

STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY SCHOLARS IN RESPONSE TO THE EXECUTIVE MEMO M-20-34

September 14, 2020

Russell Vought, Director of the Office of Management and Budget for the Executive Office of the President issued a “Memorandum for the Heads of Executive Offices and Agencies” on September 4, 2020. This [memorandum](#) states that “Executive Branch agencies have spent millions of taxpayer dollars to date ‘training’ government workers to believe divisive, anti-American propaganda,” and goes on to direct federal agencies to find and cancel contracts with organizations that use critical race theory, "white privilege," or essentially name racism in the United States (details in the quote below).

In the memorandum, Mr. Vought elaborates that, “in some cases these training [sic] have further claimed that there is racism embedded in the belief that America is the land of opportunity or the belief that the most qualified person should receive a job.” He argues that “these types of ‘trainings’ not only run counter to the fundamental beliefs for which our Nation has stood since its inception, but they also engender division and resentment within the Federal workforce.” Ultimately, he asserts this:

The President has directed me to ensure that Federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions. Accordingly, to that end, the Office of Management and Budget will shortly issue more detailed guidance on implementing the President's directive. In the meantime, all agencies are directed to begin to identify all contracts or other agency spending related to any training on "critical race theory," "white privilege," or any other training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil. In addition, all agencies should begin to identify all available avenues within the law to cancel any such contracts and/or to divert Federal dollars away from these un-American propaganda training sessions.

We cannot, and do not, understate the impact on the field of education of withdrawing federal money for work that engages critical race theory. Not only do university research centers often work with and alongside federal government agencies, including the Office for Civil Rights and Department of Justice, this memorandum serves as the beginning of a larger attack on all scholars who use CRT to surface and unpack white privilege toward a more socially just and equitable society.

As an organization that is devoted to equity work, which includes members who engage in scholarship and pedagogy to conduct trainings and lead professional learning that relies on tenets of critical race theory to conceptualize racism and discuss white privilege, we are alarmed at the broad sweeping impact of thought policing through the threat of federal funding withdrawals.

Inherent in suppressing the use of a theory lies the privileging—and silencing—of knowledge. As an academic organization dedicated to educational foundations, we are disturbed by not only the censorship and epistemic oppression put forth by the Office of Management Budget for the Executive Office of the President, but the material effects this suppression imposes on Black, Indigenous, and other scholars of color, as well as White allies and advocates, and on people of color generally in the United States.

One only needs to look at that history of the United States to understand that racism has been embedded in the foundation of this nation. This is evident, for example, in governmentally sanctioned policies and actions pertaining to people of color, including: the enslavement of African Americans, the racist practices against Indigenous peoples, Jim Crow laws, redlining, mass incarceration of Black Americans, maternal mortality rates for Black women, and disparate impacts of COVID-19 on working class and communities of color. Critical race theorists offer a framework for interrogating how racism has been codified, institutionalized, and maintained by our governmental, educational, and legal structures. Analyzing white privilege is an aspect of this framework.

This memorandum characterizes critical race theory as “propaganda” that assumes “that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country” and assumes that the theory takes to be true that some races and ethnicities are inherently racist or “evil.” The conflation between working toward an equitable society and assuming that individuals are “inherently” racist is a false correlation and a gross misrepresentation of the theory. To attribute the discomfort with historical disenfranchisement of entire populations to anti-racist trainings is, again, a false equivalency and is meant to exploit peoples’ fears and resentments in a time when many people find themselves already vulnerable. It also has a “chilling effect” on the First Amendment Rights of Freedom of Speech and Expression and is a modern version of McCarthyism, a practice which falsely accused individuals as “communist” and labelled their actions as treasonous and “unAmerican.” These practices were found to be unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court during the Warren years.

Trainers (and scholars) using this theory do the difficult work of surfacing and unpacking some of the (sometimes unseen) challenges, rooted in racism, to ideals like “the land of opportunity” and supposed systems of meritocracy. Contrary to the assertions made in the memo, these trainings are meant to unveil historical, and often hidden, inequities to diminish racism and mitigate white privilege such that there can be not only “fair,” but *equitable*, treatment of all people in the United States. The overly simplistic and repeated use of the word “equal” in the memorandum encourages a false notion of equity that is not, and has not been true, for people whose multiple identities along intersections of race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, and religion have been historically disenfranchised in the United States. As such, equal treatment in an inequitable environment does not create fairness; lack of equity maintains divides and prevents fairness. Those of us who do equity work would not argue that any person is “inherently” racist (and we don’t understand where the term “evil” arises in this memo); in fact, we understand that racist ideology is learned. We do this work because we also believe that antiracism can also be learned. Through teaching antiracism, we can create more connection, understanding, and equity between people of different backgrounds and decrease the divisiveness that has long been encouraged by unjust and inequitable systems.

We honor the critical race theory and critical whiteness studies work of our members and other scholars worldwide. We call attention to the ignorance of the current administration's understanding of racial power dynamics in the United States. Like our CRT scholar peers (https://medium.com/@addixson_5047/critical-race-theory-and-education-scholars-respond-executive-memo-m-20-34-a8b80a3445f0) we are outraged by this call to end efforts to name racism. We understand the characterizations within this memo as villainizing CRT and related work as divisive. Alongside CRT scholars, we consider this as "an affront to the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States" and we say, unequivocally, that these silencing attempts violate academic freedom principles. We, as an organization, remain poised to engaged in solidarity efforts with scholars within AESA and beyond to continue our work toward a more equitable and antiracist society for those who continue to live the material effects of racism.

American Educational Studies Association Executive Council