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**THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EVANGELICAL RIGHT'S  
ANTI-CRITICAL RACE THEORY RHETORIC**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
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## **Introduction**

Critical Race Theory (CRT), once an abstract principle used in academic circles, has exploded onto the national stage as parents fight against their children supposedly being taught its tenets. Despite not being widely (or ever, in many cases) used in K-12 schools, conservative pundits and elites have empowered people to confront progressivism and a changing culture in their communities. While CRT is the enemy, conservatives are using the theory as a tool to mobilize people against tenets of social justice. In this paper, I will discuss the right's obsession with CRT in schools, where it came from, and its political implications.

This paper has two key stakeholders: Christopher Rufo and John MacArthur. Rufo, a conservative writer, runs in elite conservative circles and brought CRT to the right's attention. MacArthur, a widely-known conservative preacher and writer, influences the Evangelical church through his sermons and writings. Both have heavily contributed to the rise of anti-CRT sentiment among white Evangelicals, and both spearhead the fight against it in the religious and political realms. I will analyze their rhetoric around CRT and social justice to understand how this language translates into political action and mobilization.

I argue that the anti-CRT rhetoric that appeared in conservative circles will politically mobilize white Evangelicals. Although we will have to wait until 2022 to fully understand how important this particular issue will be to white, conservative Evangelicals, based on previous voting patterns and current sociopolitical trends among Evangelicals, I can confidently predict that anti-CRT rhetoric will energize and organize white Evangelicals into political action. First, I will explain the essential background to understanding CRT, white Evangelicals, and the Religious Right in Chapter One. This chapter examines the relationship between Republicans and Evangelicals and racism in the Evangelical tradition. Then, I will analyze Rufo's language

and rhetoric around CRT and what political implications it has wrung. In particular, I highlight how his work on CRT led to Donald Trump's executive order banning CRT's use in federal trainings and the introduction of subsequent bills. In Chapter Three, I discuss MacArthur's stance on CRT and his rhetoric's impact on conservative Evangelicals. Here, it is essential to note MacArthur's attack on social justice as a whole and the ideas of CRT rather than the ideology precisely. Finally, in Chapter Four, I will explain the political implications of anti-CRT rhetoric and the potential for a new issue-based wave of white, Evangelical, conservative voters that could create a new Tea Party-Esque movement among the right. In my conclusion, I will evaluate my thesis and discuss further research that would contribute to the discussion.

## **Literature Review**

Among scholars, much attention has been placed on the white Evangelical tendency to vote for Republicans, and in recent years, the shocking number who voted for Trump. As will be discussed in Chapter One, white Evangelicals and Republicans have had a close relationship for decades. However, the framing of Trump and his politics was surprising for many in the academic community. Therefore, increased attention on white Evangelical politics arose in the 2010s, and predictions for future voting, political, and social patterns arose. Many concluded that the white Evangelical swing for Trump is a move to protect white supremacy and the idea of a Christian nation (Holder & Josephson, 2020; Ayris, 2021; Martí, 2019; Bieber & Beyers, 2020; Steinmetz-Jenkins, 2020). Like Dante Scala (2020), others argue that Evangelical attitudes evolved towards Trump for many different reasons and were dependent on church ties and political ideology. Overall, it is widely recognized that white Evangelicals shifted much farther to the right among the overall Christian Right.

Nevertheless, the Christian Right itself is a contentious space. Some scholars, such as Anthea Butler, consider white Evangelicals to have naturally entered the far-right. In contrast, others consider the entire group an aberration of the Evangelical and Christian faith (Balmer, 2017). Balmer argues that American Evangelicalism is politically progressive—however, it was co-opted by conservative forces with distinct political agendas in the 20th century (Balmer, 2017). Other scholars of Evangelicalism hotly contest this point. Williams (2018) argues that antebellum American Evangelicalism was not as progressive as Balmer claims. In fact, many of the more progressive denominations of antebellum and Second Great Awakening Evangelicalism distanced themselves from the Evangelical movement and instead evolved into liberal Protestantism. Fitzgerald (2017) agrees, noting that many Evangelicals in the South readily accepted slavery and patriarchy. In more recent times, whereas Balmer (2017) argues the Christian Right emerged as a backlash to integration in the 1970s, Fitzgerald (2017) believes it was a more broadly-based populist movement. Rather than a sudden reaction only to integration, Fitzgerald (2017) argues it was a reaction against the changes of the 1960s like Supreme Court rulings on school prayer, the sexual revolution, feminist movements, and *Roe v. Wade*. Overall, the origin of the Religious Right is contested and has many scholars on both sides of the debate. I lean towards the argument that the Religious Right arose due to many factors, especially the social progressivism around race, sex, and gender in the 1960s and 70s. However, the deep ties to racism in the Evangelical tradition cannot be ignored and still impact the religious Right's social, political, and cultural beliefs today.

Finally, it is essential to note that not all white Evangelicals share conservative beliefs about CRT. There is certainly a very vocal group of Christians who denounce CRT, often arguing that it is incompatible with their faith for various reasons (Beehler, 2021; Strachan, 2021).

However, many other Christians are passionate about embracing many of CRT's tenets and fighting racism within their communities. Even the editors of *The Christian Century* call CRT a "gift" to Christians (2021). Many Christians, such as Nathan Cartagena, teach CRT alongside the Gospel to Evangelicals. Additionally, the Evangelical faith is diverse and has pockets of Black, Asian, and Latinx populations (Pew, 2021). Although most Evangelicals identify as politically conservative, the faith is not a monolith, and there are differences in thought among the churches (Pew, 2021). This paper focuses on white, conservative Evangelicals—who certainly have prominence and dominance over sociopolitical discourses—however, this group is not entirely representative of the faith.

### **Theoretical Model**

I will use Butler's (2021) and Tranby and Hartmann's (2008) analysis of white Evangelicals as my theoretical grounding for understanding the backlash to CRT in K-12 schools. The key feature of these analyses is that racism is a feature of white, American Evangelicalism and that the core tenets of Evangelicalism allow for and even encourage racism. Of course, not all white Evangelicals are racist. However, through a CRT framework, institutions, structures, and ideologies can be inherently racist and, if not actively confronted or dismantled, can create environments in which racism is accepted, normalized, and wielded to maintain supremacy, status, and norms. Therefore CRT is also a valuable framework for understanding the ideology and systems of white American Evangelicals. Although contradictory to use CRT as a tool for analyzing an anti-CRT stance, it is a natural fit for the intention of this analysis. CRT questions structures, ideas, institutions, and what biases individuals and groups have that may oppress marginalized groups. Thus using CRT to deconstruct the ideologies of

white Evangelicals in the context of anti-CRT rhetoric and policy helps understand why and how this movement arose.

## Chapter 1: Background

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) arose in the mid-1970s as a movement of activists and scholars who place issues in a broader economic, historical, contextual, interest, and unconscious perspective. It first appeared in the legal studies field to “forefront and transform the function and impact of race and racism in the legal system” as Critical Legal Studies (CLS) (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). As people saw the advances of the civil rights era stalling and legislative progress rolling back, CRT built on CLS and radical feminist thought to question “the very foundations of the liberal order” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Additionally, the movement builds on feminism’s insights into the relationship between power and social roles and domination and borrows the civil rights movement’s concern for redressing historical wrongs (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). CRT also draws on philosophers, theorists, and American radical traditions such as Gramsci, Derrida, Truth, Douglass, Du Bois, Chavez, King, Jr., the Black Power, and Chicano movements (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Significant scholars of CRT (crits) include Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and others. As the scholarly movement has grown to include LatCrits and queer-crits, the theory has been applied to a broad spectrum of identities and communities and now has scholars in nearly every community. Additionally, CRT contains an activist dimension—crits are not just working to understand society, but to change it for the better by “[eradicating] all forms of subordination” via activism (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016).

CRT has five fundamental tenets that guide all of its scholars’ work:

1. *Racism is ordinary, not aberrational.* CRT emphasizes the permanence of racism and that racism is entrenched in American society (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016).

2. *The system of white-over-color ascendancy serves important psychic and material purposes.* In other words, whiteness is both a concept and a property and has psychological and material implications.
3. *The social construction thesis<sup>1</sup> is true;* therefore, race is a product of social thought and relations. The thesis also concerns a broader critique of liberalism.
4. *Intersectionality and anti-essentialism.* It is necessary to interrogate how racism operates “through majoritarian, or dominant, ideologies—such as white supremacy, colonialism, and nativism, as well as color-blind discourses of objectivity, meritocracy, and equal opportunity” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). All people have intersecting identities that contribute to their positionality in society, and people cannot be understood through broad strokes. Instead, individualism and uniqueness are essential to consider.
5. *A unique voice of color exists.* The importance of counternarratives and counterstories cannot be stressed enough. They help highlight the experiential knowledge of people of color to “document how systems of oppression and privilege affect communities of color” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016).

Another important tenet of CRT is Derrick Bell’s theory of interest convergence, which argues that Black people achieve civil rights victories only when white and Black interests converge (Bell, 1980). Exemplified by *Brown v. Board of Education*, which was only successful because it also advanced white interests alongside promoting equity for Black Americans because desegregation raised American prestige around the world during the Cold War. Once interests diverged, *Brown* was weakened, and segregation was protected again. The cycle of interest-convergence highlights how when it is convenient and ideal for white people, Black interests and goals are successful.

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<sup>1</sup> The social construction thesis is the argument that race and races are products of social thought and relations.

