



Version 1: June 4th, 2021

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Background:

Essential conversations about race in America are being hijacked and curtailed by broad narrative attacks launched by Christopher Rufo, Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute. The attacks by Rufo and other critics, pundits, and politicians who have joined the effort are shutting down critical racial equity work and conversations in institutions across the country—primarily schools, universities, and government—and are extending further into our society.

This effort started merely weeks after the public outcry over the murder of George Floyd. [Rufo penned a piece](#) describing racial equity work in government as “radical” and an “aggressive new racist ideology to fund a corrupt consultant class while maligning all white people.” [The prior Administration adopted Rufo’s effort to shut down conversations on race](#), and in documents explaining the order that banned the use of the term “systemic racism,” among others, elevated similar narratives attacking critical race theory and “racist ideologies.”

At Race Forward, we conducted research that shows **the term “systemic racism” was used more times in the media after the murder of George Floyd than in the last 30 years combined**. These attacks by Rufo and his allies are in direct response to a broad scale and growing recognition of how systemic racism shapes almost every life outcome in our country.

While President Biden rescinded the executive order banning racial equity training and [replaced it with one to advance racial equity](#), opponents to racial justice have introduced upwards of 20 state legislative bills, some passed, that would ban racial equity work in government and education on race in schools. Versions of this argument have now passed as legislation and are already [becoming a central debate in countless school districts](#) across the country. City, state, and federal government agencies have halted trainings and initiatives designed to advance racial equity.



The bills themselves are all vulnerable to court challenges ([President Trump’s Executive Order was blocked by a federal judge](#)), **but the danger to racial equity is not at the level of policy, but rather narrative.** Using slogans like “Stop Racism. Stop Hate” this Orwellian effort to frame the discussion of racism to be racism against white people is undermining the momentum recently gained by the racial justice movement.

This attack on critical race theory is part of a broad, coordinated effort to thwart a multiracial democracy.

As we have seen multiple times in our country’s history, this divisive framing is devastatingly effective. Leading up to and through the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, politicians – particularly, but not exclusively, on the right – have consistently framed people of color, particularly Black people, LGBTQ people, and people who are immigrants as the “real culprits” of our country’s ills. **This fearmongering and scapegoating is not an end to itself; it is a means to keep people of all races distracted and divided so that the wealthy elite and their enablers retain power and dominance at a time when a multiracial majority is emerging in this country.** The timing of the attack on critical race theory is telling; it is both cover and justification for the wave of voter suppression bills making their way through state legislatures across the country. **These attacks on critical race theory are a part of a broad, coordinated effort to thwart a multiracial democracy at a time when the right is consolidating their base in the lead-up to the mid-term elections.**



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It is important to remember that these attacks employ a caricature of critical race theory to distract us from enacting a racially equitable agenda, one that would provide benefits to the vast majority of people in this country, including white people. Instead, they are shrinking the conversation to a debate about critical race theory, a concept most people living in the United States do not fully understand. **Our response cannot be that we abandon or malign the concept; but that we keep the focus on the purpose of these attacks and how having honest and courageous conversations about race – how it shows up in our past and informs our present – is the key to building the promise of a just, multiracial, democratic society.**

Their goal is for us to stop doing our work of advancing racial equity – whether in the classroom, in the workplace, or in government. We hope this guide will help you counter-narrate these attacks in a way so that you and your partners can continue this critical work.

Developing our Counter-Narratives:

The attacks on critical race theory draw on narratives that breed racial resentment. These narratives include:

- Talking about race is inherently “divisive;”
- Racism is solely about “hate in one’s heart;” Systemic racism is not real;
- We should be “colorblind” when it comes to solving issues of race;
- Lack of hard work and personal responsibility is the primary driver of racial inequities;
- White people will be “victims” when we talk about race or address systemic racism in any meaningful way (i.e., zero-sum game);

We know these narratives, while false, are highly effective because all of us have been socialized in a dominant culture that reinforces these narratives. Counteracting their narrative attack with telling the facts about critical race theory will, therefore, not be as effective as we would want it to be. Remember, their aim is to [brand critical race theory as a catch-all for “radical” and “woke” ideas](#), and they are subsuming systemic racism and any race-conscious remedies to address systemic racism under that umbrella.

