



## Fox's anti-“critical race theory” parents are also GOP activists

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Nearly a dozen of the Fox News guests the network has presented as concerned parents or educators who oppose the teaching of so-called “critical race theory” in schools also have day jobs as Republican strategists, conservative think-tankers, or right-wing media personalities, according to a Media Matters review.

Critical race theory is an academic legal framework which examines the systemic impact of racism in the United States. But “critical race theory,” like “cancel culture” and “political correctness” before it, also functions as an umbrella term the right-wing movement uses to turn its mostly white adherents’ racial anxiety into political energy.

In this case, a sophisticated, nationwide network of conservative think tanks, advocacy groups, media outlets, and GOP officials have seized on the term and, in the words of Christopher Rufo - a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute and a key player in the effort -- sought to render it “toxic” and apply to it “the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.” Republicans have proposed or passed a slew of legislation restricting “critical race theory” and hope to use it as a core part of their political strategy in upcoming local, state, and federal elections.

Fox, the leading propaganda outlet for the GOP, plays a key role in this strategy. The network has mentioned “critical race theory” nearly 1,300 times over the past three and a half months. The purportedly sinister spread of “critical race theory” provides a perfect framework for Fox’s technique of highlighting local concerns to fuel the culture war. The network supercharges the individual, at times dubious, stories that filter up with the help of nationally backed local activists, other right-wing outlets, and social media. Fox has targeted the purported influence of “critical race theory” in corporate America, the military, and particularly schools, hosting parents, teachers, and other educators to talk about how they don’t want it taught in their communities.

In several of those cases, the locals Fox has highlighted are also Republican strategists, conservative think-tankers, or right-wing media figures -- ties the network has downplayed or ignored altogether. This trend is particularly notable when Fox covers “critical race theory” controversies in Northern Virginia, a bedroom community for Washington, D.C., in a state where

GOP gubernatorial nominee Glenn Youngkin has sought to make his opposition a central issue in the fall.

“The first test will be here in Virginia,” Fox chief Washington correspondent Mike Emanuel reported last month. “If this issue works in the governor's race in November, it will likely be part of the GOP campaign playbook in the midterm elections next year.”

Republican strategists have every right to advocate for their children and their communities, if not to manipulate nationwide education priorities. But since Fox has identified opposition to “critical race theory” as central to the party’s political strategy, the network has a responsibility to inform its viewers about exactly who it’s talking to.

### **Ian Prior**

Fox has hosted Ian Prior at least 15 times to discuss various “critical race theory” stories, according to Media Matters’ database of weekday cable news guests. Fox hosts and anchors have given him various introductions including “Loudoun County parent”; a “father” who “has gone from concerned parent, like many of you, to legal activist”; and “a Loudoun County, Virginia, parent and founder of FightForSchools.com.”

Fight for Schools, which Prior leads, is a political action committee launched this year to support “common sense candidates” who oppose “critical race theory” in schools.

What Fox personalities tend not to mention is Prior’s long career as a Republican political operative. He worked in top communications roles during the 2016 election cycle for the National Republican Congressional Committee, the Karl Rove-fronted super PAC American Crossroads, and the Senate Leadership Fund, a super PAC that works to elect Republican senators which was founded by allies of Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. He then spent a year and a half as a top public affairs aide to Trump’s first attorney general, Jeff Sessions.

Prior currently runs his own political communications consulting firm, is co-founder of a political newsletter, and is a senior counsel and spokesperson for Unsilenced Majority, “a grassroots conservative advocacy organization opposed to cancel culture in all forms” helmed by other Republican and right-wing media figures.

Prior had made dozens of appearances on Fox to discuss a range of issues before becoming a regular anti-critical race theory guest on the network earlier this year.

### **Quisha King**

Fox host Tammy Bruce identified Quisha King as an “everyday American,” “a Florida mom who took a bold stance against critical race theory” and as “that hero, the Northeast Florida co-chair of Moms for Liberty” during a June 11 appearance on Fox News Primetime; on-screen text also stressed her role as a “mom” and “parent.” Anchor John Roberts likewise described King as “one mom” who is “going viral” for criticizing “critical race theory” and noted her Moms for Liberty affiliation during a June 14 segment on the “straight news” program *America Reports*; on-screen text during the segment also described her as a “mom of two daughters.”