Some more recent additions to the foundational framework of CRT include empirical claims of general consensus. Some examples of these newer claims include: “The racial past exerts contemporary effects on racial contexts;” “Ignoring the importance of race and racism in law and social policy and the arguments for ostensibly race-neutral practices often serve to undermine the interests of people of color;” and “Immigration laws that restrict Asian and Mexican entry into the US regulate the racial make-up of the nation and perpetuate the view that all persons of Asian-American and Pacific Islander, or Latinx descent should be assumed to be foreigners” (Carbado & Roithmayr, 2014). Another idea of “deep whiteness” arose in 2015, which argues that there is a superiority complex of whites reinforced by years of living in white supremacist society that produced a “deep whiteness” that is intractable, even among those who are well-meaning (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

### **CRT in Schools**

Schools across the country have seen parents and legislators confront ideas of CRT in classrooms through protest and lawmaking. Education scholars apply CRT to “interrogate the racial injustices and systemic racism embedded in the K-16 educational pipeline, and in non-formal educational settings through the perspective of people of color” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). One form of praxis using CRT is critical race pedagogy (CRP), an “instructional approach designed to challenge and transform the prevailing Eurocentric power structure that organizes higher education curricula in order to cultivate spaces that validate the experiences of students of color” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). CRP centers on race and racism, validates the experiential knowledge of students of color, and deconstructs dominant ideologies in classrooms (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). Furthermore, it is characterized by the “emancipatory teaching practices of

People of Color” and uses “multiple ‘liberatory strategies as a vehicle for counteracting the devaluation of racially oppressed students’” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). Finally, CRP emphasizes both educators' and students' racialized identities and experiences. Critics describe these kinds of teaching styles like CRP as both dissent and affirmation and generally support these approaches. They “acknowledge racial disparity, unpack whiteness, and center the diverse experiences of people of color” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). However, there is often a gap in applying CRT to the administrative actions of educators when addressing racial injustice in schools (Amiot et al., 2018).

These kinds of approaches, when race and racism are addressed as factors that continue to shape inequality in the classroom, can lead to white students expressing denial, anger, guilt, and shame. On the other hand, students of color are empowered because they realize that “they are ‘part of a legacy of resistance to racism and the layers of racialized oppression’” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). Thus it is a complicated and heady call for teachers to use this kind of praxis in the classroom, considering the possible drawbacks and dangers posed to students of color. Additionally, “resisting decolonization” can occur among students of color. Resisting decolonization is a reluctance to grapple with a critical race pedagogy that destabilizes mainstream ideologies about race, racism, and racial identity in schools (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). This can elicit “a cognitive dissonance within some students of color when they recognize that they are implicated in an educational system that often reinforces their subordination” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). It often happens when students of color “dispute the idea that legacies of domination inform their identities and shape their perceptions of the ‘American opportunity structure’” (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016).

Additionally, whereas white students who refuse to interrogate racial hierarchies still benefit, students of color remain disadvantaged by systems of oppression when they resist decolonization (Alemán & Gaytán, 2016). Another form of CRT praxis is racial equity pathways, as Amiot et al. (2018) applied, guides towards more equitable school administrations. School leaders engaged in interrogating white racism in educational administration in personal ways and from institutional perspectives (Amiot et al., 2018). They wanted to move from “awareness to understanding intent, action and reflection on issues in educational leadership” (Amiot et al., 2018).

The reality is that classroom spaces often mirror contemporary society’s color-blind and post-racial discourses, which are simply dysfunctional (Simpson, Causey, & Williams 2007; Johnson & Bhatt 2003; Roberts, Bell, & Murphy 2008). White and non-white educators struggle and face many challenges while attempting to name and interrogate race in primarily white institutions. Confronting race can result in “heightened tension, resistance to or denial of raced readings of reality, rigorous avoidance of race issues” (Simpson et al., 2007). In sum, CRT is not being applied in K-12 classrooms across the country in dangerous or excessive ways for various reasons, including the fact that many teachers, white and non-white, are simply uncomfortable or untrained in how to do so. Despite what conservatives say, CRT is not pervasive in American classrooms. Less than 4% of schools must use CRT in classrooms throughout K-12 schools (McCausland, 2021). Some teachers tell their students about race and ask them to consider their privilege and positionality in age-appropriate ways. However, the argument that teachers who ask students to analyze or critique race or whiteness are abhorrent is simply inaccurate and not the reality of the educational system today.

## **American Evangelicalism**

Evangelicalism is an essential facet of a broader social movement that has transformed American society since the nineteenth century. It is a tradition that defines itself as biblically based, focusing on conversion (Butler, 2012). The “Evangelical Empire” arose in the 1800s and has maintained a strong presence in the US ever since. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, scholars of the sociology of religion, characterize American Evangelicalism by three main traits: 1) accountable freewill individualism; 2) relationalism, and 3) anti-structuralism (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Accountable freewill individualism means that individuals exist independent of structures and institutions and have free will. Each person is accountable to others and God for freely made choices and actions. Additionally, American Evangelicals place a heavy emphasis on interpersonal relationships. Salvation only comes from a personal relationship with Christ Himself in their faith. Finally, American Evangelicals do not accept explanations of phenomena based on social structural influences. In fact, they believe that an overemphasis on institutions and groups undermines accountable individualism.

Anthea Butler, another scholar of religion, builds on Emerson and Smith’s description of American Evangelicalism by adding that racism is a feature of the practice. She argues that race and racism are foundational parts of American Evangelicalism (Butler, 2021). In the 20th century, there was a more prominent social culture of racism in American Evangelicalism (Butler, 2021). However, this is reflected in the basic tenets of American Evangelicalism, argues Tranby and Hartmann. According to Emerson and Smith, the tension between ideological commitment to justice, equality, and individualist ideals “highlight key dimensions of mainstream American racial discourse and latent values” (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008). Thus by understanding the Evangelical race problem, one can understand the American race problem.

The values that white American Evangelicals stringently and consistently adhere to, such as individualism and meritocracy, make them unique. However, they still represent other whites and the mainstream racial discourse. The three basic tenets of American Evangelicalism—individualism, relationalism, and anti-structuralism—explain why the group has attitudes and ideals dependent on anti-Black sentiments (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008). Individualism, for example, can lead to the assignment of blame to people disadvantaged by race and naturalizing and normalizing white Americans’ cultural practices, beliefs, and norms that privilege them over others. Individualism in America “not only blinds white evangelicals to structural inequalities involving race... but it also provides a discourse and way of thinking that allows its adherents to justify, rationalize, and legitimate the racial status quo” (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008). Additionally, the individualistic ideals and discourse are not as politically or racially neutral as previously assumed. This ideal and culture represent more prominent tropes about “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps,” which ignores the structural challenges that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color will face when fighting for a better life. The “deficiencies” of Black Americans are to blame for one’s struggle, not structural inequities (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Tranby and Hartmann argue that racialized, anti-Black sentiments alongside individualistic ideals are factors of a larger racial-cultural schema that helps explain how white American Evangelicals understand racial issues and economic inequality (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008).

White Evangelicals generally shy away from talking about racial groups and inequalities because doing so promotes a “group-based, structuralist view fundamentally at odds with individualist, relational ideals” (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Their view of the “race problem” derives from their individualist and anti-structuralist worldview (Emerson & Smith, 2000).

Tranby and Hartmann build on Emerson and Smith's explanations by arguing that "individualistic ideals and negative attitudes toward African Americans are more intertwined and mutually reinforcing" (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008). These values and ideals are "part of a larger cultural schema that sits at the very core of white identity and the perpetuation of white privilege" (Tranby & Hartmann, 2008).

Furthermore, Butler explains that "Evangelicalism is not a simply religious group at all. Rather, it is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the "hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others" (Butler, 2021). Evangelicalism has "benefited and continues to benefit from racism on both an individual and structural level, always under the guise of morality and patriotic nationalism" (Butler, 2021). Using this framework in tandem with Emerson and Smith's understanding of American Evangelicalism sheds light on the racist traditions of American Evangelicalism.

### **Racism in American Evangelicalism**

Racism has deep roots within American Evangelicalism. Pre-civil rights movement, Evangelicalism and racism were synonymous. For example, on November 25, 1915, the second iteration of the KKK began by burning a cross on the top of Stone Mountain and pledging allegiance to the Constitution, American ideals, and the tenets of the Christian religion (Butler, 2021). The KKK centered subsequent rhetoric and actions around God and religion and justified their actions via Christian imagery (Butler, 2021). Even lynchings were done in the name of God (Butler, 2021). As integration became a more significant issue in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Evangelicals took a strong stance against it. One of the biggest misconceptions about white Evangelicals in the United States is that they came together to create the Moral Majority in

the mid-20th century against abortion and gay rights. Segregation and their fear of race mixing held Evangelicals together and pushed them into the political realm. Evangelical leaders used tropes and scripture to make integration the number one fear of average families. Groups such as the American Family Association and Focus on Family fostered an Evangelical culture that promoted color-blindness and conservatism. Although these groups were not overtly racist, they promoted underlying messages that “morality was essential to preserving the nation” and that “sexual immorality of America, including race-mixing, would be its downfall” (Butler, 2021). Evangelicals across the country came together in the formal political sphere under the umbrella of fighting integration and maintaining racist hierarchies in the US.

