

NEW YORK TIMES, FEBRUARY 17, 2023

OPINION

Who's Afraid of Black History?

By Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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Lurking behind the concerns of Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, over the content of a proposed high school course in African American studies, is a long and complex series of debates about the role of slavery and race in American classrooms.

"We believe in teaching kids facts and how to think, but we don't believe they should have an agenda imposed on them," Governor DeSantis said. He also decried what he called "indoctrination."

School is one of the first places where society as a whole begins to shape our sense of what it means to be an American. It is in our schools that we learn how to become citizens, that we encounter the first civics lessons that either reinforce or counter the myths and fables we gleaned at home. Each day of first grade in my elementary school in Piedmont, W.Va., in 1956 began with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, followed by "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)." To this day, I cannot prevent my right hand from darting to my heart the minute I hear the words of either.

It is through such rituals, repeated over and over, that certain "truths" become second nature, "self-evident" as it were. It is how the foundations of our understanding of the history of our great nation are constructed.

Even if we give the governor the benefit of the doubt about the motivations behind his recent statements about the content of the original version of the College Board's A.P. curriculum in African American studies, his intervention falls squarely in line with a long tradition of bitter, politically suspect battles over the interpretation of three seminal periods in the history of American racial relations: the Civil War; the 12 years following the war, known as Reconstruction; and Reconstruction's brutal rollback, characterized by its adherents as the former Confederacy's "Redemption," which saw the imposition of Jim Crow segregation, the reimposition of white supremacy and their justification through a masterfully executed [propaganda effort](#).

Undertaken by apologists for the former Confederacy with an energy and alacrity that was astonishing in its vehemence and reach, in an era defined by print culture, politicians and amateur historians joined forces to police the historical profession. The so-called Lost Cause movement was, in effect, a take-no-prisoners social media war. And no single group or person was more pivotal to “the dissemination of the truths of Confederate history, earnestly and fully and officially,” than the historian general of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Mildred Lewis Rutherford, of Athens, Ga. Rutherford was a descendant of a long line of slave owners; her maternal grandfather owned slaves as early as 1820, and her maternal uncle, Howell Cobb, secretary of the Treasury under President James Buchanan, owned some 200 enslaved women and men in 1840. Rutherford served as the principal of the Lucy Cobb Institute (a school for girls in Athens) and vice president of the Stone Mountain Memorial project, the former Confederacy’s version of Mount Rushmore.

As the historian David Blight notes, “Rutherford gave new meaning to the term ‘die-hard.’” Indeed, she “considered the Confederacy ‘acquitted as blameless’ at the bar of history, and sought its vindication with a political fervor that would rival the ministry of propaganda in any twentieth-century dictatorship.” And she felt that the crimes of Reconstruction “made the Ku Klux Klan a necessity.” As I pointed out in a PBS documentary on the rise and fall of Reconstruction, Rutherford intuitively understood the direct connection between history lessons taught in the classroom and the Lost Cause racial order being imposed outside it, and she sought to cement that relationship with zeal and efficacy. She understood that what is inscribed on the blackboard translates directly to social practices unfolding on the street.

“Realizing that the textbooks in history and literature which the children of the South are now studying, and even the ones from which many of their parents studied before them,” she wrote in “A Measuring Rod to Test Text Books, and Reference Books in Schools, Colleges and Libraries,” “are in many respects unjust to the South and her institutions, and that a far greater injustice and danger is threatening the South today from the late histories which are being published, guilty not only of misrepresentations but of gross omissions, refusing to give the South credit for what she has accomplished ... I have prepared, as it were, a testing or measuring rod.” And Rutherford used that measuring rod to wage a systematic campaign to redefine the Civil War not as our nation’s war to end the evils of slavery but as “the War Between the States,” since as she wrote elsewhere, “the negroes of the South were never called slaves.” And they were “well fed, well clothed and well housed.”