But King is also a Republican strategist. She was regional engagement coordinator for the Republican National Committee in 2020 according to her LinkedIn page, which states that she

now runs her own political media consulting firm. On Twitter, she calls herself a “@gop 2021 Rising Star.”

On Fox, King said teachers unions “want to remake America” and are “trying to raise up a generation that believes everything that they're pushing; they're trying to raise little woke Marxists” through “critical race theory,” which she later added is actually “aligned with the KKK and true white supremacy.”

### **Patti Hidalgo Menders**

On June 4, *Fox & Friends* co-host Ainsley Earhardt described Menders and two other guests who oppose the supposed teaching of “critical race theory” in their schools as “three parents from Loudoun County, Virginia,” and mentioned that she is “president of the Loudoun County Republican Women’s Club.”

Menders is also a Republican strategist. She is “Virginia State Strategist” for Majority Strategies, a GOP media consulting firm, according to her bio at the firm, which also calls her “the creator of the Loudoun Conservatives Care, a state PAC that fundraises for Republican candidates by organizing large scale events.” Majority Strategies bills itself as “the only firm to work with every official GOP presidential nominee since 2000” and counts Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and two past Speakers of the House among its current or former clients.

### **Lilet Vanetsyan**

Fox anchor Dana Perino described Lilet Vanetsyan as “one of the teachers who was at that school board meeting” in Loudoun County, Virginia, and suggested she was part of a “grassroots movement” during a June 9 interview on *America’s Newsroom*. Bruce similarly identified Vanetsyan as a “Fairfax County teacher” when she was on the June 10 edition of *Fox News Primetime*.

Vanetsyan is also a right-wing media personality. She is affiliated with the Trumpist youth organization Turning Point USA and runs a “Teachers for Trump” Instagram account (which now largely posts about “critical race theory”). Vanetsyan was a reporter for the pro-Trump Right Side Broadcasting Network, according to a since-deleted bio on its website that calls her “a passionate educator who never hesitates to expose the public education system, the teacher unions, and the corrupt curriculum our children are spoon-fed.” That bio also says Vanetsyan’s goal is to open the “The Donald J. Trump School of Excellence” and quotes her saying, “If we want to change the world, we must start with the youth.”

On Fox, Vanetsyan described “critical race theory” as an attempt to “indoctrinate our children.”

### **Barry Bennett**

On May 18, *Fox & Friends* co-host Brian Kilmeade described Barry Bennett as an “Alexandra Little League parent and an informal adviser to the 2016 Trump campaign,” and on-screen text throughout the segment identified him as a “Virginia Little League Parent.”

Bennett, elsewhere described as a “senior adviser” to Trump’s 2016 campaign, is also “one of the most prominent lobbyists of the Trump era,” according to Politico. He co-founded Avenue Strategies with Corey Lewandowski, a former Trump campaign manager, after Trump’s victory, billing the firm as “your sherpa through turbulent times” (Lewandowski left in 2017).

After Trump's 2020 defeat, Bennett shuttered the company, which had been "loaded with lobbyists who had ties to Trump and the Republican Party," and founded Bennett Strategies, a government relations and political consulting firm.

### **Nicole Neily**

Fox host Laura Ingraham introduced Nicole Neily as one of "two parents fighting against CRT in their schools" (Prior was Ingraham's other guest) and as "president and founder" of the organization Parents Defending Education during the May 26 edition of her prime-time show.

Neily has spent her entire career working in and for libertarian and conservative political advocacy organizations and think tanks, including stints at FreedomWorks, the Cato Institute, the Independent Women's Forum, the Franklin Center for Government and Public Policy, and Speech First, before launching Parents Defending Education in January.

### **Elizabeth Schultz**

Fox "news side" anchor Dana Perino introduced Elizabeth Schultz for a May 20 *America's Newsroom* interview by calling her a "former Fairfax County [Virginia] school board member." On-screen text echoed that description and also noted her affiliation with the group Parents Defending Education.