Additionally, white Evangelicals hesitate to discuss the so-called race problem and instead emphasize prejudiced individuals, group-based thinking, or elite fabrication and manipulation instead of racism. Laissez-faire racism, in which principled conservative ideas are bound up with subtle and unspoken anti-Black stereotypes that justify or legitimate political inaction such as color-blind policies, explains this thinking that many white Evangelicals partake in. Thus laissez-faire racism allows subconscious thoughts about certain groups to permit and promote specific political action (or inaction). Many Evangelicals want to see race problems end. However, they call for “voluntaristic, faith-based solutions that would achieve the desired effects gradually and incrementally, such as converting people to Christianity and forming strong cross-racial relationships” (Emerson & Smith, 2000). For many reasons, these solutions are ineffective in combatting internal racist ideas or structural and institutional barriers to equality.

However, American Evangelicals have evident group-based anti-Black attitudes. Additionally, there is a long history of white Evangelicals protesting and actively working against social change to address systemic racism. White Evangelicals were Martin Luther King,

Jr.'s most vigorous critics and opposed his method and his work to change Southern social customs (Evans, 2009). Evans (2009) found that white Evangelicals' theology and social thought moved from a "hesitant posture toward social reform" to a commitment to asserting "true Christians" power to "reverse cultural decline and unjust morality and decency into the public sphere." Although earlier Evangelical leaders argued that the Church should not align with any political party, Evangelicals became "more eager to flex their social muscles and to assume political power" (Evans, 2010). As a direct response to the Civil Rights Movement and social progressivism, white Evangelicals threw themselves into the political sphere to reframe and reshape American culture.

### **Evangelical–Republican Relationship**

Evangelicals have institutional and expressive bonds with the Republican party (Scala, 2020). As discussed briefly above, racism, not abortion, explains Evangelical's move to political action in the 20th century (Butler, 2021). Evangelicals pushed into the political realm, consolidating power by aligning with the Republican party and creating the Moral Majority with strong anti-gay and anti-abortion stances. The homophobic and anti-abortion stances were simply more palatable than the real motive of the Moral Majority, which was to protect segregated schools that were under attack (Balmer, 2014). In 1969, a group of Black parents from Mississippi sued to prevent three new all-white private academies from securing tax-exempt status because their discriminatory practices prevented them from being "charitable" institutions (Balmer, 2014). This 1970 *Green v. Kennedy* decision denied "segregation academies" tax-exempt status for the time being. Later that year, President Richard Nixon ordered the Internal Revenue Service to deny tax exemptions to all segregated schools. As integration

became inevitable, white Evangelicals changed their social attitudes and habits to accommodate Black folks in their churches and schools (Butler, 2021). At this time, Evangelicals began to seep into the political realm but “continued to seek acceptance in the social realm by practicing the color-blind gospel, even as they supported racial separation and white nationalism more or less under the national radar” (Butler, 2021). However, white Evangelicals were unapologetic about supporting candidates and positions that were “unremittingly conservative,” designed to prevent Black people and other people of color out of power (Butler, 2021).

White Evangelicals threw themselves into the Republican party, which transformed their whiteness from religious and cultural to political whiteness. White Evangelicals became “white conservatives...concerned with keeping the status quo of patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and nationalism” (Butler, 2021). Paul Weyrich, the figurehead of the New Right and founder of the Heritage Foundation, explains this transformation in the mid-1970s: “the new political philosophy must be defined by us [conservatives] in moral terms, packaged in non-religious language, and propagated throughout the country by our new coalition” (Balmer, 2014). Evangelicalism became both a political and cultural whiteness at this time. Interestingly, Brint and Abrutyn (2010) found that the direct influence of membership in formal Evangelical communities is weaker on political leanings than other factors. Although religious communities have a strong Republican affiliation, social circumstances and beliefs associated with membership in formal Evangelical communities are the “underlying causes of political conservatism” (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010). High moral standards, traditionalism, religiosity, and patriarchal gender roles are the immediate causes of conservative leanings (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010). Evangelicals see the world through specific moral standards, which lead them to oppose certain changes. Therefore these commitments to moral standards shape their attitudes about

governance and forms of social relationships (Brint & Abrutyn, 2010). Therefore, Evangelicalism's political, cultural, and social whiteness contributes heavily to the group's conservative politic.

In the 21st century, racism, politics, and white Evangelicalism became even more deeply intertwined. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, Evangelicals argued that the reason for the attacks was that America “had become too morally liberal and had fallen away from God” (Butler, 2021). As a result, many Evangelicals turned to the Tea Party and became “teangelicals.” These folks “believe in American Exceptionalism, Judeo-Christian values, free markets, capitalism, and limited government, along with the desire to see Christian leaders in political office” (Butler, 2012). The Tea Party accelerated white Evangelicals' shifting relationship with capitalism and gave them space to express grievances and racial animus stirred during Barack Obama's presidential election in 2008. Obama's election was a sign of the apocalypse for white Evangelicals and stirred many overt and covert racist sentiments about the state of America. Obama's administration made Evangelicals feel “marginalized and even threatened” because of its social progressivism, and they felt as though traditional institutions were crumbling (Fea, 2018). Additionally, leaders like Sarah Palin began to lead in “both the political and religious arenas, mixing their faith and their political activities and actions” on the biggest stages (Butler, 2012). These leaders who unapologetically merged their religions and politics and often exposed their racism “shifted the foundations of the religious traditions” (Butler, 2012). This movement in the religious right exposed the political possibilities to white Evangelicals and signaled the Republican party's ideology that aligned with that of white Evangelicals.

More recently, Evangelicals fight the so-called culture wars “through pro-life rallies, conservative religious and political think tanks, and their number one media outlet, Fox News” (Butler, 2012). In the last five years, white Evangelicals’ racism has exploded into the mainstream, with 81% of Evangelicals voting for Donald Trump in 2016. Despite his Protestant background and personal shortcomings, Trump won a “plurality or majority of Evangelicals in more states than any other Republican candidate” in 2016 (Scala, 2020). His use of a Christian nationalist message by portraying the United States “as a Christian nation under siege from forces both within and without” was key to gaining this massive support from white Evangelicals (Scala, 2020). Although in theory, Trump should not have gained the acceptance of Evangelicals for a variety of reasons like his lack of natural “God-talk” (for example, calling Second Corinthians as Two Corinthians at Liberty University), he advocated for concerns broadly shared by Evangelicals (Scala, 2020). One of the major issues that Trump touched on was the “worry that [the] nation as they knew it was on the verge of irreversible change and decline,” which Trump blamed on the loss of a larger American Christian identity (Scala, 2020). He was very successful at appealing to the “health and wealth” gospel and framed himself as the strongman needed to tame the chaotic world that Evangelicals saw crumbling around them (Fea, 2018). Once Trump entered office, the “court Evangelicals” obtained nearly unrestricted access to the White House (Butler, 2021). These elite Evangelicals prayed for Trump regularly and advised him on both small and big issues. American Evangelicals’ support of Trump is an “embrace of an unrepentant racist” and has “solidified the place of racism in the history of American Evangelicalism” (Butler, 2021). It exposes the deep-rooted racism of white Evangelicals that they attempted to hide for centuries.

## Chapter 2: Christopher Rufo & the Political Elite

### **Profile of Christopher Rufo**

One person is responsible for the rise in interest of CRT by conservatives: Christopher Rufo. In the summer of 2020, Rufo got a tip from a municipal employee in Seattle that said Seattle city employees participated in racial sensitivity trainings after the murder of George Floyd. Rufo subsequently wrote an article describing this and other instances “in which white people were told to examine their whiteness” (Bittle, 2021). His article, which did not overtly include the phrase “critical race theory,” led whistleblowers from across the country to reach out to him, complaining about different diversity trainings (Harris, 2021). A senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a libertarian think tank, Rufo already had quite a bit of influence in right-leaning circles, and his attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts lit a fire among the right.

Moreover, he has a history of inflammatory remarks—for example, he created a film for PBS in 2015 that traced the experience of poverty in American cities, which argued that poverty was “deeply embedded in ‘social, familial, even psychological’ dynamics” (Wallace-Wells, 2021). This film outraged Seattle’s homelessness activists. So his use of the anti-bias training documents from Seattle as political kindling is not surprising. He even describes himself as a “brawler,” and was looking for a new enemy for the right to converge upon (Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo is not afraid to make provocative claims and create political fires that spiral out of control.

Within three weeks of his article, Trump signed an executive order that banned the use of CRT in DEI trainings in federal departments. To Rufo, this executive order was the start of the “real fight” against CRT (Harris, 2021). Since then, Rufo has advised on the language for over

ten bills and has become the go-to person regarding anti-CRT rhetoric and policy. His language and reporting on CRT have reached millions and have serious political and real-life implications in towns and cities across the country.

### **Rufo's Anti-CRT Rhetoric**

Rufo hardly holds back his contempt for CRT in his writings and interviews. He constantly attacks the ideas and scholars of CRT and uses inflammatory language to scare and manipulate Americans into believing their country and values are under attack. He describes CRT as a “cult indoctrination” and an “existential threat” to American values (Meckler & Dawsey, 2021, Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo argues that so-called American values such as colorblindness, meritocracy, private property, and individual rights are dismissed by the left and instead are being replaced by ideas of equity. While arguing that CRT attacks American values, Rufo emphasizes the difference between equality and equity. While equality brings all Americans together, he says that equity divides America into racialized categories and endorses active racial discrimination. Although the definition of equity is the quality of being fair and impartial, Rufo sees equity as the antithesis of “individual freedom, equality under the law and colorblind public policy” (Rufo, 2021). According to Rufo, the left is disillusioned by the “idea of equality under the law” and instead attempts to revive Marxist ideology (Rufo, 2021). The fear of a Communist revolution is one prominent throughout conservative circles and has been proven as a tool to mobilize and connect with voters and otherwise ordinary people.