Of the more than 25 books and pamphlets that Rutherford published, none were more important than “A Measuring Rod.” Published in 1920, her user-friendly pamphlet was meant to be the index “by which every textbook on history and literature in Southern schools should be tested by those desiring the truth.” The pamphlet was designed to make it easy for “all authorities charged with the selection of textbooks for colleges, schools and all scholastic institutions to measure all books offered for adoption by this ‘Measuring Rod,’ and adopt none which do not accord full justice to the South.” What’s more, her campaign was retroactive. As the historian Donald Yacovone tells us in his recent book, “Teaching White Supremacy,” Rutherford insisted that librarians “should

scrawl ‘unjust to the South’ on the title pages” of any “unacceptable” books “already in their collections.”

On a page headed ominously by the word “Warning,” Rutherford provides a handy list of what a teacher or a librarian should “reject” or “not reject.”

“Reject a book that speaks of the Constitution other than a compact between sovereign states.”

“Reject a textbook that does not give the principles for which the South fought in 1861, and does not clearly outline the interferences with the rights guaranteed to the South by the Constitution, and which caused secession.”

“Reject a book that calls the Confederate soldier a traitor or rebel, and the war a rebellion.”

“Reject a book that says the South fought to hold her slaves.”

“Reject a book that speaks of the slaveholder of the South as cruel and unjust to his slaves.”

And my absolute favorite, “Reject a textbook that glorified Abraham Lincoln and vilifies Jefferson Davis, unless,” she adds graciously, “a truthful cause can be found for such glorification and vilification before 1865.”

And what of slavery? “This was an education that taught the negro self-control, obedience and perseverance — yes, taught him to realize his weaknesses and how to grow stronger for the battle of life,” Rutherford writes in 1923 in “The South Must Have Her Rightful Place.” “The institution of slavery as it was in the South, far from degrading the negro, was fast elevating him above his nature and race.” For Rutherford, who lectured wearing antebellum hoop gowns, the war over the interpretation of the meaning of the recent past was all about establishing the racial order of the present: “The truth must be told, and you must read it, and be ready to answer it.” Unless this is done, “in a few years there will be no South about which to write history.”

In other words, Rutherford’s common core was the Lost Cause. And it will come as no surprise that this vigorous propaganda effort was accompanied by the construction of many of the Confederate monuments that have dotted the Southern landscape since.

While it’s safe to assume that most contemporary historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction are of similar minds about Rutherford and the Lost Cause, it’s also true that one of the most fascinating aspects of African American studies is the rich history of debate over issues like this, and especially over what it has meant — and continues to mean — to be “Black” in a nation with such a long and troubled history of human slavery at the core of its economic system for two and a half centuries.

Heated debates within the Black community, beginning as early as the first decades of the 19th century, have ranged from what names “the race” should publicly call itself (William Whipper versus James McCune Smith) and whether or not enslaved men and women should rise in arms against their masters (Henry Highland Garnet versus Frederick Douglass). Economic development versus political rights (Booker T. Washington versus W.E.B. Du Bois)? Should Black people return to Africa (Marcus Garvey versus W.E.B. Du Bois)? Should we admit publicly the pivotal role of African elites in enslaving our ancestors (Ali Mazrui versus Wole Soyinka)?

Add to these repeated arguments over sexism, socialism and capitalism, reparations, antisemitism and homophobia. It is often surprising to students to learn that there has never been one way to “be Black” among Black Americans, nor have Black politicians, activists and scholars ever spoken with one voice or embraced one ideological or theoretical framework. Black America, that “nation in a nation,” as the Black abolitionist Martin R. Delany put it, has always been as varied and diverse as the complexions of the people who have identified, or been identified, as its members.

I found these debates so fascinating, so fundamental to a fuller understanding of Black history, that I coedited a textbook that features them, and designed Harvard’s Introduction to African American Studies course, which I teach with the historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, to acquaint students with a wide range of them in colorful and sometimes riotous detail. More recent debates over academic subjects like Kimberlé Crenshaw’s insightful theory of “intersectionality,” reparations, Black antisemitism, critical race theory and the 1619 Project — several of which made Mr. DeSantis’s hit list — will be included in the next edition of our textbook and will no doubt make it onto the syllabus of our introductory course.

