



TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES:
THE WHOLE DEBATE ABOUT “CRITICAL RACE THEORY” IS A
CYNICAL GOP PROPAGANDA TRAP – HERE’S WHAT YOU
SHOULD SAY INSTEAD**

BY
ANDREW LEVISON



DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES: THE WHOLE DEBATE ABOUT “CRITICAL RACE THEORY” IS A CYNICAL GOP PROPAGANDA TRAP – HERE’S WHAT YOU SHOULD SAY INSTEAD

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One field where the GOP has long been widely acknowledged to be superior to the Democrats is in the development and effective use of propaganda and particularly in the creation of “hot button” phrases that trigger strong emotional reactions from many voters. From the use of the term the “death tax” that was created by GOP communications strategist Frank Lutz to describe the inheritance tax to the famous “death panels” supposedly hidden in the Obamacare plan, Republicans have been vastly more effective than Democrats in recognizing and effectively deploying phrases that anger and mobilize conservative voters.

The latest example of this extremely effective GOP exploitation of language is the current debate over “Critical Race Theory” – a perspective about race that is supposedly being foisted on children in classrooms around the country. In the florid propaganda that is circulated about it, elementary school children exposed to this view are being forced to “examine their whiteness” and “check their privilege” with the goal of “making them feel guilty about their skin color” and “hate their country.”

Trump’s Office of Management and Budget launched the best known attack:

“All agencies are directed to begin to identify all contracts or other agency spending related to any training on ‘critical race theory,’ ‘white privilege,’ or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.”

Similarly, the Ohio legislature voted for a ban on any teaching that “any individual is inherently racist or bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by the same race or sex”

These attacks are coldly and utterly cynical even by the debased standards of the Trump era. Christopher Rufo, the leading promotor of this campaign on Fox News, clearly laid out the basic strategy.

We have successfully frozen their brand – critical race theory – into public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic as we put all of the various cultural insanities into that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory”... [across] the entire range of cultural considerations that are unpopular with Americans.

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In fact, many of the most vivid anecdotes about allegedly intrusive or manipulative exercises in classrooms actually come from the subculture of the corporate training business that is variously called racial sensitivity training, implicit bias training or diversity training rather than from the academic writings of critical race theory. These anti-racism seminars are specialized versions of the vast range of seminars that are constantly purchased by firms and institutions for “team building,” “group communication,” “employee motivation” and so on and that are often contracted by executives when they want to demonstrate to shareholders of one sort or another that they are “doing something” about a problem in their company or institution.

The assault is also being used as a training ground for the next generation of culture war politicians in political campaigns for school boards – a technique that was first developed by Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition in the 1990’s. 50 recall efforts in 126 schools have been launched, some seeking to get rid of entire school boards. These recall efforts began as opposition efforts against school Covid restrictions but were quickly repurposed when Fox News joined the anti “critical race theory” campaign. The Heritage Foundation, ALEC and the Manhattan institute have all jumped on the bandwagon.

Progressives and Democrats, even if they recognize the utter and absolute cynicism and manipulative intent behind this campaign will still debate it as if it were sincere. People who actually know something about critical race theory will attempt to defend the theory and others will take the conservative characterizations of the view as the basis for their own discussion of the concepts involved.

This is both predictable and largely inevitable. Progressives and Democrats take ideas seriously and believe it is important to debate them. Already discussions about this debate fill the pages of the New York Times, the Atlantic, The New Republic and the Nation.

But for Democratic candidates who are now preparing to run in the 2022 elections this entire debate is a grotesque and classic GOP trap. Democrats would be foolish to fall into it.

The very words “critical race theory” are a perfect linguistic trap – the word “theory” indicates that the idea comes from the academic world, the word “critical” suggests that it criticizes white people and the word “race” feeds the common complaint that Dems “make everything about race these days.”

The related term “white privilege” is equally booby-trapped. To educated liberals the term seems to describe an obvious reality of being white – the status of not being followed by security guards in a department store or being treated with respect by a policeman. To a white framing carpenter who works in the sun all day long, lives in a dilapidated house with an aging roof and who cannot afford dental work for his children the idea of his enjoying “white privilege” sounds like condescending contempt from a limousine liberal who understands nothing about his life. He does not feel privileged compared to the academic who is describing him or to the well-dressed racial sensitivity lecturer who demands he “check his privilege.”

The more a Democratic politician allows the debate to be about critical race theory or white privilege the more he or she reinforces the framework of his opponents and allows them to define the debate about what children should be taught about race in school.

But for Democratic political candidates, what is the alternative?

The answer, in a word, is to shift the debate away from critical race theory and over to the life, work and ideas of Martin Luther King.