Rufo uses three different tools to frame the debate for conservatives. He embraces anti-communism, calls on theoretical framings, and creates tangible enemies through his rhetoric

and writings. As the founder of the discourse over CRT, these tools are mirrored by other conservatives and propagate dangerous ideas in the conservative mainstream.

### *Anti-Communist Rhetoric as a Tool*

An especially interesting element of Rufo's argument is this fearmongering about a Communist revival. He emphasizes that CRT was founded in Marxist thought and argues that critics attempt to stir a Marxist revolution in America and the West more broadly. In his explainer video of CRT, he says that Marx's ideas "unleashed man's oldest and darkest brutalities," and that countries that went through Marxist revolutions ended in "disaster" with huge "body counts" (Rufo, 2021). A common talking point among the right, Rufo echoes fears about communism and the brutal regimes that arose in the past. Rufo's rhetoric is reminiscent of the McCarthyist "Red Scare" and the language used in the early 1950s. McCarthy's fearmongering created a climate of fear and suspicion across America, and although Rufo may not intentionally be doing this, his language has serious climatic consequences. By connecting CRT to the greater American cultural fear of communism, he connects and mobilizes Americans to act against progressivism. Rufo's constant reminder of horrible histories of communism connects CRT with violence and horror, rather than what it is—a framework through which one can examine society. He also contrasts CRT and leftist scholarly work with American principles, arguing that Marxists were against how Americans could thrive economically: "education, hard work, and community support" (Rufo, 2021). Rufo also argues that Marxists and radicals (such as the Black Panthers), as the first critical theorists in the 1960s, attempted to coopt the Civil Rights Movement and eventually lost out to the more moderate ideas of the time. Rufo argues that the "levers of state power are being turned against the American people, with no sign of slowing down" (Rufo,

2021). CRT as a whole is, to Rufo—and now the right—an attempt to revive Marxist thought and encourage a Communist revolution in the U.S. Because of the Republican party's newfound weakness in the suburbs, the conservative movement is attempting to convince suburban voters that the left represents an “unthinkable Marxist menace” (Bittle, 2021). The anti-Communist movement has deep ties and is an essential frame for the right to use.

Since the 1950s, when the modern conservative movement arose, the political right worked to make the American public believe that liberalism and communism were the same. McCarthy's unfounded crusade against supposed Communists shaped conservative beliefs, and these sentiments still hold today. Communist regimes were, at one time, a possible threat to capitalistic empires. However, as Jodi Dean argues, anti-communism is a “pervasive ideology of capitalism” with strong affective pulls and uses fear and emotion to control norms and beliefs (Dean, 2019). Capitalist regimes such as the United States use anti-communism as a tool to protect and immunize themselves against critique, rebellion, or change (Dean, 2019).

Anti-Communism is “crucial to the maintenance of the fiction that there is no alternative to capitalism” (Dean, 2019). Dean's work helps explain why Rufo and other conservatives use the anti-Communist rhetoric as a scare tactic to incite and mobilize otherwise ordinary people. The threat of communism is the threat of the end of the world as we know it. All of the social and cultural change happening reflects the looming end of American society. Rufo himself believes that the Marxist strain of CRT is a “really profound pairing of the destructive instinct, a desire to smash society as it's been known, paired with this very utopian instinct, that once we smash society something will happen that we can't explain, outline, or predict... human nature will be different” (Wallace-Wells, 2021). There is a distinct, affective fear of the alternative to current society. Rufo and other conservatives are scared of the progressive changes, such as

implementing CRT's teachings into the government and schools, because they represent a Marxist threat to modern American society.

### *Theoretical Tools*

Rufo also draws on Orwellian frames by depicting a future guided by CRT that is dystopian and totalitarian. Orwell's book *1984* describes the danger of a surveillance state molding a docile society. In specific contexts, calling on Orwell's vision of a dangerous future can be helpful. However, when used regarding CRT, it overemphasizes the real-life implications of a theory. For example, he describes DEI Offices as tools that "serve as a political office to enforce new orthodoxy and punishing dissent," clearly a purposeful misinterpretation of both the scope and intentions of DEI efforts (Rufo, 2021). Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training is a hot topic right now—and rightfully so. DEI trainings are one essential part of the larger effort to address biases, emphasize the importance of diversity, and create an inclusive environment. Nevertheless, DEI trainings are not making the impact that the right argues it does. There is little evidence that DEI trainings affect the behavior of men and white employees, despite being the target of many of these trainings. So Rufo's overemphasis that CRT in the workplace and school creates an Orwellian, dystopian future in which Americans are being indoctrinated is simply dramatic (Chang et al., 2019). He also says that critics are creating an alternate reality that must be confronted to prevent this dystopian future, thereby mobilizing people to act against a nonexistent threat (Rufo, 2021).

As discussed in Chapter Four, this kind of language is dangerous. It mobilizes people to create real-life political, cultural, and social dissent against cultural changes that most workers appreciate (Caminiti, 2021). CRT is "dishonest and manipulative," as well as a "phenomenon of

political power” that challenges American ideals and must be “defeated” (Rufo, 2021). Rufo does not elaborate on what kind of action needs to be taken to “defeat” CRT, which is dangerous in itself as it allows for extremists and radicals to subvert this movement for greater, and potentially more dangerous, efforts.

### *Villainizing Individuals to Funnel Anger*

One example of Rufo's rhetoric against CRT is his particular interest in attacking influential scholar Ibram X. Kendi. By targeting Kendi as the face of CRT, Rufo creates a clear enemy for the right. Not only is CRT as a whole a concept to fight against, but there are specific figureheads whom the right can fight. This is an important and strategic move on Rufo's part in an attempt to discredit and villainize CRT while simultaneously mobilizing conservatives against scholars. Clearly, Kendi, a New York Times #1 bestselling author, professor, and National Book Award winner, is a threat to conservatives and is one of the faces of the changing culture that the right is terrified of.

Rufo goes as far as to say that Kendi is a “false prophet” and that his “religion of ‘antiracism’ is nothing more than a marketing-friendly recapitulation of the academic left’s most pernicious ideas” (Rufo, 2021). Calling Kendi and CRT a religion draws on ideas of America as a Christian nation under attack, similar to those that bubbled up after 9/11. As seen here, Rufo is adept at calling on potent cultural themes and framing debates successfully. He calls Kendi a fake anticapitalist who translates “ivory-tower theories into media- and corporate-friendly narrative” (Rufo, 2021). However, he argues that Kendi's policy proposals are “much more alarming than his fraudulent posturing” (Rufo, 2021). Rufo says that Kendi, and other critics, call for racial discrimination against white people and that his policy proposals “verge on the

totalitarian” (Rufo, 2021). This incendiary language scares people who have not read Kendi’s award-winning book “How to Be an Antiracist” and reframes the issue from an approach that attempts to confront racist histories and rectify present injustices to one that wants to upheave America as a whole. This is not to say that some critics are not calling for the end of the American empire—however, this is not the vast majority of scholars, nor is this idea prominent in CRT circles.

Rufo’s obsession with scholars like Kendi and Cheryl Harris—to the point where they are presented as the only critics in the vast movement—shows the fear and confusion about CRT. Using only specific scholars in the movement who are highly visible and subverting their ideas to promote an uber-nationalist, fearmongering ideology, Rufo shows the right’s fear of a culture shift away from the historical dominance of white, Christian, American ideals.

### **Why CRT?**

These rhetorical attacks on CRT come together to paint a picture of an America under attack. Rufo describes a world in which some scholars are forcing a specific, radical kind of thinking onto the American people that is changing the country's foundational principles. This dangerous and inflammatory rhetoric has real-life impacts in cities and towns across the U.S., as will be explored in Chapter Four. The grounding of this rhetoric is the culture war that conservatives have been fighting since the Obama years. In the right’s eyes, a progressive racial ideology counters American values, and the U.S. is under attack. CRT is a new hot term that has replaced “political correctness” in the fight against progressive politics and social reform. Rufo explains that the right “needed new language for these issues” because political correctness “doesn’t apply anymore” (Wallace-Wells, 2021). CRT is the stronger, more specific, and targeted

term that describes how political elites are, in the eyes of the right, “seeking to reengineer the foundation of human psychology and social institutions through the new politics of race” (Wallace-Wells, 2021). CRT has specific people to point to, such as Kendi and Harris, and a history rooted in dissent against American institutions. These combine to create the perfect enemy for the right. Whereas correctness is a “mechanism of social control,” CRT is a tool for political and social control, thereby posing a more significant threat to Americans (Wallace-Wells, 2021). Rufo needed a villain in the larger culture war, and CRT was perfect. CRT emphasizes a “deep historical and intellectual pattern to anti-racism” that was enraging for people encountering it for the first time (Wallace-Wells, 2021). This is the same fight over race that conservatives have been fighting for decades, just rebranded.

### **Rufo’s Rhetoric Entering the Conservative Mainstream: A Case Study**

Rufo’s rhetoric found its way into conservative circles through news reports and articles, highlighted by the Heritage Foundation’s report on CRT titled “Critical Race Theory: The New Intolerance and Its Grip on America” (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). The Foundation frames CRT as “an ongoing effort to reimagine the United States as a nation riven by groups, each with specific claims on victimization” (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). It is described as an “intolerance” that weakens “public and private bonds that create trust and allow for civic engagement” (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). Finally, the Foundation frames one of CRT’s ideas as an attempt to replace all systems of power to replace the current worldview with one that emphasizes only the oppressors and the oppressed. The idea that CRT divides people into two distinct groups comes directly from Rufo. He wrote that CRT trainings “have pushed a deeply ideological agenda that includes reducing people to a racial essence, segregating them...” (Rufo, 2020). The Heritage

Foundation goes as far as to say that Hispanic and Asian-American ethnicities were “contrived” by the government, and various gender identities were “manufactured” by New York City (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). They present the diversification of affirmed identities as a part of a scheme to control the public that has succeeded. Identity politics, social justice, and progressivism are now the “paradigm” that controls many Americans (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). To conservatives, new identity-making is “divisive, flout constitutional equal protection, and represents a direct threat to republican self-rule” (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). CRT is seen as an attempt to divide the U.S. to overthrow the government in a Marxist revolution.