Schultz is also a former Trump administration official. She became locally notorious during her tenure on the Fairfax County School Board for voting against "expanding the school system's sex-education curriculum to include lessons on gender identity and transgender issues" and supporting armed teachers in classrooms. After losing a reelection bid in 2019, she became deputy director of the Office of Educational Technology at the Department of Education, according to her LinkedIn profile. In March, she joined Neily's Parents Defending Education group as a senior fellow.

On Fox, Schultz alleged that "our education system is being weaponized by school boards" that are "using taxpayer money to embed things like critical race theory." She plugged Parents Defending Education and its website and urged parents to "take back your schools."

### **Carrie Lukas**

Fox anchor Martha MacCallum introduced Carrie Lukas as a "a Virginia mom of five" on the April 27 edition of *The Story*. For much of the segment, on-screen text highlighted that she is a "VA mother," "parent," and a "Virginia mother of five," though the chyron briefly acknowledged toward the end of the segment that she is also "Independent Women's Forum President." She was interviewed alongside her daughter, an eighth-grader.

Lukas has worked at the Independent Women's Forum, a conservative think tank that says it works to "reduce government red tape and return resources and control to people," since 2003, according to her LinkedIn profile. She is also a contributor to National Review and the author of *Checking Progressive Privilege*, a book arguing that conservatives are "marginalized and stereotyped" in U.S. culture. She previously worked as a policy analyst for congressional Republicans and at the libertarian Cato Institute.

On Fox, Lukas said that instead of trying to "improve equity," Virginia should provide vouchers so that parents could use public funds to enroll their children in private schools.

## **Bridget Ziegler**

Roberts introduced Bridget Ziegler as “the mother of three girls and a Sarasota County [Florida] school board member” on the June 10 edition of *America Reports*; on-screen text also described her as a “FL Mom” and a “Mother of 3 Girls.”

Ziegler is also a Republican activist. She is a precinct committeewoman for the Republican Party of Sarasota County and a member of seven different local GOP organizations, according to her school board candidate bio.

On Fox, Ziegler said she is “so appreciative” of Florida’s “great governor” Ron DeSantis for opposing the teaching of “critical race theory” in the state’s schools. That “is why we call it ‘Freedom Florida’ here,” she added, “because he’s working and fighting for families to make sure that our children are going to be great, successful people and not be felt guilty by the content of their skin, or felt that they can’t success because of the color of their skin, and that is exactly what this particular critical race theory or the anti-American issues that they are pumping into schoolhouses across America and in Florida [do].”

## **Deborah Flora**

*America’s Newsroom* anchor Bill Hemmer introduced Deborah Flora on June 3 as a Colorado “mother of two” who is also “president and founder of Parents United America.” On-screen text also identified her as a “Douglas County School District mom.” Flora later described Parents United America as “not political; it’s nonpartisan. This isn’t left or right; it’s right and wrong.”

Flora is also a right-wing media personality and activist. She hosts *The Deborah Flora Show*, a right-wing radio program airing on Denver’s KNUS that brings on a variety of state and local Republican politicians and conservative activists. The station is owned by Salem Media Group, the right-wing radio giant that features hosts like Hugh Hewitt and Sebastian Gorka and reportedly pressured hosts to be more pro-Trump; former KNUS host Craig Silverman claimed in 2018 that his mic had been cut and he had been fired in the middle of his show for criticizing Trump (the station denied it). Flora is also “the Director of Public Policy for Salem Radio Denver.” She became a right-wing celebrity in 2006 when she produced and starred in the anti-abortion film *A Distant Thunder* and later reportedly hosted “the first Beverly Hills ‘Tea Party’ rally” with the actor Pat Boone.

On Fox, Flora said that “equity policy is the same as critical race theory” and that it “divides ... innocent children into oppressors and oppressed” which “damages both.”

## **Joe Mobley**

*Fox & Friends* co-host Steve Doocy introduced Joe Mobley on June 14 as a “father of three and U.S. Army vet” who had “rallied for education, not indoctrination” over the weekend in Loudoun County.

Mobley also hosts *The Joe Mobley Show*, a political self-help podcast that purports to teach conservative listeners how to respond to criticisms from liberals who engage in “massive misinformation campaigns” about them.

On Fox, Mobley agreed that “critical race theory” is racist, adding that its “singular purpose” is “to divide.”

