

From: Robert Bligh  
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Omaha World-Herald — Jun 27, 2021

## Deciding to sound like Heineman and Ricketts is probably good politics . . .

### Regent Pillen, speaking as governor candidate, opposes critical race theory

CHRIS DUNKER  
Lincoln Journal Star

A pair of conservative groups last week called on Regent Jim Pillen, who is running for governor, to sponsor a resolution denouncing the teaching of critical race theory at the University of Nebraska.

In a press release, the Nebraska Freedom Coalition and the Nebraska Federation of Republican Women said Pillen had an opportunity to take a stand against what they called “the attempted indoctrination of students on college campuses.”

But Friday’s meeting of the Board of Regents came and went without any mention of the issue.

Gov. Pete Ricketts, who earlier this month joined a growing chorus of Republican politicians who have come out against critical race theory, spoke glowingly of NU and its efforts during the pandemic.

No one spoke in favor or against critical race theory during public comment.

After the meeting, and clarifying that he was speaking as



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a candidate for governor, Pillen said he opposes the teaching of critical race theory in Nebraska, preferring instead that teachers and professors focus on “facts and commonsense Nebraska values.”

“I’m not supportive of teaching of theories or ideologies that are divisive, that are anti-American,” Pillen said. “I oppose our kids being indoctrinated with radical theories.”

“I oppose CRT today, I oppose it tomorrow, and I will oppose it as your governor,” he added.

Patrick Peterson, executive director of the Nebraska Freedom Coalition, criticized Pillen for speaking as a gubernatorial candidate and not a sitting regent: “That’s an easy out.”

As the furor over critical race theory has moved from conservative circles into the mainstream, experts in the discipline, including Keffrelyn Brown, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said the issue is

not as divisive as politicians and news outlets have portrayed it.

The theory is “a framework used to understand how race and racism operate” at a systemic level rather than in individual interactions, both historically and today, Brown said during a webinar for education writers last week.

“It acknowledges racism plays a founding and pivotal role in our society,” she said, “and it also acknowledges that when racial progress is made, it is often met with backlash to neutralize that progress and places racial equity efforts further back.”

While it only recently gained widespread attention, critical race theory has been practiced for almost a century by writers and scholars following the abolition of slavery and segregation, according to Nolan Cabrera, an associate professor at the University of Arizona.

Cabrera said the theory exists not as a way to label White people as racist — which he said is often used to paint CRT as divisive — but rather to look at how systemic inequities have disad-

vantaged groups of people based on their race.

“The only way you’re being attacked as a White person is if you’re being racist,” he said. “There’s nothing inherent that says White people need to feel bad. I have yet to see that as a prerequisite.”

In a phone interview Friday afternoon, Peterson said the Nebraska Freedom Coalition and the Nebraska Federation of Republican Women saw an opportunity to bring the issue to NU after previously calling on the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties to ban critical race theory.

While regents stay away from directing policy — a bylaw governing the board “reaffirms belief in, pledges support of, and directs all segments of the University community to sustain and follow” principles of academic freedom — Peterson said regents have the final say in what NU funds and how.

The Nebraska Freedom Coalition and its various political action committees, limited liability companies and nonprofit

organizations formed earlier this month believe that the Board of Regents should use that power to stop critical race theory from being taught at NU.

“We truly see this as another way to divide people, classify people, to pit people against one another as American citizens, and that’s fundamentally wrong,” he said.

The South Dakota native, who moved to Lincoln three years ago, said he hasn’t been in a class where critical race theory has been taught: “But you can listen to the tone and affect of people who do teach it and the way they include their personal beliefs.”

Brown said critical race theory is often used as a lens to understand history or literature, much in the same way as other theories of criticism, and rarely as a curricular topic itself.

The often ill-informed debate over critical race theory has served a different purpose, she added.

“We are no longer talking about the problem but allowing a new problem that didn’t exist to take precedence,” she said.

## . . . but it surely smells like lousy public policy!



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What do you think? Lots of chatter on this. – John

John,

What a fine fellow you are. I consider your question to be more of a compliment than I deserve. Even so, I will do my best to respond by describing my judgments about modern American politics as represented by that cartoon.