The Heritage Foundation also echoes Rufo’s rhetoric on Marxism and anti-Communism. Their report argues that leftists and radicals in the mid-1900s decided to create categories of minorities instead of focusing on workers because the potential to stoke grievances was more potent (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). CRT as a whole is believed to be an “unremitting attack on Western institutions and norms in order to tear them down” that was also a “Nietzschean attack on objectivity” (Butcher & Gonzalez, 2020). Through pitting American values and norms against a biased, Marxist attack, conservatives emphasize their “goodness” and commitment to equality compared to the created enemy. They argue that American values such as free-market capitalism, hard work, ability, and “other virtuous traits” are under attack and will be abolished under CRT. Conservatives create a paradigm in which inclusivity, acknowledgment of systemic and institutional wrongs, and equity are incompatible with traditionally-American (in other words, white, Christian, conservative) norms.

These introductory descriptions of CRT and its tenets are dangerous because they implicitly fearmonger and attempt to scare ordinary people into fighting to maintain the current politic. They echo Rufo’s sentiments, which are overtly attempting to create an enemy out of

CRT and progressivism. Rufo himself admitted CRT is a convenient enemy for the right, and framing conservatives as the side that wants so-called absolute equality calls on a moral argument to mobilize the right. Similar to the colorblind Evangelicalism of John MacArthur that will be discussed in Chapter Three, Rufo pushes a colorblind and supposedly merit-based agenda that appeals to white Americans who highly value individualism and meritocracy.

### **Political Implications of Rhetoric**

There are both political and social implications of Rufo's and the right's anti-CRT rhetoric. Politically, Rufo aimed to "persuade the President of the United States to issue an executive order abolishing critical race theory in the federal government," which is exactly what former President Trump did (Cineas, 2020). Within three weeks of Rufo's July 2019 appearance on Fox News discussing CRT, Trump signed an executive order that banned the use of CRT by federal departments and contractors in diversity trainings (Harris, 2021). Rufo flew to D.C. to help draft this executive order that the White House issued. Trump waged war against "race-based ideologies," or theories and practices like CRT that examine institutional and systemic racism in the U.S. (Cineas, 2020).

This most recent fight against progressivism started on September 4, 2019, when Russell Vought released a memo that instructed federal agencies to identify any CRT or white privilege training within their departments. The memo says that the Trump administration aimed to stop all funding programs that suggest the "United States is an inherently racist or evil country or that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil" (Cineas, 2020). Trump's memo, released later in September, directed agencies to stop anti-bias trainings that "run counter to the fundamental beliefs for which our Nation has stood since its inception" (White House, 2020). The memo says

that these trainings “engender division and resentment” within the workforce and “undercut our core values as Americans” (White House, 2020). The memo calls CRT and other diversity trainings “propaganda efforts” and “unAmerican” (White House, 2020). These sentiments directly mirror Rufo’s rhetoric, and his influence on the document is quite clear. For example, Trump spoke at the National Archives in September 2020 and called CRT a “Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression, and that our entire society must be radically transformed” (Lang, 2020). This language is explicitly fearmongering, arguing that CRT will completely uproot the U.S. as it is known and change the culture in radical ways. He continues, saying that “CRT is being forced into our children’s schools, it’s being imposed into workplace trainings, and it’s being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors, and families” (Lang, 2020). Bringing the fight to personal grounding by connecting it to schools is an attempt by Trump to stoke fear in people. It has had social and political implications outside of the federal government.

Rufo has provided his analysis of CRT to at least six state legislatures, including New Hampshire. State Representative Keith Ammon, a Republican, introduced a bill prohibiting schools and organizations contracted with the state from endorsing “divisive concepts” (Harris, 2021). In particular, this bill would “forbid ‘race or sex scapegoating,’ questioning the value of meritocracy, and suggesting that New Hampshire—or the United States—is ‘fundamentally racist’” (Harris, 2021). This bill is one of the dozens of bills that Republicans have introduced in state legislatures. Rufo’s language and fight against CRT have major political implications.

High-ranking officials like Ron DeSantis and Tom Cotton used his phrases when tweeting about CRT, Rufo has traveled to D.C. to speak with Congress members, and he worked closely with Trump. Clearly, his work is making a significant impact on the political playing field. Among the

GOP and conservative base CRT is a major political issue. With over 50% of its viewers being Republicans and ideologically conservative, Fox News has increased its coverage and commentary on the issue (Public Opinion Strategies, 2019). Republicans see this as a significant element of their plan to win voters in 2022's midterms and use it as a talking point in 2020 during those midterms as well (Harris, 2021).

### **Chapter 3: John MacArthur's Attack on CRT and Social Justice**

#### **Profile of John MacArthur**

John MacArthur is an Evangelical Christian pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, CA, and president of The Master's College and Seminary. In addition, he is an internationally-known radio preacher for his show, Grace to You. Acknowledged by Christianity Today as one of the most influential preachers of his time, he has authored or edited over 150 books, some of which, like the MacArthur Study Bible, has sold over 1 million copies.

Primarily working within conservative Protestant circles, he is one of the leading fundamentalist ministers and insists on preaching and teaching an inerrant Bible. MacArthur also has a controversial and nontraditional understanding of the Bible as a dispensationalist. Dispensationalism is, to MacArthur, a “fundamentally correct system of understanding God’s program through the ages” (MacArthur, 1988). It is a hermeneutic system for the Bible that considers biblical history divided into dispensations or defined periods or ages in which God has allotted distinctive administrative principles. Additionally, MacArthur describes faith as “a firm conviction... a personal surrender... [and] conduct inspired by such surrender,” which is somewhat abnormal for Evangelical preachers who do not emphasize the “work” of faith as heavily (MacArthur, 1988). Finally, he is considered a Calvinist and a proponent of expository preaching (preaching that details the meaning of a particular text or passage of the Scripture). (*John MacArthur*, 2021).

MacArthur is no stranger to controversy, as he has taken extreme stances on various issues from gender and sexuality to broader cultural shifts. His blog on Grace to You highlights many of his extreme stances, and he was recently in the news as he accused the Southern Baptist Convention of taking a “headlong plunge” by allowing women to be preachers (Lee, 2019). As

one of the most influential Evangelical preachers of the last fifty years, MacArthur represents the Evangelical right's understanding of CRT and social justice more broadly. His rhetoric is mirrored by other preachers and believers, and his work highlights his conservative Evangelical beliefs.

### **MacArthur's Anti-CRT Rhetoric**

MacArthur attacks CRT in two distinct ways: first through a lens of a dangerous cultural change, and second by arguing that current social justice movements are incompatible with Evangelicalism. He uses social justice as a lens through which to address CRT and progressive ideologies like feminism. First, I will discuss how MacArthur grounds his rhetoric in Biblical and personal frames. Then, I will analyze how MacArthur uses a threat of culture change and CRT's supposed incompatibilism with Evangelicalism to mobilize Evangelicals.

#### *Grounding of Rhetoric in Bible*

MacArthur's critique of CRT is grounded in the Bible and biblical texts, which he uses to frame his argument against progressivism. He bases his ideology on the idea that "there are not different flavors of justice in the Bible;" there is only true justice, "defined by God Himself and always in accord with His character" (MacArthur, 2018). Therefore, social justice or transformative justice is not a real, acceptable way of dealing with societal and individual wrongs. Because the only justice in the world is God's, wrong and right are completely determined by Him, and efforts to right societal wrongs are incorrect and unjust. This diminishing view of societal norms and justice is ignorant and dismissive of valid and proven societal critiques, such as CRT.

MacArthur also calls on equity and righteousness, which are paired with justice in Scripture and are ideals that are foundational to God's justice. He calls on Jeremiah 5:26-29, Romans 13:1-7, Leviticus 24:17-22, 1 Thessalonians 4:11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10 to reinforce his definitions of justice, equity, and the values of righteousness. Using these Biblical groundings, he contrasts so-called true justice with "hatred, envy, strife, jealousy... anger... factions, hostility, divisiveness, bitterness, pride, selfishness... vindictiveness," all of which are "the self-destructive works of the flesh" and thereby unjust (MacArthur, 2018). These, unlike God's true justice, are the values promoted by social justice. Furthermore, the message of social justice

diverts attention from Christ and the cross. It turns our hearts and minds from things above to things on this earth. It obscures the promise of forgiveness for hopeless sinners by telling people they are hapless victims of other people's misdeeds (MacArthur, 2018).

Social justice, therefore, undermines the message of God Himself and promotes evil values that will corrupt the soul of the Church as a whole. Because social justice "omits or minimizes" qualities of righteousness, true justice, and equity, it cannot be called moral equity or justice. Therefore, true Christians must rebuke and reject it (MacArthur, 2018). This is a hardline, fundamentalist, and innerant view of justice and society.

