

# **United States: Anti-Wokeism is attack on racial justice and equality - In Defense of Being Awake**

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**WE LIVE IN a surreal reality. Those of us who argue for truth-telling about history are attacked as practicing a nonexistent “wokeism” as described by Florida Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and followers of former president Donald Trump.**

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“Anti-Wokeism” is an attack on both racial justice and gender equality. It ignores the genocide of Native peoples, violence against gays and lesbians (Florida passed a “Don’t Say Gay” law last year), and scores of state legislation against Trans youth.

It accelerated with broadsides against women’s rights after the overturn of abortion legality by the Supreme Court in June 2022. It is a reminder of the sexist and anti-woman history of a country based on patriarchy and white male domination.

The country’s wealth creation, moreover, was always bloody including slavery that created early capitalist accumulation. DeSantis and others downplay that violent history by attacking those who teach the historical facts. He and others want to rewrite history, for example by banning the mention of the words “race” and “racism.”

The goal is to reproduce a country where not only Black people have difficulty to vote, but women are set back in the rights and social gains won over the last century. The state of Idaho legislature is in the process of passing an anti-abortion law that criminalizes “abortion trafficking,” making it illegal to take minors across state lines for abortion care while concealing it from their parents.

## **“Woke” to History**

DeSantis says, “Wokeism is dead in Florida.” Only the stories told by the European settlers will be allowed.

The real story harks back to the 1600s. By the 1800s, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 stated that runaway slaves had to be brought back to their owners even from non-slave states.

That law, upheld by the courts, spurred the abolitionist movement in the North that led up to the Civil War a decade later.

For DeSantis and others, that history must be whitewashed or hidden. Of course, U.S. colonialist and imperialist policies (past and present) are also largely off limits in school curricula — for example, not explaining why there are some 800 U.S. military bases around the world.

Worse, DeSantis has adopted laws to ban books and to fire teachers, librarians and even weaken corporations (like Disney) who refuse to do what he says. Big Government's full power is alive in Florida and the other Republican-led states in the South and West.

But what is the "dangerous" concept of wokeism in the first place? It is simply being aware about history based on facts.

African Americans have used that word, "Wake," or similar words and phrases like "Black Pride" and "Black Lives Matter," for decades. Malcolm X said: *"The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organize a sleeping people around a specific goal. You have to wake the people up first, then you'll get action."*

Wokeism is democratic, and radical. It should be proudly said and defended.

### **Kimberlé Crenshaw's Warning**

Understanding intersectionality and critical thinking about race is explained succinctly by academic and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. She is an important defender of Black Pride and Black empowerment today and an opponent of the lies advanced by anti-wokeism.

She discussed her views with *The Guardian* (U.S. edition) in the March 4 issue. Under the headline, "Kimberlé Crenshaw warns against right-wing battle over critical race theory" she took up the attack on being awake," the *Guardian* reporter writes:

"The Columbia University and UCLA law professor and co-founder of the African American Policy Forum thinktank believes that the escalations [against racial history](#) teaching, in Florida [and elsewhere](#) represent 'the tip of the iceberg' of rightwing efforts to retract the progress since the civil rights era and push America towards authoritarianism.

"Are [schools] on the side of the neo-segregationist faction? Or are [they] going to stick with the commitments that we've all celebrated for the last 50, 60 years?' Crenshaw asked, referring to headway made on equal opportunities since the 1960s."

If anything, professor Crenshaw actually understates the right-wing drive against progress and the fight for racial justice and equality. The more devastating truth is that conservatives and their corporate backers seek to rollback all social progress of the last 60 years.

In other words, this campaign by DeSantis, Trump and their supporters is not about what's taught in public schools but really about where Black people fit into this so-called democracy.

Historically, Black Africans were first enslaved with no representation in the Constitution, and after the end of slavery, and the defeat of Reconstruction, white supremacist states used violence to take back all the gains won in the Civil War (except bringing back literal slavery which was no longer economically feasible).

What was ratified as “separate but equal” by the Supreme Court (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) spread the segregationist legal system across the country, not just in the southern former slave-owning states.

## **The Past As Present**

DeSantis won reelection as Florida governor in 2022 in a landslide by targeting African Americans’ rights. He specifically attacked African American History AP college credits in high schools. DeSantis also targeted Gays and Trans people. He passed the “Don’t Say Gay” law and pushed to limit rights to women’s bodily autonomy.

