocate the abolition of private property and the overthrow of capitalism.”

To understand these campaigns, we must look back. In the post-World War II era, with the emergence of civil rights movements and, in particular, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, there was a white backlash to a changing of societal norms that welcomed, rather than suppressed, racial diversity and inclusion.

The resistance that ensued—what I and others call “white fright and flight”—is a prerequisite to understanding the fireworks over critical race theory. Fright led to flight both literally in terms of residential and school relocation and politically in the rejection of integration, affirmative action, and teaching about race. Both dimensions were active rhetorically.

In the 1980s and ‘90s, Republican politicians discovered clever, if manipulative, ways of using this fear to their advantage. Ronald Reagan derided the welfare queen and spoke of ending government action. Newt Gingrich did his best to maintain this emphasis both rhetorically and politically. In 2016, Donald Trump took a page out of their book by declaring undocumented immigrants as “rapists” and “criminals” crossing the southern border—and that Barack Obama, our first Black president, was not born in this country. All of these charges sent the same message to red America: the increasing population of people of color posed a threat to their way of life.

That led to widespread white resistance to a host of policies that would diversify America, from fighting to limit the integration of neighborhoods to today’s efforts to “ban” teaching about race in classrooms.

The nature of the latest iteration of this battle is that it is playing out, mostly, in a dramatically different media landscape. Conservative charlatans can spread their misinformation on Facebook and Twitter, as well as right-wing cable networks like Fox, Newsmax, and OANN.

Even worse, though, are when objective and mainstream news reports take these duplicitous accounts at face value—and fall for the concentrated effort to create a

controversy where there is none. At this point, we can expect bad faith arguments from Republicans to sow dissension and fear. But we should not expect those who should know better to fall for it. And we must all fight against it.

Harvey J. Graff

Ohio Eminent Scholar in Literacy Studies &
Professor Emeritus of English and History
The Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio

email graff.40@osu.edu
<http://u.osu.edu/graff.40/>