Additionally, MacArthur calls on Ephesians 2:14-15 to argue that Christ will "solve" racism: "In Christ alone are the barriers and dividing walls between people groups broken down, the enmity abolished, and differing cultures and ethnicities bound together in one new people" (MacArthur, 2019). He argues that true believers have a "spiritual unity in Christ," which people "disdain in favor of fleshly factions" (MacArthur, 2019). He says that the real message of the

Gospel compels people towards reconciliation rather than redressing historical wrongs. This is precisely what the Evangelical Church did in the 1980s—the Church attempted to reconcile with Black Americans despite promoting harmful and dangerous political and social views that would continue to disadvantage marginalized groups. Evangelicals are hypocritical and dismissive to toss the real work of reconciliation, which involves acknowledging historical wrongs and taking action to ensure views, ideologies, and steps are taken to prevent harm in the future, aside because the Bible says that God loves everyone. If the Evangelical Church had really made progress towards racial equity, there would not be this amount of animus towards progressive causes from leaders.

Finally, MacArthur calls on Leviticus 19:18, the second commandment, to argue that all white Evangelicals “stand together against every hint of racial animus” (MacArthur, 2019). This is despite data that shows that white Christians, as a whole, are more racist than nonreligious people (Jones, 2020). The colorblind Evangelicalism that arose in the 1980s still holds firm today, exemplified by MacArthur’s language. Dismissing racism and racial bias to say that all people are equal under God while simultaneously supporting discriminative policies and agendas is hypocritical and indicative of the real sentiments of white Evangelicals. Although outward racism is condemned, the more covert and subtle forms of racism that prevent equality are still maintained and supported by MacArthur and the Church. The harmful and dismissive colorblind rhetoric is echoed in how MacArthur frames his arguments personally.

### *Personal Grounding*

In his writings, MacArthur calls on the now-dubbed “Some of my best friends are Black” defense to argue that the real problem is not with Black liberation or other forms of racial

progress but with social justice overshadowing so-called true, Godly justice. Anthea Butler's work explores this sentiment, wherein white Evangelicals historically allowed Black people to join their churches and communities; however, the much deeper racial animus and covert racism remained. MacArthur is a clear example of Butler's argument. He writes that he "[deplores] racism and all the cruelty and strife it breeds" and tells stories of his time ministering in the South during the Civil Rights Era (MacArthur, 2019). Despite formal racial reconciliation and doing away with overt forms of racism in himself and his Church, MacArthur's attack on CRT and social justice as a whole indicate the deep, covert racism insidious in white Evangelical churches. He dismisses natural barriers towards equality and argues that "the only long-term solution to every brand of ethnic animus is the gospel of Jesus Christ" (MacArthur, 2019). This is not to dismiss the power of religion to bring groups together—however, to ignore centuries of systemic, institutional barriers that have prevented equality from being achieved and describe racism as simply personal is ignorant and simplistic.

Additionally, despite the history of racism within the Evangelical tradition explained in Chapter One, MacArthur argues that no "authentically Evangelical church" would disrespect or exclude someone based on race or ethnicity.

MacArthur's lived experience would show otherwise. Many Evangelical churches are over 60% white and less than 10% Black (Pew, 2014). His church, Grace Community Church, has a leadership board with 11 white men and one Black man. Of 50 Elders, one is a Black man. The rest are white men. He says that because race relations are not what they were fifty years ago and overt white supremacy and racism are "almost universally condemned," there is no longer an issue of racism. However, clearly there is an issue of racism and discrimination in his church. The leadership may not be overtly racist to Black people, but through their sermons, language,

rhetoric, and support of specific policies, they are working against equality. Sun Valley, CA, where MacArthur's Church is located, is nearly 75% white and only about 2% Black. Therefore, it is both unsurprising and almost expected that race is not an issue because these people are not seeing racism in their everyday lives. Furthermore, Emerson and Smith highlight a racial isolation in white Evangelicalism that limits their opportunities to witness the "pervasiveness and severity of racial problems" (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Contact theory (Allport, 1954) can thus explain the hostility towards diversity and racial equity efforts. Contact theory argues that extensive and extended intergroup contact changes racial perspectives and interpretations of racial problems. Therefore, white Evangelicals' limited contact with Black Americans due to racially and culturally similar congregations tends to intensify conflict, prejudice, and social stereotypes.

Thus, by presenting racism as a thing of the past and unrelated to the world now, MacArthur ignores the actual impacts of structural, institutional, and individual racism that has led to the current income gap, astonishing rates of imprisonment, and more that highlight the inequality between Black and white Americans.

### *Culture Change*

One of MacArthur's primary attacks on the acceptance of social justice in the Church is that it is a pragmatic pander to the mainstream culture of America. Alongside feminism, LGBTQ+ causes, progressive immigration policies, animal rights, and "other left-wing political causes," the political left attempted to win Evangelical acceptance through the label of social justice (MacArthur, 2018). Embracing social justice is "the next logical step for a church that is completely ensnared in efforts to please the culture" (MacArthur, 2018). MacArthur argues that

the Church needed to connect with popular culture to reach broad audiences, thereby surrendering historic forms of worship in favor of “rock-concert formats and everything else the church could borrow from the entertainment industry” (MacArthur, 2018). The embrace of social justice is simply another step in the Church’s copying of popular culture’s preferences and “fleeting fads” (MacArthur, 2018).

Additionally, MacArthur argues that the language of social justice is the same language of secularists who advocate for “all kinds of deviant lifestyles and ideologies” (MacArthur, 2018). MacArthur claims that Evangelicals supporting social justice hide its meaning because of its attachment with secularism. He argues that accepting progressive ideas on sexual orientation, gender identities, and gay marriage are other examples of some Evangelicals borrowing “moral rationalizations from secular culture” (MacArthur, 2019). Therefore, the so-called social justice movement threatens the Evangelical conviction and threatens massive cultural change that would end Evangelicalism as it is meant to be in MacArthur’s eyes. If the inclusion of social justice widened the scope of the gospel, the gospel would be put “so far out of focus that its actual message will be lost” (MacArthur, 2018).

Furthermore, the secularization of America is a broader enemy for MacArthur. He sees the contrast between social justice and traditional values as a “culture clash” and sees Americans’ contempt for racial bigotry [as] now so acute that even accidental cultural or ethnic insensitivity is regularly met with the same resentment as blind, angry racism—even a simple social gaffe is likely to be treated as bigotry. There are people—increasing numbers of them—so obsessed with this issue that they seem able to find proof of racism in practically everything said or done by anyone who does not share their worldview (MacArthur, 2019).

The acceptance of social justice, and CRT more specifically, is an example of how the Church and the state are becoming secular, progressive realms in which traditional people are not accepted. This argument mirrors the culture war response in which a Marxist revolution takes over America. He explains social justice as being “employed as political shorthand by radical leftists as a way of calling for equal distribution of wealth, advantages, privileges, and benefits—up to and including pure Marxist socialism” (MacArthur, 2018). He says that leftists “purposely use such arguments to foment resentment, class warfare, ethnic strife, the tension between the genders, and other conflicts between various people groups” so that they can eventually restructure society to fit a leftist and Marxist society (MacArthur, 2018). It is commonly believed that socialism and Communism are incompatible with religion, so MacArthur’s fear of a Marxist revolution is not surprising. Despite this presumption, there are countless religious and leftist groups, for example, Standing Up for Racial Justice’s Faith group, a national anti-racist, faith-based organization. In addition, he argues that identity politics is “destructive of our nation,” a subtle hint to a Christian nation under attack (MacArthur, 2019). These arguments are echoed by conservatives, even nonreligious ones, throughout political discourses. Before Rufo “discovered” CRT, white Evangelicals like MacArthur had been attacking social justice and “laying the groundwork for the attack on CRT” (Johnson, 2021).

### *Incompatible with Evangelicalism*

Although more people are learning about CRT, many Evangelicals oppose it because they believe their faith compels them to do so (Johnson, 2021). Evangelical leaders argue against CRT and social justice as a whole because it reshapes what justice means. Social justice is an alternative view to the mainstream, Christian, white understanding of American culture. It

questions, reframes, and confronts institutions and systems that have historically held strong and shaped American culture. In MacArthur's view, social justice challenges God and the Church's authority and is simply incompatible with the beliefs of a true Evangelical.

MacArthur argues that social justice-centered rhetoric demands "repentance and reparations from one ethnic group for the sins of its ancestors against another. It's the language of the law, not gospel—and worse, it mirrors the jargon of worldly politics, not the message of Christ" (MacArthur, 2019). The "newfound obsession" with social justice is a significant shift that is "moving many people (including some key evangelical leaders) off message and onto a trajectory that many other movements and denominations have taken before, always with spiritually disastrous results" (MacArthur, 2019). He explains that "When you decide to let the culture interpret the Scripture, and you need cultural cues to translate the Bible, the horse is out of the barn" (Johnson, 2021). Essentially, MacArthur argues that social justice is distracting from the message of the Bible and creating a shift in Evangelicalism that could lead to disaster.

Social justice is a subtle but dangerous threat to Evangelicalism as a whole. He argues that accepting social justice is an "assault on the authority and sufficiency of Scripture" and is destructive (MacArthur, 2019). Essentially, accepting progressive ideologies and values would lead to a new definition of justice—one that is not God's justice—and a society that rejects Christian principles. One significant example of how Evangelical leaders have spread the notion that social justice, CRT, and progressivism are incompatible with their beliefs and practices is the Dallas Statement. This controversial resolution condemns social justice's involvement in the Church.

