



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

## How Gov. DeSantis whitewashes American history

DeSantis wants us to focus only on how our nation was founded on principles of freedom. The truth is that we were founded on both freedom and slavery.



The author points out that Nikole Hannah-Jones has documented how school curricula have treated slavery as “an aberration in a free society” and downplayed its role in the creation and existence of America. [ ARTURO HOLMES | TNS ]

To justify his “Stop Woke” legislation, Gov. Ron DeSantis argued in September that it was the American Revolution that first caused people to question slavery. The governor stated “No one had questioned it before we decided as Americans that we are endowed by our creator with inalienable rights and that we are all created equal. Then that birthed the abolition movements.”

Noted historian and Pulitzer-prize winning author Jon Meacham quickly pointed out that this was simply not true. Meacham provides numerous historical examples of how the “evils of slavery” were questioned long before 1776. For example, as early as 1652 leaders in Rhode Island temporarily abolished human enslavement. In 1688 the Pennsylvania Quakers called for an end to slavery. In 1700, the antislavery tract “The Selling of Joseph” was published in Massachusetts. Meacham accuses DeSantis of deploying his false interpretation of the past to engage in today’s ideological wars.

It has been more than 400 years since the first slaves were brought from Africa to the colony of Virginia in August 1619. Author Nikole Hannah-Jones points out that slavery “predates nearly every other institution in the United States.” Yet the role of slavery in the founding of our republic is too often downplayed or, in the case of DeSantis, dismissed.

DeSantis wants us to focus only on how our nation was founded on principles of freedom. The truth is that we were founded on both freedom and slavery. History cannot be simply a mindless celebration of only half of that equation. Yet, this is exactly the direction of DeSantis and the Florida Legislature when they require Florida’s schools to teach a mythical founding story as American history.

The promotion of misleading lies about our country’s history and race relations is dangerous. Once a lie is accepted as “common knowledge” it can take decades to undo the damage. The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that as late as 2017 just 8% of U.S. high school seniors named slavery as the central cause of the Civil War. The majority of high school students cannot define the Middle Passage, in which 13 million enslaved Africans were shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas.

Overall, as Nikole Hannah-Jones documents, school curricula have treated slavery as “an aberration in a free society” and downplayed its role in the creation and

existence of America. The fact that 10 of the nation's first 12 presidents were enslavers is too often ignored in history courses. The lie that the American Civil War was about protecting Southern culture and not about slavery significantly helped prevent civil rights protections for African Americans for over 100 years.

Technically, the teaching of African American history is still required in Florida's schools. But the "Stop Woke" Act guts the ability of teachers to discuss the full harms of slavery on America by banning the teaching of structural and institutional racism. The vagueness of the law leaves educators in the crosshairs of this culture war.

Asked during a news conference about Florida's rejection of an AP African American studies course, DeSantis said "this course on Black history, what's one of the lessons about? Queer theory ... that's the wrong side of the line for Florida standards." While this sound bite may be a powerful dog whistle to those still afraid of gay people, it profoundly limits and distorts the teaching of African American history.

Understanding the contributions of queer Black American role models like Alvin Ailey, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Marsha P. Johnson, Barbara Jordan, Audre Lorde, Pauli Murray and Bayard Rustin is fundamental to grasping American history. Banning and limiting conversations about race, gender and sexual orientation in the classroom suppresses learning and distorts history.

Carter G. Woodson, who conceived Black History Month, wrote and spoke extensively about the dangers of politics in the classroom and the lies about the Civil War and slavery promoted in the South. Woodson stated: "Starting after the Civil war 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." "If you can control a man's thinking," Woodson continued, "you do not have to worry about his actions."

Democracy is threatened when governments impose their ideological agenda on public education. Unfortunately, this is what is happening in Florida and around the country.

No democratic society can survive without schools capable of producing citizens who are knowledgeable of history, critical, and willing to make informed judgments. The survival of our democracy depends upon an educated citizenry that can tell the difference between demagoguery and responsible argument.

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