

# The New York Times

OPINION

## The Race and History Wars



*A visitor views "Pickett's Charge" in the Gettysburg Cyclorama at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania.*

By Ross Douthat  
Opinion Columnist  
June 26, 2021

The debate over how American schools should teach about race and racial history has reached a curious juncture, in which it's becoming hard to tell what the argument is about.

On the one hand you have conservative state lawmakers taking aim at progressive ideas with scattershot legislation, whose target depends on which bill you read and how you interpret vague or sweeping language.

On the other you have progressives, until recently breathing the sweet air of revolution, suddenly denying that they are interested in anything radical at all. In particular, after conservatives began using "critical race theory" as an umbrella term for educational strategies they oppose, progressives began insisting that C.R.T. is either academic and irrelevant (just high-level graduate school stuff) or anodyne and uncontroversial (just a way of saying we should teach kids about slavery and racism).

So let's try to give the debate a little bit more specificity. What is the new progressive agenda, and which parts have led to backlash? There are two answers, related but distinct, so this will be the first of two columns.

One answer is that progressives want to change the way schools teach American history. They want to finally exorcise the ghost of Lost Cause historiography, the romanticization of the Confederacy that still haunts textbooks in some corners of the South. Then they want to broaden the narrative of race beyond the Civil War and the civil rights era, recovering stories of African-American resistance under slavery and the history of racial subjugation from the 1870s onward, giving events like the Tulsa Massacre a special prominence.

This goal has been part of the new racial progressivism from the start: Ta-Nehisi Coates's famous 2014 Atlantic essay on reparations, which reopened some of these debates, was as focused on the neglected history of Jim Crow as on any specific policy proposal.

But for some on the left, there's been another goal as well: to weave these revisions into a more radical narrative of U.S. history as a whole — one that casts a colder eye on the founders and Lincoln's halting path to abolition, depicts slavery as the foundation of white American prosperity and portrays the Republic's ideals as just prettying up systems of racist and settler-colonialist oppression.

The biggest zone of controversy lies where the second project, the recovery of memory, blurs into the third one, the radical critique — where the impulse to memorialize Tulsa gives way to the impulse to take Lincoln's name off a San Francisco school, where the indictment of slave owning gives way to an indictment of the American Revolution.

The debate over this newspaper's 1619 Project is a good example. The project became a locus for backlash because it did several things at once, offering a general (and widely praised) expansion of historical knowledge about slavery and race, but also elevating specific interpretations — in particular, the so-called new history of capitalism, a cotton-centric interpretation of American prosperity — that imply a deeper condemnation of this country.

The backlash to 1619 and similar efforts has convinced progressives that the right is desperately clinging to myths of American innocence. But conservatives often see themselves as objecting to the most radical parts of progressive revisionism, not the entire project. As the historian Matthew Karp notes in a perceptive essay for Harper's, compared with just a generation ago the position of many conservatives has shifted, becoming explicitly anti-Lost Cause, anti-Confederate flag — and, in the recent congressional voting, mostly pro-Juneteenth as well. In its contest with the new progressivism, the right is abandoning Lee and rallying to Lincoln — for its own nationalist political purposes, Karp is quick to stress, but in a way that accepts a different center for historical debate than existed even when I attended high school.

Similarly, Benjamin Wallace-Wells of The New Yorker, reporting on the Texan battle over race and education, notes how quick the Republican spokesman in the legislative debates was to make concessions to the history of racism and discrimination, the failure of the ideals of 1776 to initially extend beyond "white property-owning males."

This means that you could imagine, out of this controversy, potential forms of synthesis — in which the progressive desire for a deeper reckoning with slavery and segregation gets embedded in a basically patriotic narrative of what the founding established, what Lincoln achieved, what America meant to people of many races, even with our sins.

Except, of course, the controversy isn't only about history. Instead, Wallace-Wells notes, what has the Texas Republicans most agitated is the debate over how to teach children about racism *today* — about the racial structure of society, their own identity within those structures, and the potential culpability and obligation that they bear.

I'll turn to those debates in this column's sequel.