As a consultant to the College Board as it developed its A.P. course in African American studies, I suggested the inclusion of a pro-and-con debate unit at the end of its curriculum because of the inherent scholarly importance of many of the contemporary hot-button issues that conservative politicians have been seeking to censor, but also as a way to help students understand the relation between the information they find in their textbooks and efforts by politicians to say what should and what should not be taught in the classroom.

Why shouldn’t students be introduced to these debates? Any good class in Black studies seeks to explore the widest range of thought voiced by Black and white thinkers on race and racism over the long course of our ancestors’ fight for their rights in this country. In fact, in my experience, teaching our field through these debates is a rich and nuanced pedagogical strategy, affording our students ways to create empathy across differences of opinion, to understand diversity within difference and to reflect on complex topics from more than one angle. It forces them to critique stereotypes and canards about who we are as a people and what it means to be “authentically” Black. I am not sure which of these ideas has landed one of my own essays on the list of pieces the State of Florida found objectionable, but there it is.

The Harvard-trained historian Carter G. Woodson, who in 1926 invented what has become Black History Month, was keenly aware of the role of politics in the classroom, especially Lost Cause interventions. “Starting after the Civil War,” he wrote, “the opponents of freedom and social Justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negroes’ mind inasmuch as the freedom of the body has to be conceded.”

“It was well understood,” Woodson continued, “that if by the teaching of history the white man could be further assured of his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that he had always been a failure and that the subjection of his will to some other race is necessary the freedman, then, would still be a slave.”

“If you can control a man’s thinking,” Woodson concluded, “you do not have to worry about his action.”

Is it fair to see Governor DeSantis’s attempts to police the contents of the College Board’s A.P. curriculum in African American studies in classrooms in Florida solely as little more than a contemporary version of Mildred Rutherford’s Lost Cause textbook campaign? No. But the governor would do well to consider the company that he is keeping. And let’s just say that he, no expert in African American history, seems to be gleefully embarked on an effort to censor scholarship about the complexities of the Black past with a determination reminiscent of Rutherford’s. While most certainly not embracing her cause, Mr. DeSantis is complicitous in perpetuating her agenda.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. so aptly put it, “No society can fully repress an ugly past when the ravages persist into the present.” Addressing these “ravages,” and finding solutions to them — a process that can and should begin in the classroom — can only proceed with open discussions and debate across the ideological spectrum, a process in which Black thinkers themselves have been engaged since the earliest years of our Republic.

Throughout Black history, there has been a long, sad and often nasty tradition of attempts to censor popular art forms, from the characterization of the blues, ragtime and jazz as “the devil’s music” by guardians of “the politics of respectability,” to efforts to censor hip-hop by C. Delores Tucker, who led a campaign to ban gangsta rap music in the 1990s. Hip-hop has been an equal opportunity offender for potential censors: Mark Wichner, the deputy sheriff of Florida’s Broward County, brought 2 Live Crew up on obscenity charges in 1990. But there is a crucial difference between Ms. Tucker, best known as a civil rights activist, and Mr. Wichner, an administrator of justice on behalf of the state, a difference similar to that between Rutherford and Mr. DeSantis.

While the urge to censor art — a symbolic form of vigilante policing — is colorblind, there is no equivalence between governmental censorship and the would-be censorship of moral crusaders. Many states are following Florida’s lead in seeking to bar discussions of race and history in classrooms. The distinction between Mildred Lewis Rutherford and Governor DeSantis? The power differential.

Rutherford wished for nothing less than the power to summon the apparatus of the state to impose her strictures on our country's narrative about the history of race and racism. Mr. DeSantis has that power and has shown his willingness to use it. And it is against this misguided display of power that those of us who cherish the freedom of inquiry at the heart of our country's educational ideal must take a stand.

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