

Florida's "Stop WOKE Act" is about White people's comfort

When did comfort become our highest aspiration?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [April 6, 2022](#) issue



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Getting people good and scared is a great way to pass controversial legislation. Convince them that their way of life or thinking is in danger—use fear to arouse and monopolize their brain—and you have the potential to enact absurd legislation. When people are afraid, what they want is protection. And since instilling fear is a lot easier than instilling courage, legislation that promises to protect fear-filled people often gains public traction fast.

The Florida legislature recently passed the Individual Freedom bill, which Governor Ron DeSantis calls the Stop WOKE Act, in which WOKE is an acronym for wrongs to our kids and employees. The bill basically broadens the definition of discrimination to include making another person uncomfortable over historical, factual events that involve people's race, nationality, or gender.

Ever since critical race theory emerged as a bogeyman of the right, many conservatives have doubled down on the idea that discrimination against White people today is a bigger problem than unfair treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in the past. It's no secret that far-right conservatives purposely misconstrue CRT as an ideology to indoctrinate people with racial conflict rather than a methodology that might encourage people toward racial literacy. Various legislators and school boards have seized on CRT as an existential threat to America, turning their larger ignorance about the theory itself into shorthand for any teaching lesson that fosters discomfort among White people.

In his pugnacious way, DeSantis has pushed relentlessly for culture wars to assume center stage. CRT tops his list. In December, he told reporters that "teaching kids to hate their own country and to hate each other is not worth one red cent of taxpayer money." Who would've imagined that teaching children about African captives brought over on slave ships, in addition to European colonists coming over on other ships, would constitute teaching hatred of America? But that's where this culture war has taken so many. If you want to kill a contrived threat, just get people good and scared, and then pass bizarre legislation to give them a sense of protection.

The most urgent question surrounding bills like the one in Florida may be this: When did comfort become our highest national aspiration as a people? Numerous political leaders seem willing to elevate comfort above truth, historical integrity, and even what's optimal for healing our nation's historic wounds. Yet I'm not aware of any good definition of either citizenship or faithful Christian living that treats comfort as a nonnegotiable entitlement. Do we really need laws to protect us from being uncomfortable? Learning both the good and bad of our nation's history is a splendid way to strengthen democracy and become deeper people.

I get uncomfortable looking at photos of lynchings and police dogs attacking teenage girls in bobby socks. I get queasy every time I think of the injustice—or is it the crime?—of Black veterans being excluded from the GI Bill or suffering the generational consequences of discriminatory mortgage policies. Contemplating decades of Jim Crow cruelty turns my stomach. But I've decided that learning to be comfortable with discomfort is one of the most important skills for leading a fulfilling life. Comfort by itself may make us content, but also stagnant and insular. Embracing a certain measure of discomfort turns out to be a beautiful way to grow and expand our lives.

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