Crenshaw told *The Guardian*, “The College Board [that oversees AP content] fiasco, I think, is just the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot of interests that have to make this decision.”

As *The Guardian* reports: “The College Board, the organization that administers college readiness exams and AP courses for high schoolers to earn college credits, [denied bending](#) to political pressure [amid accusations](#) that the curriculum has been watered down.

“But in [what many viewed](#) as a response to DeSantis’s ban, the work of Crenshaw and other high-profile progressive Black figures, such as [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#), were relegated from required reading to ‘optional’ within the course....

“Making such core topics optional ‘is exactly the same structure of segregation,’ she said. ‘It’s like (saying) we’re going to create this so that the anti-woke [camp] will permit states to decide whether they want the segregated version, or whether they want a more fully representative and inclusive version,’ said Crenshaw.”

In the past, Crenshaw observes, “one of the most sustained features of segregation in the past was the fact that businesses were not only enablers, they facilitated segregation.

“So, when businesses and segregation were aligned, it was a chokehold on Black freedom aspirations.”

History can repeat itself when citizens are not informed of that history. The past can become the present.

## **The Example of Mississippi**

The case of Mississippi, the poorest state in the country, highlights how central the issue of voting rights is for white supremacists and their allies.

A case waiting to be heard by the Supreme Court, but not yet on its docket, concerns whether ex-felons can vote after serving their sentence. Mississippi is not the only state that denies that right, but it is unique because of the origins of the state’s Constitution.

In 1890 Mississippi adopted a Constitution that was explicit in denying freed Blacks the vote, a right they had gained and used to elect Black representatives from Mississippi to Congress and to some statewide offices during Reconstruction. Thus, crushing the right to vote came 25 years after the Civil War and the end of slavery. Its purpose was to keep the “Negro” in his place. What became known as Jim Crow segregation laws were enacted.

Not every felony conviction in Mississippi involves people losing their voting rights, but 22 of them do. Some legal groups say that constitutional provisions in the state must be reviewed and struck down.

“Mississippi is keeping a provision of the 1890 constitution in place that everyone agrees was racially discriminatory when it was adopted,” described Deputy Director of Impact Litigation for the Mississippi Center for Justice, Paloma Wu.

That the 1890 Constitution provision has never been struck down, even after the Court declared Jim Crow illegal in the late 1960s, shows how entrenched systemic and institutional racism is.

The fact that Florida, Georgia, Texas Mississippi and other Republican states seek to advance racially motivated voting laws is not an accident. If you cannot vote, it is difficult to make legal changes.

Health care reforms are opposed by these same reactionary forces. Ten states, all with Republican majority legislatures, refuse to expand Medicaid for the poor. This leads to more illness and deaths among Black and Brown people as well as poor whites.

The attacks on basic rights that began against African Americans and extended to other oppressed national minorities, women, the disabled and LGBT-plus communities is not an accident. It is outrageous, but the far right does not care. Their plan is to eliminate these safety net programs.

## **Recovering History for the Future**

The idea of Make America Great Again harks back to the time of racial tyranny, and far-right forces attempt to end the teaching of fact-based history so that future generations have no ability to critique the present as a reflection of the past.

In Crenshaw’s view, this is all with the goal of transforming the “decades-long journey towards greater social justice” into what the right admonishes as “wokeness” - which is in fact the encouraging of racial justice and equity.

“Wokeness has become the oppression, not the centuries of enslavement and genocide, and imperialism that has shaped the lives of people of color, in ways that continue into the present,” said Crenshaw.

Resistance to this reactionary ideology by the public must start in the streets. Slaves rose up repeatedly. The early civil rights movement was against the institutions and elected officials of the major parties.

That resistance led first to partial reforms, and finally the downfall of legal segregation across the country.

There can be no reliance on electoral politics. Black and liberal faces in high places are a buffer for the ruling class, not a base to lead mass legal as well as extra-parliamentary actions.

The new generation must lead the fight back by returning to the resistance roots of Black history, where basic rights didn’t exist. Fighting back successfully will come in many forms, but going to the streets and being proud to be Awake is top of the agenda.

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