



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

## How Florida allows toxic racist beliefs to fester

The author says that the state's record is a troubling one — with no end in sight.



Gov. Ron DeSantis pictured in April in Jacksonville. He recently exploded at a Black questioner who suggested he and his policies bore some blame for the racist shooting last month in Jacksonville that killed three Black people. [ JAMES GILBERT | Getty Images North America ]

Following the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Chicago Daily News published a special 12-page edition on his murder. The paper included a notable feature by Chicago's nationally respected columnist, Mike Royko. Instead of focusing on King's mission and morality, Pulitzer laureate Royko wrote the following:

“FBI agents are looking for the man who pulled the trigger, and surely they will find him. But it doesn't matter if they do or they don't. They can't catch everybody, and Martin Luther King was executed by a firing squad that numbered in the millions. They took part, from all over the country, pouring words of hate into the ear of the assassins. The man with the gun did what he was told. Millions of bigots, subtle and obvious, put it in his hand and assured him he was doing the right thing. ... They all took their place in King's firing squad. And behind them were the subtle ones, those who never say anything bad but just nod when the bigot throws out his strong opinions.”

The responsibility for King's murder, Royko asserted, does not just lie with the man who pulled the trigger, but with those who promote division. As Wesley Lowery writes in his exceptionally perceptive book “American Whitelash,” “Nearly everyone condemns racial violence unequivocally, but few seem to agree on a thornier question: To what extent is the gun in the hand of those who stoked the hatred as much as it is he who pulled the trigger?”

The racially motivated shooting of three African Americans in Jacksonville in August reminded me of Royko's seething indictment. The man with the gun who killed these three innocent people — Angela Michelle Carr, 52; Anolt Joseph “AJ” Laguerre Jr., 19, and Jerrald Gallion, 29 — lives in a state that aggressively sanitizes Black history and ignores ongoing structural racism and injustice. The killer's racist beliefs were reinforced by an administration that has marginalized the human rights of African American citizens. The record is a troubling one with no end in sight.

The DeSantis administration has changed how slavery is taught in schools, cut funds for diversity and inclusion and eliminated through redistricting a Black-led congressional district (although a lawsuit about the constitutionality of that move is making its way through Florida courts right now).

Gov. Ron DeSantis restricted the enactment of an overwhelmingly popular referendum to restore the voting rights of many felons, banned the academic teaching of the widely respected field of critical race theory and removed from office two Democratic state attorneys who supported criminal justice reform. In addition, Florida rejected an Advanced Placement course on African American studies and adopted new standards that stated students should be taught how enslaved people “developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.”

The atmosphere in Florida is so toxic to African Americans that the NAACP issued a startling travel advisory as a “direct response” to the governor’s “aggressive attempts to erase Black history.” The NAACP warned: “Florida is openly hostile toward African Americans. ... Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by, African Americans.” Overall, as numerous commentators have noted, DeSantis’ message boils down to this: “Black humanity is of little value.” As Royko so eloquently noted in relation to the killing of Martin Luther King, governmental policies and individual actions can create an environment that normalizes white supremacy and denigrates Black lives.

Racists feel supported and emboldened in Florida. Just one week after the killing of the three innocent Black Americans in Jacksonville, white supremacists from the Aryan Freedom Network and the Order of the Black Sun held a protest outside of Disney World with around 15 people flying swastika flags. Vice News reports that there have been almost two dozen protests involving white supremacist groups so far in 2023, more than the total number of such events in 2022. FBI Director Christopher Wray has affirmed that racially motivated violence poses one of the gravest threats to U.S. security. According to the Vice News study, most of the prominent mass shootings of the past decade are connected to white supremacist ideology. And, guess what: The majority of newer neo-Nazi organizations are headquartered in Ron DeSantis’ Florida.

New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg points out that responsible Republican leaders have in the past condemned politicians who stoke racist hatred. She notes, for example, that during the 2016 campaign, Republican Sen. Mitt Romney denounced the “trickle-down racism” a Donald Trump presidency

would bring, echoing his father's moral leadership. In 1964, former Republican Michigan Gov. George Romney refused to endorse Barry Goldwater for the presidency due to the senator's opposition to the Civil Rights Act. DeSantis, on the other hand, not only denies any responsibility for the toxic racial environment in Florida, but harasses and silences those who dare to broach the issue.

When a brave African American man presented to the governor how his administration may have some responsibility for the tragedy in Jacksonville, DeSantis bullied and silenced the man. As captured on film on social media, DeSantis rallied his crowd of white supporters to shut the man down. It is hard to imagine a John McCain or Mitt Romney slapping down this courageous African American citizen in such a manner.



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