So, what do we do? We fight narrative with narrative. Here is a starter list of narratives that we offer as counters to these attacks:

- We all deserve an honest education about race in this country;
- Systemic racism is real;

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- Learning about the history of race and how it informs our present helps us all become wiser and stronger;
- Politicians are using a caricature of critical race theory to rob us of our history and the knowledge to solve our biggest challenges.
- Addressing the harmful impact of systemic racism will benefit us all;
 - Systemic racism describes how laws and institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, workplaces, etc.) have discriminated against people of color, whether intentionally or not;
 - Systemic racism explains the differences in opportunities and outcomes across race.
 - Systemic racism primarily hurts Black people, Indigenous people, Latinx people, and Asian American, and Pacific Islander people; and it also has limited opportunity for the vast majority of white people (*see Heather McGhee’s “The Sum of Us” for more stories*)

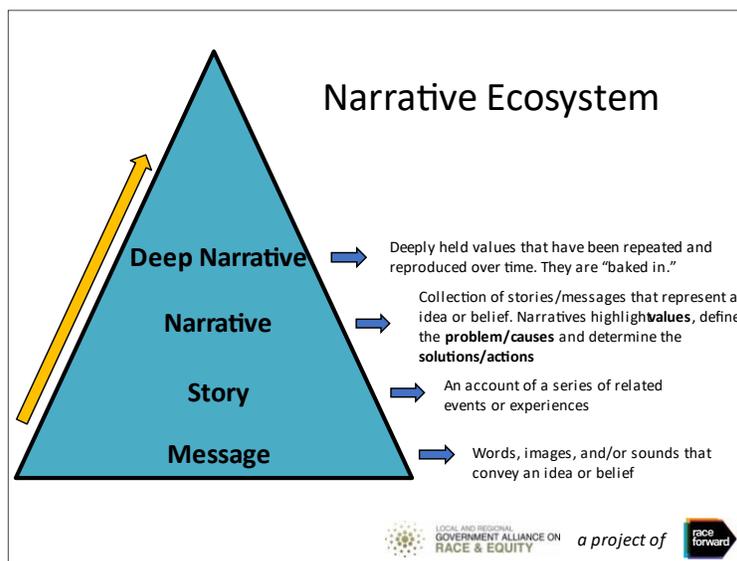


Figure A: Conceptual framework from [The Narrative Initiative](#)

From these narratives, we can use all the tools in our narrative toolbox (see [Figure A](#)). When our stories and messages align with the narratives we want to elevate, we create impact.

In this guide, we offer messaging and storytelling frameworks to help you lift up these narratives in a way that helps you continue the transformative work you are doing. Remember that stories and messages are just some of the tools we can use to lift up these narratives. We also value the power of arts and culture to challenge the dominant narratives underlying these attacks.



Know your Goals; Know your Audience

Before responding, take a few moments to think about:

- 1) Your goal (Is it to defeat the bill? To continue anti-racist education in your school, workplace, your neighborhood, or in government? To get people to call their state legislators?);
- 2) Who your audience is;
- 3) Who your messengers are (*note: white people, this is your opportunity to speak up!*).

Knowing these things will help you with the content of your messages and stories.

At the end of the day, you know your audience and what gets them to act and inspire others to act. Use the messaging and storytelling guides below as a jumping off point to develop your own messages and stories that underscore the reality of systemic racism and the imperative of advancing racial equity.

Messaging Guide

We use the framework below as a guide to develop and sequence messages.

- **Shared Values:** What is this issue about at the core? Frame the issue on a big idea, one that reflects the beliefs and emotions of your audience.
- **Challenge:** What is the barrier to overcome? Ideally the problem is one that can be understood as a community or public issue.
- **Solution:** Define the solution from your perspective. Your listeners will be inspired if you can tell them that you know what to do. Put your organization and its mission smack in the middle of the solution.
- **Ask:** What is the listener/reader/viewer to do? This can be as simple as learn more, visit our website, etc. or please write/call/visit your elected officials.

Sample Messages:

Shared Values

- We solve problems by having honest and courageous conversations about them / We value an honest education about race in this country.
- It may be easier to deny or avoid our challenges, but that is never how we overcome them.
- Every day, more and more people living in this country are beginning to [understand that systemic racism is a major problem](#).
- Learning about systemic racism – within our neighborhoods, in our schools, and in our workplaces – is the first step in healing our divisions so that we can solve problems that harm us



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all.

- Systemic racism describes how laws and institutions, whether intentionally or not, work to the detriment of people of color.
- Systemic racism has directly harmed Black people, Indigenous people, Latinx people, and Asian and Pacific Islander people. It has also [decreased the quality of life for everyone, including people who are white.](#)
- We resist attempts to distort truth and rob us of our history. Learning about the history of race and how it impacts our present helps us all grow stronger, wiser, and more able to solve our current-day problems
- Having honest and courageous conversations about systemic racism helps us achieve the promise of racial equity.
 - We achieve racial equity when a person's race no longer determines the opportunities in their life; because of systemic racism, it often does, to the detriment of us all.
 - Advancing racial equity will [benefit us all](#), strengthening our neighborhoods, our cities, and our states.

Challenges

- Today, some politicians want to ban the conversations about race we are having in classrooms, workplaces, and in government.
 - State legislatures across the country have either introduced or passed bills to ban these conversations. These bills are a copycat of Trump's Executive Order in 2020 banning "diversity" training in federal government agencies.
- These attacks use a caricature of critical race theory to distract and divide us from addressing real problems in our society. Instead of supporting people after a devastating pandemic, they are wasting time trying to ban conversations about systemic racism – conversations that would actually help us unite to solve our country's biggest challenges.
- The timing of the attack on critical race theory is telling. They are attacking critical race theory as both cover and justification for the wave of voter suppression bills making their way through state legislatures across the country. This attack on critical race theory is part of a broad, coordinated effort to thwart a multiracial democracy.



