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Guest Columnist

For DeSantis and America, myths have consequences

These falsehoods about the past distort the present and serve to undermine national unity and stifle progressive change toward racial equality. History is under attack.



An historian notes that an examination of the business cycles during the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt reveals that “not only did the U.S. economy begin to grow during the New Deal; it grew rapidly.” [HENRY GRIFFIN | AP]

Politicians consistently spin history to support ideological agendas. What are often seen as “harmless” exaggerations can unfortunately create a false national “common sense” narrative with devastating consequences. Successful public policies have been sabotaged by these falsifications. It can take decades to overcome misleading historical depictions. Myths have consequences. Examine the following: (1) the distortion of The New Deal and the Great Society and (2) the whitewashing of America’s “Founding Fathers.”

The New Deal and the Great Society:

Republicans for decades have argued against government-run programs designed to achieve full employment and an enhanced “safety net” for all citizens. To achieve this objective, these politicians consistently trash Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” and Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” with cherry-picked statistics and misleading analysis.

For example, in arguing against a Democratic proposal for a “Green New Deal,” Republican Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa told his fellow senators that “The New Deal of the 1930s didn’t work. It didn’t get us out of the Depression. The Depression didn’t end until we entered World War II.” He further argued any modern New Deal-type program would only, “like the original ... dampen economic growth and will hurt jobs.” According to historian Eric Rauchway, a group of leading historians evaluated Grassley’s statements on the New Deal as “more or less false” and close to “all bunk.” An examination of the business cycles during the FDR administration reveals that “not only did the U.S. economy begin to grow during the New Deal; it grew rapidly.” Economist Christina D. Romer, former chairperson of the Council of Economic Advisers, notes that the rates of growth in the American economy during Roosevelt’s first few years in office were “spectacular, even for an economy pulling out of a severe depression.” The New Deal policies contributed to our recovery by stabilizing the banks and providing public-works jobs which allowed people to buy more goods which increased demand and stimulated production.

To discredit LBJ’s “Great Society,” Ronald Reagan produced effective and entertaining one-line quips that were often false. Reagan, for example, claimed:

“Lyndon Johnson declared war on poverty, and poverty won.” Yet, as historian Joshua Zeitz documents, this statement is untrue and misleading. According to Zeitz, “The national poverty rate declined from 20% to 12% under LBJ’s watch. By contrast, it stood at 13% when Reagan was elected president, and it remained at 13% when he left office.”

These inaccurate myths about the New Deal and the Great Society have consequences in real world politics today. These distortions serve to discredit current public policy proposals, including the Child Tax Credit, which for three years helped to significantly reduce child poverty throughout America. This false history is promoted as “evidence” against an enlarged governmental role in the provision of public goods, such as basic medical care, child care, food and housing.

The Founding Fathers and slavery:

The campaign by the DeSantis administration to distort and reframe Black history has provoked a justifiable backlash. Florida’s misrepresentations of the African American historical experience are now well documented. An egregious example is the Florida Department of Education’s push for grade-school teachers to use videos created by Dennis Prager’s PragerU Kids in the classroom. As Charles Blow writes in *The New York Times*, “PragerU is no more a university than Trump University was.” Prager admits it is not an accredited university and instead offers “entertaining, pro-American videos” containing an extreme right-wing ideology.

For example, in one of the Prager videos for children, cited by Blow, a cartoon Frederick Douglass says, “Our founding fathers knew that slavery was evil and wrong, and they knew that it would do terrible harm to the nation.” Yet as Blow writes, “nowhere in the video does it mention that most of the prominent founders, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, were themselves enslavers.” Douglass, who is arguably America’s leading abolitionist and social reformer of the 19th century, would be appalled at this absurd and dangerous misappropriation of his name.

History Professor Calvin Schermerhorn notes that if “there was anyone who knew the rewards of slavery, it was George Washington. Over a period of about 50

years, the nation's first president enslaved about 577 Black Americans, starting when he was 11 years old." Despite the "voluminous public records" that reveal Washington's refusal to grant his slaves their freedom, "Florida officials want public school educators to instead emphasize Washington's efforts to abolish slavery." Schermerhorn continues: "As a scholar of slavery in the U.S., my research has shown that Washington's efforts to free Black people pale in comparison to how he fought to keep Black people enslaved." After winning the American Revolution, Washington said of the children he enslaved, "I expect to reap the benefit of their labor myself." In addition, Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 authorizing the federal police to recapture runaway human property.

Despite this historical record, Gov. Ron DeSantis made the following nonsensical and false claim about the role of our Founding Fathers in history: "No one questioned (slavery) before we decided as Americans that we are endowed by our creator with unalienable rights and that we are all created equal." This statement reflects willful ignorance apparently designed to mobilize the white vote.

Beginning in 1619, enslaved Black people who were raped, beaten and worked to death questioned slavery, long before our nation's founding. In addition, England was moving toward abolition and ending the slave trade decades before America.

These efforts to reshape the narratives about America's past are now central to not only DeSantis but to the far-right conservative movement in America. These falsehoods about the past distort the present and serve to undermine national unity and stifle progressive change toward racial equality. History is under attack.

George Orwell was prescient in his dystopian novel "1984" when he wrote: "Who controls the past controls the future." Or, as William Faulkner stated: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."



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