It is vital to remember that during the period from the 1980's to Obama's election, Martin Luther King's life and ideas were taught in American public schools as an entirely positive model that most whites generally accepted (aside from those who moved their children to private segregationist academies). This national recognition of King as an American hero and embodiment of American ideals was notably highlighted by Ronald Reagan's grudging 1982 creation of the official King holiday. Lessons in public schools credited King as the honored national champion of civil rights and integration. The only major challenge to King's achievements were over the implementation of his ideas in areas like affirmative action. In public education there was a general acceptance that children should be taught that segregation had been wrong, that racial bigotry was wrong, discrimination was wrong and that King had defined the proper future for America in his *I Have a Dream* address in 1963.

The election of Obama terrified many conservatives, however, and motivated them to seek a way to challenge King and his ideas. In the demonization of critical race theory they have found their strategy. By defining it, rather than the philosophy of Martin Luther King, as today's "liberal" alternative to conservative reaction, they conveniently bury his legacy.

So how should a democratic candidate proceed?

First he or she should categorically reject the conservative framing of the issue – the idea that progressives actually believe that the United States is an irredeemably racist or evil country or that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil.

A Democratic candidate should say:

I don't believe this and neither do the people who vote for me. I've had my staff check and there is not a single school in my district that teaches this nonsense so let's stop talking about utterly false issues.

Instead, let's talk about the real issue. What should our children be taught about race?

Here's my answer. I believe our children should be taught to honor three great Americans – Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King.

They should be taught to honor Thomas Jefferson because he and the other founding fathers created the magnificent American creed – the ideals of freedom, democracy, equality and justice that we still support today,

They should be taught to honor Abraham Lincoln because he ended the injustice of slavery and made America live up to its creed.

They should be taught to honor Martin Luther King because he led the campaigns that ended segregation, legal discrimination and disenfranchisement, moving us closer to a world of true justice and equality

Martin Luther King believed that America's ideals are profoundly good and the fact that we have all too often failed to live up to them does not prove they are wrong but rather challenges us to do better in the future.

King believed that all whites and indeed all Americans are profoundly shaped by the culture in which they grow up but that they are not its helpless prisoners. Young people find it hard to imagine that in the 70' it was a shock to see an African American bank teller or nurse and an even greater shock to see black and white tellers or nurses chatting together at the same table at lunch. Ten years earlier this never occurred. King believed that progress is hard and slow but it does proceed. He would often repeat the quote that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

King believed that there is indeed "systemic" racism and injustice in many American institutions but that change can be achieved. While still far from perfect, our armed forces are a fine example of how America's major institutions can grow and improve over time.

This is what our schools should teach our kids.

In most electoral districts in America this is a position that a majority of voters can endorse. It sidelines the whole debate over critical race theory and puts conservatives on the defensive.

A final note:

It is important to note that a substantial number of young progressives and radicals will object to this approach because they believe that King is an obsolete, superficial reformist who does not embody the new deeper understanding that now exists of systemic racism and white privilege. A depressingly large group of young people have a vision of King that is based on a caricature they learned in elementary school – a simpering portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a saintly, Mother Teresa/St. Francis of Assisi figure—a "peaceful warrior," an "apostle of nonviolence" a "man of peace"—an idealistic preacher delivering his "I have a Dream" speech but who was in no way a serious thinker or a radical leader.

This view, it must be said, is simply based on abysmal ignorance. An appalling number of people who consider themselves knowledgeable about racial issues know absolutely nothing about King other than the clichés, drivel and pablum that they learned in elementary school (If you wish to prove to yourself that this is the case, just ask a young radical or race sensitivity consultant to name all four of Martin Luther King's books. The vast majority have never read them and have absolutely no idea what they say).

In fact, King knew and shared ideas with the major progressive social scientists of his era who studied the effects of racism (figures like Thomas Pettigrew, Kenneth Clark and E. Franklin Frazier, scholars who King's critics have also never heard of) and had a deep and nuanced understanding of systemic racism and white privilege. The young radicals of today would be surprised to find out that the "new" ideas that they think were first developed in the 1990's were actually very clearly expressed and analyzed in King's books and articles back in the 1960's. Just consider two quotes from King's 1968 speech to the American Psychological Association:

The depth of white racism:

*If the Negro needs social sciences for direction and for self-understanding, the white society is in even more urgent need. White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its **soul by racism** and the understanding **needs to be carefully documented** and consequently made more difficult to reject.*

The existence of systemic racism:

*When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also demand that the white man abide by law in the ghettos. Day-in and day-out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; and he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions for civic services. **The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison.**¹*

And to see the depth and sophistication of his analysis of white privilege, watch the following speech:²



In short, Democratic political candidates should not allow themselves to be deflected from the use of the life and ideas of Martin Luther King as the core of their reply to the conservative critics of critical race theory. The radical dismissal of King is factually misguided and—even more important—has virtually no influence on Democratic voters in any but a handful of districts anywhere in the country.

For Democratic political candidates the debate over critical race theory is a distraction. They should powerfully and emphatically insist that conservatives should openly admit that their real opponent is the life, work and legacy of Martin Luther King.

¹<https://www.apa.org/monitor/features/king-challenge>

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNfHJK0rbcQ>