

America's Long-Running Conversation About Race and Justice

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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For more than a half century, popular culture, public policy, law, and universities in the United States have wrestled openly with questions of race and justice. Yet today's progressives demand that schools, universities, corporations, and the federal government institute aggressive new curricula, training, and protocols because, according to them, the nation has scarcely begun to address the poisonous legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. It turns out that "scarcely begun to address" means, in their view, "failed to produce radical change."

On March 2, 1971, during the first season of "All in the Family," an African American family — George and Louise Jefferson and their adult son, Lionel — [moved next door](#) to the Bunkers. Archie Bunker's recurring encounters over the years with the Jeffersons — George was loud and irascible, Louise warm and thoughtful, and Lionel sharp-witted and understated — entertained by exposing Archie's bigotry to ridicule and by revealing that his humanity ran deeper than his racism. That was 50 years ago. One of America's best-loved and most influential sitcoms, "All in the Family" was followed by numerous hit shows featuring black characters and highlighting black experience, including "[The Jeffersons](#)."

In an era of three networks and no cable TV or Internet, and in the wake of momentous post-World War II developments that included *Brown v. Board of Education*, Martin Luther King Jr.'s soaring oration on the National Mall, and landmark civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, "All in the Family" and "The Jeffersons" did more than accelerate a national conversation about race. Without scolding or lecturing — instead with abundant laughter and more than occasional tenderness — they taught audiences to simultaneously see the injustices of racism and look beyond race to what all Americans share.

Over the last half-dozen decades, movies have also contributed to the national conversation about race. In 1964, for his role in "[Lilies of the Field](#)," Sydney Poitier became the first black person to win the Best Actor Oscar. Among the biggest names in Hollywood in 1967, Poitier starred in not one but three major films that year raising questions of race and justice: "[To Sir, With Love](#)," "[In the Heat of the Night](#)," and "[Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#)." Since then, hardly a year has gone by in which Hollywood has not produced [feature-length films](#) that explore the black experience in America.

Public policy, too, turned to the question of race. In 1965, then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan led a team that published "[The Negro Family: The Case for National Action](#)." The so-called Moynihan Report argued that to deal with racial inequality it was

necessary to go beyond civil rights legislation to address the weakening of family structure in inner-city black communities. The report sparked a national debate that continues to this day about the causes of poverty and crime and the appropriate remedies.

The courts became centrally involved in questions of racial justice in 1978, in [*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*](#). In that landmark case, the Supreme Court rejected the use of racial quotas in university admissions as unconstitutional while holding that the Constitution permits universities to use race as one factor among others in admissions decisions. Ever since, the nation has struggled to reconcile each citizen's individual right to equal treatment under the law with the nation's obligation to address the lingering effects on black Americans of the country's painful history of race-based discrimination.

Stretching back to the 1950s, eminent historians have published seminal works dealing with slavery and race in America. Martin Luther King himself praised "The Strange Career of Jim Crow" (1955), by C. Vann Woodward, as "the historical bible of the Civil Rights Movement." David Brion Davis' "The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture" (1966) was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Eugene Genovese's "Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made" (1974) won the Bancroft Prize. Orlando Patterson's "Freedom (Volume I): Freedom in the Making of Western Culture" (1991) won the U.S. National Book Award for nonfiction. And Eric Foner's "The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery" (2010) received a Pulitzer Prize.

America's long-running conversation about race — inspired, informed, and sometimes inflamed by efforts to address the topic in entertainment, politics, law, and the academy — has coincided with the emergence of a more tolerant and just, if still far-from-perfect, society. Yet plenty of intellectuals, activists, and politicians asserted that the killing of George Floyd last year set in motion a long overdue racial reckoning. It would be more accurate to say that progressives seized on Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's criminal conduct — no evidence was introduced in court to show that he was motivated by racism — and the ensuing protests and violence in cities throughout the country to entrench in public and private institutions the explosive idea that racism in America is systemic. This means that racism is woven into the very core of American politics and culture, and therefore American political beliefs and institutions must be fundamentally transformed.

Controversy about education is particularly intense. A flurry of articles appeared in recent weeks to assure readers that conservative concerns that the K-12 curriculum has been hijacked to inculcate students in critical race theory are without merit. [According](#) to New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, for example, "The current obsession with critical race theory is a cynical attempt to change the subject away from the Biden administration's highly popular policy initiatives, while pandering to the white rage that Republicans deny exists." For Krugman, critical race theory simply represents "honesty about America's racial history."

In a Wall Street Journal [op-ed](#), Donna Brazile, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, argues that conservative opposition to critical race theory and the 1619 Project reflects nothing more than right-wing determination to "mandate a distorted and whitewashed view of America" that suppresses questions about race.

Among the most substantial pieces dismissing conservative concerns about critical race theory was one published by Time magazine staff writer Olivia B. Waxman. In “[Critical Race Theory Is Simply the Last Bogeyman’: Inside the Fight Over What Kids Learn About America’s History](#),” Waxman reduces the conservative critique to political opportunism, contending that conservatives “have mounted a campaign to weaponize the teaching of critical race theory, driven by a belief that fighting it will be a winning electoral message.” Then she changes tune, flipping on its head the standard charge that conservatives overemphasize the past. Whereas progressives, according to Waxman, only “want kids to learn how the legacy of” the nation’s “past shapes American society today,” conservatives, she maintains, “think children shouldn’t be burdened with the past.”

Krugman, Brazile, and Waxman render the controversy over critical race theory unrecognizable. The trouble is not, as these apologists for politicization of the school curriculum suggest, that conservatives oppose teaching about race. None of them provide a single example of a conservative who believes that the study of slavery and post-Civil War racial discrimination should be excluded from the study of American history.

The problem, rather, is [the spirit of indoctrination](#) that informs much of fashionable race pedagogy. Parents on both sides of the aisle should unite in opposition to teachers who present claims about systemic racism as established fact rather than a matter of debatable interpretation. Legislators are right to prohibit teachers from abusing their authority by ascribing guilt to some students and awarding special privileges to others based on the color of their skin. And citizens should stand against the use of classrooms to stigmatize the view shared by Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Rev. King that the key to overcoming racism in America is greater fidelity to the nation’s founding principles and constitutional system.

Such fidelity is warranted not least by the extraordinary wrestling with race and justice — the rival of the sustained and frank public debate about its fundamental principles undertaken by any nation anywhere and at any time — in which the United States has been engaged for many decades.

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