First, I am 75 years old. My involvement in elective politics began when, at age 16, I decided to do what I could to support the candidacy of Arizona's Barry Goldwater during the 1964 presidential election. I liked him and I liked the fact that his party supported personal responsibility, a strong military, a rational foreign policy, a balanced federal budget and minimal interference with liberty and civil rights. Goldwater lost, but members of his party showed wisdom in their greater support in Congress for the series of civil rights legislation in the 1960s than did the Democrats. I became a Republican when I first registered to vote in December of 1967 and remained a Republican until I moved to Texas in May of 2016.

The last five years of Trump have caused me to fear that the end of the American experiment in practical liberty might be near. I have no great affection for the Democratic party, but the Republican party has become morally bankrupt. Trump is – and has always been – a liar, a physical coward and a thief. The ease with which Trump took over the Republican party demonstrates the GOP's abandonment of traditional principles. They have adopted a new guiding principal that the gathering of pure political power justifies all necessary lies. They have traded liberty for power in a fashion that would be easily recognized by all the Roman emperors and all of their despotic political progeny of the last two millennia.

The cartoon is an excellent example of this dishonesty. The historic immorality of slavery, the Second Amendment, the Electoral College, the U.S. Senate, the Civil War, the failure of Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws in the slave states, housing discrimination, voter suppression, lynching and other racial terror, job discrimination, public accommodation discrimination and racially segregated schools must be denied by the Republicans because that denial is their only source of hope to maintain political power as the American populace becomes more brown, more black, more Asian, more Hispanic, less religious, less white, more young, more tolerant, more fair and more honest.

Nearly every time that Trump and his Republican enablers issue an accusation about something they do not like – "Critical Race Theory" is as good an example as any – they are really making a confession that their intentions for America do not include the traditional principles that enabled America to become "a more perfect union" over the course of the last two and a half centuries. They threaten to make Simon Bolivar's sad and cynical observation about the future of political liberty as true in the US as it has been in most of the rest of the world.

Thanks for asking and very best wishes,

Rob



# Two Examples of Dishonesty in Texas Politics

## GOP's education law will re-whitewash history

It was the mid-1960s, and the schoolchildren at Roosevelt Elementary School didn't have a proper library or a trained librarian.

The school didn't have a cafeteria either, but that's another story.

A classroom was converted into a makeshift library and stocked with old books. The library attendant was lovely. She teased me about how many books I checked out, warning me that in time she might not have any left to lend me.

I read every biography of a U.S. leader I could find, including my favorite, Benjamin Franklin.

Most of the biographies were part of a series that sat on the shelves in blue, green and black bindings.

They told the stories of the great, selfless men who founded a nation, fought and won wars, and wrote stirring words about liberty and justice.

They were all white men. I don't recall wondering why women, Black people and brown people were absent.

I was in the fourth grade.

None of the books said that those great men were in any way part of a genocide of Indigenous peoples and the violent takeover

ELAINE AYALA  
*Commentary*



of their lands. Or that any of the founders were involved in buying and selling African men, women and children.

None of the books said the nation's founding documents denied women the right to vote and most other rights. Nor did they say that the "three-fifths compromise" of 1787 counted a slave as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of apportioning seats in the House, and that this bargain gave slave-holding states greater representation in Congress, even though the slaves couldn't vote and were considered property.

It would take years for me to learn about the nation's best intentions in the context of its worst. It would be years before I understood that San Antonio once was part of Mexico and that much of the story of the Alamo was

myth. Over time, curriculum and library offerings improved, though not nearly enough and far too slowly.

The writers, publishers and buyers of those books probably didn't see themselves as responsible for the inaccuracies, half-truths and lies. The books might not have been called racist or misogynist at the time, though I've got to believe some educators begged for better texts.

I thought of my little library a lot during the last legislative session, as Texas Republicans passed and Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law a bill that will make it harder for students to learn the whole truth about Texas and U.S. history.

If it's ever put into practice, House Bill 3979 (a bill "relating to the social studies curriculum in public schools") would prohibit honest discussions of racism and sex discrimination in the classroom and re-whitewash our history in the name of patriotism.

The legislation didn't surface because students were being ill-served or indoctrinated, but because such conversations mess with the sensibilities of white adults watching cable news.

Clearly, the law's intentions are

political — to stir up the Republican base, nurse feelings of victimhood and demonize progressive Democrats as part of a GOP re-election strategy.

HB 3979 will make teachers' jobs harder, and it is likely to be challenged in court.