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- They want to distort the truth and sanitize history at a time when awareness of systemic racism is growing as a result of last year’s historic uprisings in response to the murder of George Floyd and COVID’s disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Pacific Islander communities.
- They insist that talking about race is “divisive,” but that is a lie designed to rob us of our history and deny us the knowledge that will help us unite to build a more just and inclusive world – a world in which one’s race does not limit your opportunity and achievements in life.
- These attacks originate from conservative think tanks, funded by wealthy elites, many of which were formed after the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement. Their goal over the past few decades has been to deny the existence of systemic racism and shrink government so that we lose the means to address it.
- These attacks draw from the oldest playbook in American politics. Politicians use fear of people of color, immigrants, or LGBTQ people to breed resentment so that they can retain power and dominance at a time when a multiracial, pluralistic majority is emerging in this country.

Solutions

- We know better than to give into lies that prevent us from learning our country’s true racial history and how it shapes our lives today.
- History shows that when we work together across our differences, we accomplish great things for ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors, and our children.
- History also shows that every time we made progress on race as a country, there has been a backlash. These attacks are in response to a growing movement of people who want to play their part in addressing systemic racism.
- We must not be “colorblind” to the reality of systemic racism. Instead, we must be “race-conscious” in our efforts to understand and fix our country’s problems. That means directly addressing the harm that systemic racism has caused to people of color.
- There is benefit for everyone in addressing systemic racism. By having honest and courageous conversations about systemic racism, people of all backgrounds have come to a deeper understanding of themselves, developed stronger connections with their neighbors, and have found purpose in doing their part to build a more fair and inclusive world. [We call this the Solidarity Dividend.](#)
 - After the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement, the South received better infrastructure and schools. It also provided the moral and legal framework for other



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communities (women, immigrants, LGBTQ people, and more) to thrive.

- People who have learned about systemic racism have come together across race to win raises in the minimum wage.
- People who have resisted division have revitalized their small towns by welcoming immigrants
- Cities, in response to federal calls to get to 0 traffic deaths, [have begun to move away from enforcement/education to improving infrastructure](#) (because enforcement disproportionately impacted people of color). And in doing so, they created better conditions on roads (everyone benefits from better infrastructure) and fewer traffic deaths.
- [INSERT YOUR EXAMPLE OF THE SOLIDARITY DIVIDEND HERE]

Ask:

- As these attacks against discussing race continue and escalate, now is a vital time to express our support of learning about systemic racism—in our neighborhoods, classrooms, and workplaces.

Storytelling Framework

Our brains are hardwired for stories. Oftentimes, a personal account of how one has benefited from learning about the history of systemic racism in this country will be more powerful than any set of messages (though you are free to incorporate the messages above into your story!)

Stories can take many forms. One form is the [Personal Narrative Framework developed by Professor Marshall Ganz](#). The Personal Narrative Framework uses three parts to develop a story that inspires others for change: Story of Self, Story of Us, and Story of Now.



Be creative with your story. If you have the chance to share your story publicly, strive to keep your story concise (you do not need to divulge every detail of your personal life; share the parts of your life that have relevance to the issue at hand).

Questions to guide the construction of your personal narrative:

Story of Self: (Why were you called to motivate others to join you in this action?)

- What events led you to understand your racial identity?
- What was the personal transformation that occurred when you learned about the history and reality of systemic racism?
- Why are you now called to address systemic racism?

Story of Us: (Who is your “us” and what does your Story of Self say about who “we” are or should be?)

- What does your personal story say about the value of learning about systemic racism for the community or organization that you are a part of?
- In what ways will learning about the history and reality of systemic racism benefit us all? What lessons did you learn that could be helpful for people in your circle that are wary of “critical race theory” being taught in schools and in government?
- Who are the people who are stoking division by attacking critical race theory? What is their goal?

Story of Now: (What urgent challenge do you hope to inspire others to take action on?)



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- Why is it important for your community or organization to continuing learning about the history and reality of systemic racism? What can you do together to deepen your learning?
- What actions can you all take to overturn these bills and/or start/continue learning about the history and reality of systemic racism?

Asks:

- Use this moment to advocate for a teach-in on systemic racism in your classroom, workplace, or in government. At Race Forward, we like to use the following media as starting points:
 - [Race: The Power of an Illusion](#)
 - [Segregated by Design](#)
 - [Vox Glad you Asked Season 2](#)
 - [The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together](#)
- Contact Race Forward at media@raceforward.org if you want to work with Race Forward's team to develop (and potentially pitch) your story in support of education and training on systemic racism.