### **MacArthur's Influence on Evangelical Rhetoric: A Case Study**

The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel, also known as the Dallas Statement, was one of MacArthur's most significant so-called accomplishments in rebuking social justice, CRT, and progressive trends. A year before the Southern Baptist Convention's infamous resolution on CRT, MacArthur and other influential Evangelical leaders drafted the Dallas Statement. It "decries a perceived threat of orthodox Christianity being influenced by the 'social gospel'" and argues that progressive influences on the Church is creating "an onslaught of dangerous and false teachings that threaten the gospel, misrepresent Scripture, and lead people away from the grace of God in Jesus Christ" (Wingfield, 2021). This document is a crucial example of how conservative Evangelicals see CRT as a "worldview that is a direct threat to the gospel itself" (Wingfield, 2021). MacArthur influenced conservative Evangelical pastors to later write their resolution against CRT, which raised the profile of the debate and influenced the White House's and Trump's policies and rhetoric.

The Dallas Statement contains 14 articles and addresses the sociocultural areas of race, gender and gender roles, sexuality, and more. It argues that progressivism and social justice infiltrate the Evangelical Church and will lead to its downfall. In its first article, the document says that Evangelicals "deny that the postmodern ideologies derived from intersectionality, radical feminism, and critical race theory are consistent with biblical teaching," which sets the tone for the rest of the resolution that condemns a wide variety of behaviors, identities, and actions (*Statement on Social Justice*, 2018).

One way the resolution rejects CRT without explicitly doing so is in its use of the Bible as justification. For example, article two says that Evangelicals "deny that God-given roles, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, sex or physical condition or any other property of a person either negates or contributes to that individual's worth as an image-bearer of God"

(*Statement*, 2018). Although this article never explicitly says anything about white, cis, straight, able-bodied people, its implicit message is that white people cannot be inherently “bad” or have negative implications because of how God sees them. They argue that because God sees all his children equally, any inherent racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., is null and societal conditions that lead to these covert and subconscious feelings are irrelevant. For example, even if someone were to grow up conditioned to dislike or be outright hostile towards Black people, it does not matter in the eyes of God, who is the only one whose judgment matters. Essentially, they argue that identity plays no role in achieving justice or social contexts—something that has been refuted countless times. MacArthur’s influence here is evident—he uses the same argument and frames social justice in the same way. They argue that because everyone is born a sinner, there is “no difference in the condition of sinners due to age, ethnicity, or sex. All are depraved in all their faculties and all stand condemned before God’s law. All human relationships, systems, and institutions have been affected by sin” (*Statement*, 2018). This colorblind rhetoric is dangerous and concerning in a larger cultural context.

The history of colorblindness in Evangelicalism has been examined before (see Butler 2021); however, it is imperative to be reminded of it in the context of the Dallas Statement. Evangelicals genuinely believe that their Christianity is a race that “comprises an all-encompassing identity,” therefore explaining why the economic, social, and political impacts of racism are consistently minimized in Evangelical circles (Butler, 2021). In the 1960s, colorblind Evangelicalism arose via groups like the American Family Association and Focus on Family, which fostered an Evangelical culture that promoted colorblindness and conservatism (Butler, 2021). During the civil rights movement and integration efforts, Evangelical groups spread a covert message that “morality was essential to preserving the nation and that sexual

immorality of America, including race-mixing, would be its downfall” (Butler, 2021). They sought acceptance in the mainstream social realm by preaching a colorblind gospel despite discretely supporting segregation and white nationalism (Butler, 2021). Echoed in the Dallas Statement, the sentiment that Jesus and the Bible would answer the problem of race and racism is the only approach to racial equity that conservative, white Evangelicals accept (Butler, 2021). Despite a broader social culture of racism, performances of racial reconciliation in the 1980s and 1990s accommodated Black Americans in their churches and schools. In the political realm, Evangelicals supported candidates and policies that were “unremittingly conservative” and designed to keep BIPOC groups out of power (Butler, 2021). So, the colorblind gospel of white Evangelicals is pervasive, dangerous rhetoric that contributes to continued covert racist sentiments and actions in the Church.

The statement also juxtaposes social and Biblical constructs by arguing that social justice is a mere social construct and not true justice, unlike Biblical or Godly justice, just like MacArthur does in his blog posts and sermons. Article three denies that true justice can be culturally defined, or that standards of justice that are merely socially constructed can be imposed with the same authority as those that are derived from Scripture... Relativism, socially-constructed standards of truth or morality, and notions of virtue and vice that are constantly in flux cannot result in authentic justice (*Statement*, 2018).

The contrast between what is “authentic justice,” or what is justice as in the Bible and by conservative Evangelical standards, and social justice that is “in flux” and “socially constructed” is unmistakable and an attempt to dismiss and minimize the real effects of marginalization and identity-based discrimination. Progressive calls for justice through the conservative Evangelical lens are merely a made-up and undefined concept that does not mean anything, unlike the justice

of God. If a “charge of sin or call to repentance” does not come from a “violation of God’s commandments,” it is illegitimate and unjust (*Statement*, 2018). This echoes MacArthur’s personal statements on CRT that claim social justice is not aligned or compatible with Biblical justice. MacArthur’s rhetoric around righteousness is reflected in Article three. The document states that “We further deny that Christians can live justly in the world under any principles other than the biblical standard of righteousness” (*Statement*, 2018). The notion of what is truly “right” is a point of contention across cultures but is a compelling theme in Christian America. For example, the document condemns LGBTQ+ folks in Articles Ten and Eleven and articulates a conservative worldview that defines morally and socially correct via the Bible. Homosexuality is a sin and a “disordered affection,” outright rejecting gay Christians—in fact, being gay and being Christian is not a “legitimate biblical category,” according to the Statement (*Statement*, 2018). The document's constant appeal to sinful behaviors and righteousness attempts to frame the argument against social justice, progressivism, and CRT as one of what is “truly” right and wrong.

MacArthur’s rhetoric on sinful behavior is echoed clearly in the Dallas Statement and connected to the condemnation of social justice in Articles Five and Six. For example, Article Five argues that all people are inherently sinners and “there is no difference in the condition of sinners due to age, ethnicity, or sex. All are depraved in all their faculties and all stand condemned before God’s law. All human relationships, systems, and institutions have been affected by sin” (*Statement*, 2018). Although this article appears, at first glance, to condemn racism, it fails in that it adopts the familiar colorblind rhetoric of the Church that erases real, systemic, and institutional racism that seriously impacts BIPOC, LGBTQ+, poor, and disabled (among other marginalized communities) communities. Labeling all negative sentiments and

their impacts as an inherent sin that cannot be addressed, cured, or fixed minimizes and closes an essential conversation about racism in the Church community. Likewise, arguing that no person “is morally culpable for another person’s sin” emphasizes the individualism of the Evangelical tradition but fails to address how communities can harm through inaction or acceptance of hate (*Statement*, 2018). The problem with colorblindness is that it negates real differences in the treatment of people. By arguing that all people are “ontological equals before God in both creation and redemption” and that Christians should not even categorize themselves by race ignores the harmful impacts the Church has had on people of different races over centuries (*Statement*, 2018). It is a shameful attempt at absolving Evangelicals from their duty to examine their racism.

Finally, they deny that any systemic or institutional change could address racism as a problem in America. In Article Eight, the document says that they “deny that laws or regulations possess any inherent power to change sinful hearts” (*Statement*, 2018). Although, to an extent, this is true, laws and policies have essential consequences in shaping communal and societal norms. They help build future generations and emphasize particular sentiments, feelings, and ways of expression and have the possibility to create better futures. Of course, laws and regulations cannot change certain subconscious feelings shaped by the family, community, and other relationships; however, they can create societal norms and define what is acceptable.

### **Mobilization of Evangelicals**

MacArthur’s rhetoric is so dangerous because he uses his words to mobilize white Evangelicals against social justice and CRT. He compels Christians to “employ the light of Scripture to scrutinize and evaluate the ideas currently being promoted in the name of social

justice” and outwardly rejects any form of social progressivism (MacArthur, 2018). He describes the current era as an “era of injustice” and one where “hatred of the truth is going to go to a level we haven’t seen it” (MacArthur, 2018).

Evangelicals are not only embracing this call to action but fighting for political and social changes that would reverse progressive advances. For example, United in Purpose (UIP), an influential organization that brings together leaders of the religious right, mobilized Evangelical leaders to connect with Trump in 2020 through faith-based messages and church outreach. This plan was called “Ziklag,” a town referenced in the Bible, and aimed to maintain control of the White House (Fang, 2020). Aiming to mobilize dormant Evangelical and conservative voters, UIP worked to reduce Democratic support among religious Black and Latinx voters via data mining and targeted ads on Facebook (Fang, 2020). UIP, although covert and subtle, is a massive financial and political tool of the Evangelical right and has had a massive impact in maintaining Republican connections with Evangelicals. Evangelicals are focusing on reclaiming the political sphere and maintaining their control over the elite branches of government. In 2018, 75% of white Evangelical or born-again Christians voted for Republican candidates, and it is likely that in 2022 Republicans will maintain or increase their level of support (Sciupac & Smith, 2018). Although messages from leaders like MacArthur call for widespread social change, without a hold on political institutions, the Evangelical right will not be able to stay in power.

Additionally, MacArthur describes the future as one in which people must fight for their beliefs under attack. Both culturally and religiously, Evangelicals are fighting against a changing culture destroying American Christian values. Trump was an answer to Evangelicals’ perceived social and cultural problems and was thereby promoted as God’s instrument (Trangerud, 2021). Voting for Trump was a religious duty for conservative Christians (Trangerud, 2021).

