

# Column: Advancing the Critical Mistakes Theory

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All doctors make mistakes. Good doctors learn from them. The same can be said of nations. The United States is a great nation with a relatively brief history, and one of its greatest assets is the willingness of its general population to look critically at the consequences of past actions and promote or avoid those actions in the future. Fear, greed and arrogance have repeatedly interfered with our desire to “form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity” enumerated in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution.

Rumor has it that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. I doubt that he had a violin, but he certainly appreciated the fires that helped clear the way for construction of his palace at a site near where the Roman Colosseum now stands. Nero wasted Rome’s wealth and resources to build an extravagant but short-lived mansion as a tribute to himself. Today we have a Congress that spends much of its time and too much of its resources arguing about what should be taught in history classes.

This type of discussion was previously limited to Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings in the suburbs. One group of parents would shout down an opposing group

intent upon restricting or expanding what the first-grade students would be allowed to hear or read. These confrontations at PTA meetings always struck me as especially absurd since it assumed the children whose delicate minds were being targeted would read or listen to what these overwrought parents demanded was included in or excluded from the school curriculum. Superman comics [I mean graphic art books] were the most popular and most seriously discussed educational materials at my grammar school. I gather from my own children that college curricula provided little additional preparedness for the workplace beyond what they had already learned from their Marvel and Dell comic books.

These Congressional hearings on educational initiatives, such as Critical Race Theory, suggest that our country is so devoid of crises that we can afford to pay these nattering nabobs of negativism to lob insults at each other over what are the best courses to provide our students to make them “good citizens.” The Governor of Florida insists that schools getting financial support from the state government teach that “Communism is evil.” Is he too young to remember that one of the many problems experienced by the U.S.S.R. [the communist nation designated an evil empire by Ronald Reagan] was its diversion of resources to ensure adherence to state dogma and to restrict what its citizens could read or say? Our Founders were very big on education and freedom of thought and expression. They did not fear an educated electorate: they sought it.

From what I have heard from those advocating against Critical Race Theory and other such historical reviews, I gather that they are concerned about the impact of discussing discriminatory practices, past and present, by the U.S. government and agencies affected by the government. The argument is that focusing on government programs and laws that penalized, marginalized, or otherwise discriminated against non-white citizens would sew more discord in an already agitated citizenry.

Surely most Americans already know about the red-lining process introduced under FDR’s New Deal that enabled banks to deny mortgages to neighborhoods with any Black home owners and thereby converted Black ghettos into slums. If banks would not offer

mortgages, home owners could not sell their property and their investments in homes were wiped out. Surely most Americans are familiar with the USDA policy of refusing loans to Black farmers while simultaneously heavily subsidizing white farmers. Farmers who could not get money for seed and equipment were quickly eliminated from the land they struggled to get and to hold onto. Surely most Americans know of the Supreme Court decisions, such as Plessy v. Ferguson, that relegated black students to underequipped, underfunded, and overcrowded public schools under a policy euphemistically labelled “separate but equal.” This decision legalized both mandated and de facto segregation in public schools for the first half of the twentieth century. Surely most Americans know all about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Japanese Internment of 1942, the Cherokee Removal of 1838, and, of course, America’s original sin, slavery.

No, most Americans know little or nothing about these horrific missteps in our nation’s history. The argument against discussing these mistakes and injustices is that a free and open airing of America’s government-funded and often mandated discriminatory practices will fuel social unrest and engender mistrust in its government. What some of our elected officials insist on not recognizing is that democracies thrive on candor and wilt on reticence. Perhaps, it is not that they fail to recognize the value of full disclosure, but rather fear it. Thomas Jefferson, a man with many flaws, but also with a devotion to democracy [at least for white men], refused to join the Society of FreeMasons that most other Founders belonged to because he objected to the society’s demand for secrecy.

And so our legislators quibble over what Americans should be taught while the South is flooded, the Southwest is burning up, the Midwest is ravaged by tornadoes, and the national infrastructure is crumbling. Their debates focus on sound bites that can be used in future election ads, rather than on sound policies that improve the “general Welfare” of the citizenry. Some of them demand that we ignore our nation’s history and its consequences, that we trust our elected officials to do the right things in the future, regardless of the track records of their predecessors. It is like trusting that a building in

Florida constructed 40 years ago will not collapse, even if mistakes were made in its construction four decades ago.

We must constantly re-examine the structure of our government, identifying its flaws and vulnerabilities, building on its strengths and opportunities. Leave curriculum debates to the PTA. Our nation has more important matters to deal with. If we fail to examine and maintain the integrity of its core institutions, our government and our nation can and will collapse.

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