

Our View: Justice Department bias probe addresses made-up issue

There are too many civil rights problems to address to waste time on a phony one.

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The past 50 years or so of social progress have been tough to accept for those Americans who wonder why nobody holds “heterosexual pride” parades or celebrates White History Month. But now one of them is heading the U.S. Justice Department, and by threatening to take the nation’s colleges and universities to court over so-called “reverse racism,” Jeff Sessions is showing that he’s prepared to administer a destructive cure for a disease that doesn’t exist.

The initiative came to light last week in a New York Times story that cited an internal announcement of the department’s new priority: “investigations and possible litigation related to intentional race-based discrimination in college and university admissions.” Though the document didn’t specify who’s considered at risk from affirmative action policies, both critics and supporters of the initiative told the Times that the effort is targeting programs that seek to help black and Latino students.

Why this issue, and why now? The second question is easier to answer than the first one. The move is timed to appeal to Americans who see anti-white bias as a significant problem — and nearly half of Trump voters believe that whites face “a lot of discrimination,” they told pollsters just after the election. What’s more, according to recent research by Cato Institute polling director Emily Ekins, the voters who feel a sense of racial solidarity with the president are also the most likely of his supporters to stand by him through his administration’s many twists and turns.

And the idea that anti-white bias is actually doing harm is staggeringly hard to combat, despite the mountain of data that show that white people are well served by our higher education system. White adults, for example, are far more likely to obtain a bachelor’s degree than either black or Hispanic Americans. Whites made up 60 percent of the nation’s high school graduates in 2004, according to a 2012 Stanford University study, but accounted for nearly three-quarters of all applicants admitted to the nation’s most selective colleges. And white young people from wealthy families have advantages that others don’t, in the form of parental donations and legacy admission preferences that propel their college applications to the top of the pile.

But in an increasingly diverse society where a bachelor’s degree has become the key to a living wage and a middle-class life, we can’t afford colleges and universities whose doors aren’t open to all students. If the Trump administration can’t be persuaded by the moral arguments for

maintaining affirmative action, let's make the pragmatic case instead. We have too many actual civil rights issues to address without being distracted by a made-up one.