It doesn't represent how democracies behave but rather how autocracies do. The law seeks to micromanage teachers and put classroom discussions in a straitjacket. Teachers could not be required "to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs." Those who chose to do so would have to incorporate "diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective."

The law bans coursework that requires or gives students credit for civic activism or advocacy, including attending a City Council meeting or sending a letter to a lawmaker. Course materials could not suggest that anyone "bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex" or that the concepts of meritocracy and a strong work ethic "were created

by a members of a particular race to oppress members of another race." The stilted language gives away the law's real purpose: to keep "critical race theory" out of the classroom. That theory holds that racism in our country operates in subtle ways and has entrenched itself in our institutions and social relations, even in the absence of overt racism or explicitly discriminatory laws.

HB 3979 requires students to put on rose-colored glasses and read the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Federalist Papers, excerpts of Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," the first Lincoln-Douglas debate and writings of founding fathers.

But students wouldn't be able to discuss candidly how the language in such documents remains both inspiring and aspirational.

Abbott wants tougher restrictions on classroom give-and-take and has vowed to stir up more restrictive legislation during a July 8 special session. It's all part of Republicans' strategy for the 2022 congressional midterm elections, and they're off to a good start.

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## Alamo's slavery link not remembered

By Julián Olivares  
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS



Those who died with valor and sacrificed at the Alamo did so in defense of liberty and slavery.

In these days of disavowing the Confederacy and the removal of Confederate statues from public spaces, it's time to take a stark look at the prevailing narrative of Texas liberty and the Alamo. This enhanced narrative skirts the question of slavery, projecting Texas as a Western frontier state.

Annette Gordon-Reed, a Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize winner, once wrote that novelist Stephen Harrigan reinforced the idea that most people do not associate Texas with slavery. The state's "western" half — its cowboy half — acts as a kind of psychic counterweight to the cotton-kingdom identity that links it with the Old South," Reed wrote in a 2019 essay in the New York Review of Books.

Indeed, the truth is that Texas was the deepest Southern, slave-

holding state — and the battle to keep slavery was a harbinger of the Civil War.

Stephen F. Austin wrote in various letters and in the "Diario Mexicano de Estevan F. Austin," which he wrote mostly in Spanish, that the Texas economy depended on cotton, which, in turn, depended on slaves picking the cotton. Without slavery, the cotton industry would have collapsed — and Texas would have, too.

"Texas must be a slave country," Austin wrote in 1833. "Circumstances and unavoidable necessity compel it. It is the wish of the people there, and it is my duty to do all I can, prudently, in favor of it. I will do so."

Austin went to Mexico in 1833 to negotiate Texas independence from the state of Coahuila. Mexico had become a centralist nation and would not tolerate a separate state nor continue to cast a blind eye at slavery. In January 1834, Austin was arrested for sedition and freed unconditionally in July 1835.

Like Saint-Domingue and Martinique in the Caribbean, Texas was a slave society, which

Haitian American historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot described as "not simply societies that had slaves: they were slave societies. Slavery defined their economic, social, and cultural organization: it was their raison d'être. The people who lived there, free or not, lived there because there were slaves."

Because slavery was essential to the economic growth and existence of the Texas colony, Austin arranged for his settlers to receive 80 acres of land for each slave they brought with them to Texas. However, the holding of ever-increasing slaves presented perilous situations that Austin was familiar with after reading about the first successful revolt against an empire — the slaves of Saint-Domingue who rose against France — and the thought of Black people butchering whites filled him with dread.

Austin wrote: "I sometimes shudder at the consequences and think that a large part of America will be Santo Domingonized in 100 or 200 years. The idea of seeing such a country as this overrun by a slave population almost makes me weep. It is in vain to tell a North Amer-



Marvin Pfeiffer / Staff file photo

**It's time for a stark look at the prevailing narrative of Texas liberty, the Alamo and this state's history of slavery.**

ican that the white population will be destroyed some 50 or 80 years hence by the negroes, and that his daughters will be violated and butchered by them."

And what about other Texas and Alamo heroes, such as James Bowie? He and his brother, Rezin, trafficked slaves in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Now the Alamo is being glorified even more with the con-

struction of a new plaza and center — and along with it the propagation of the same old narrative of "Remember the Alamo." Children will flock to this shrine of Texas liberty and purchase faux coonskin caps and muskets.

Julián Olivares is an Emeritus Hispanist at the University of Houston.