Evangelical leaders strategically promoted Trump as a national savior that would eventually establish God's kingdom on earth in the US (Trangerud, 2021). Through religious framing, leaders created a sense of urgency and defensiveness that mobilized Evangelicals in vast numbers against progressivism and the left. Although the connection between the Republican party and Evangelicals has always been strong, strategic framing of leaders and issues leads to an even tighter allyship between the two groups. By framing Trump as "God's solution to save America from its accelerating deterioration," America is presented as a spiritual battleground for the so-called Seven Mountains<sup>2</sup>. Leaders such as MacArthur framed Trump and his election in a way that compelled Evangelicals to act and fulfill a larger prophecy (Trangerud, 2021).

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<sup>2</sup> The Seven Mountains Mandate argues that Christians should attempt to establish God's kingdom by taking control of the seven gates of influence: religion, family, education, government, news media, entertainment, and business/economics.

## **Chapter 4: Anti-CRT Political Movement**

Protests over schools teaching CRT have become a hot topic in the U.S. over the past year, with school boards across the country often facing violent protests. Parents concerned about what their children are taught are rising against ideas that counter their own political beliefs. With support from national conservative institutions, they have disrupted the everyday work of teachers and school board members. This current movement springs primarily from the fear that students, especially white students, will be exposed to “damaging or self-demoralizing” ideas (Sawchuk, 2021). However, nearly all school districts say they do not teach CRT in their schools, and CRT is not a part of their curricula (Kingkade, 2021). Furthermore, some literature shows how the emotionality of whiteness can even block the teaching of CRT in urban environments (Matias et al., 2016). Therefore, the debate and movements around CRT in schools across the country are part of a strategic plan to mobilize white, conservative, and Evangelical voters in the 2022 midterms.

Conservatives are using CRT as an issue to compel conservatives into the political sphere at the local level. Organizations are fearmongering about CRT and its cultural implications that threaten conservative values. For example, the Heritage Foundation attributed the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, LGBTQ+ clubs in schools, diversity trainings, and more phenomena to CRT (Sawchuk, 2021). CRT has become a catchall for anything that addresses systemic racism, white privilege, or equity, diversity, and inclusion (Kingkade, 2021). The Foundation claims that CRT is “destructive and rejects the fundamental ideas on which our constitutional republic is based” (Sawchuk, 2021). This idea is an echo of Christopher Rufo’s sentiments about CRT, as he says that “Conservatives need to wake up. This is an existential threat to the United States. And

the bureaucracy, even under Trump, is being weaponized against core American values” (Wallace-Wells, 2021).

The debates around CRT are happening across the countries in small towns and suburbs, not large cities. So, they quickly become very personal and emotional (Kingkade, 2021). Moreover, the movements are disrupting the lives of otherwise nonpolitical people and changing the political landscape in light of the upcoming midterm elections.

There are two broad categories of anti-CRT movements: political and social. Politically, laws have passed in Idaho, Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Florida, and there are more bills in other states’ legislatures all over the country. Socially, 22 states saw anti-CRT protests and people interrupting school board meetings, with these protests often ending in violence and arrests (ACLEED, 2021). In this chapter, I will discuss the legislation being passed in states and cities around the country and the potential for a second Tea Party-esque wave of political action.

### **Political Action against CRT**

Conservatives are capitalizing on Rufo’s and MacArthur’s rhetoric and celebrity over CRT to push the issue into the national conversation and mobilize white conservatives. Rufo strategically guides the effort to reclaim formal political institutions alongside MacArthur’s work to empower white Evangelicals to fight back against cultural change. Their work on CRT has been influential and successful in mobilizing conservatives across the country to act in support of right-wing causes, like this, and not just in red states. These debates and movements appear everywhere regardless of traditional political leaning (Kingkade, 2021). For example, in 2021, there were more school board recall initiatives and petitions than there had been in over two

decades (Kingkade, 2021). Although school boards are usually nonpartisan, Republicans see the outrage over CRT in classrooms as an opportunity to get conservatives engaged at the local level and eventually the 2022 midterms (Kingkade, 2021). Influential Republicans, like Steve Bannon, argue that the “path to save the nation is very simple... through the school boards” (Kingkade, 2021). Thus, laws and bills are being introduced at the local, state, and national levels to ban CRT, mobilize and energize voters, and promote conservative values and causes.

### *Legislation against CRT*

Republicans around the country are introducing and passing legislation to ban CRT in classrooms at all levels of government. Although it would be nearly impossible to police what happens in every classroom in the U.S., these laws may have a “chilling effect” on teachers and cause the censoring of information out of fear of retaliation (Sawchuk, 2021). Most bills that have been written and passed are “so vaguely written that it’s unclear what they will affirmatively cover,” however, their mere existence is a success for Republicans in that it builds momentum for conservatives in the formal political sphere (Sawchuk, 2021). This is essentially a branch of the culture war waging in this country—Republicans are introducing legislation that would prevent progressive issues and causes to be taught to younger generations, thereby continuing the indoctrination of children into so-called traditional American values. Republicans have framed the teaching of CRT as an attempt by teachers to condition students into a specific, liberal, anti-American mindset (McGee, 2021). They claim that CRT teaches children to “hate each other and hate their country,” despite CRT not being taught in classrooms and not an ideology of hate (Bernstein, 2021). Regardless, laws have been passed that censor what can be

taught in classrooms and promote conservative values in the classroom. By examining this legislation, we can better understand the aims of conservative actors in a sociocultural context.

### *Case Study: Idaho State Legislature*

Idaho passed legislation in May 2021 that explicitly bans the teaching of CRT and prevents any schools that teach CRT or other material that could create division based on identity from receiving funding. Added to the Idaho Code, the law prevents the teaching of CRT because it often exacerbates and inflames divisions based on identity “in ways contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens” (H.R. 377, 2021). According to the bill, it prevents any public school, including public universities, from teaching that “any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior,” often found in CRT (H.R. 377, 2021). Additionally, it prohibits teaching that says that “individuals, by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same [identity]” (H.R. 377, 2021). These points echo Rufo’s, MacArthur’s, and conservative talking points that argue that CRT and discussing equity and social justice in schools could contribute to division and tension among students and the fear that students are being indoctrinated in schools.

Furthermore, the law states that no public school or university can “compel students to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere” to any ideology that would contribute to the fracturing of the nation (H.R. 377, 2021). Essentially, the bill explicitly prevents progressive teaching points about current events in schools. It prevents any money from being spent on any public school that acts in a prohibited manner to enforce this law (H.R. 377, 2021).

Opponents to the bill face a long, uphill battle to get H.R. 377 repealed. Many of Idaho's legislators and leaders are pushing against CRT and progressivism in schools, and teachers are facing threats of being doxxed if they show support of CRT. Layne McInelly, the Idaho Education Association president, explains that the bill's passage highlights a "'monster under the bed' problem brought about by a false and misleading narrative that some legislators have willfully conflated. They aim to diminish the public's trust in our teachers and schools, just to come back next year and push to privatize education" (Asmelash, 2021). One organization, the Idaho Freedom Foundation, published a list of 14 teachers who signed a petition to defend CRT in classrooms (Miller, 2021). Backed by conservative organizations, legislators argue that CRT in schools is "one of the most significant threats facing our society today... we must find where these insidious theories and philosophies are lurking and excise them from our education system" (Asmelash, 2021).

In addition, national and state-wide organizations are empowering and supporting Idaho's leaders to attack CRT and progressivism in schools to defend American values and protect children. For example, Idaho Lt. Governor Janice McGeachin created a task force to "examine indoctrination in Idaho education and protect our young people from the scourge of critical race theory, socialism, communism, and Marxism" (Asmelash, 2021). The arguments of conservative leaders in Idaho come directly from Rufo's repertoire, and it is clear that his work provides the basis upon which legislators are attacking CRT. Despite the Idaho State Board of Education president saying that he has not "seen evidence of systematic indoctrination or stifling of free speech in a systematic way," legislators stoke fears of a Communist revival and are attacking progressivism and changing culture through legal channels (Parris, 2021).

Idaho's bill is an example of the legislative routes to censor information and shape a generation through education. As conservatives fear a massive culture shift away from their traditional values, they are using CRT as one path to fight back. Themes discussed in Chapter Two, such as anti-communism as a rhetorical tool, are prominent in Idaho and have come to the fore of the debate.

### *Tea Party 2.0?*

The Tea Party movement arose in the late 2000s and peaked in 2010, mobilizing large numbers of white conservative voters, especially Christians, through grassroots organizing. It is the most significant conservative political movement of the 21st century (Gervais & Morris, 2018). The movement's similarities to the religious right and white Evangelicals remained strong, and the two movements' memberships overlapped as well—around half of the Tea Party members were also reported to be members of the religious right (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). However, the Tea Party was distinctive in its organizational base, policy agenda, and movement culture. A deeper analysis of the Tea Party and its current revival can show the role of the religious right and white Evangelicals in future policy discussions.

The 2016 presidential election highlighted the Tea Party's relevance in national politics and continued influence on the formal political sphere. Reinvigorated blocs of Evangelical voters helped Republicans gain power in the White House, Congress, and statehouses all across the country (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). For example, Ted Cruz, Rand Paul, and Marco Rubio rose to national prominence with Tea Party and Evangelical support. The Tea Party is so successful because it connects with a broader field of conservative religiopolitical activism and thereby mobilizes voters to action (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). In addition, a majority of the Tea Party's

members, despite a split in religiosity, believe that America is a Christian nation, which highlights the inherent religious threads in Tea Party beliefs (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017).

As the Tea Party emerged, the religious right declined—was the Tea Party a new vehicle for advancing the religious right’s conservative religious causes, and is this the case today? In short, somewhat. Tea Party members were more religious than the general population, many of their candidates were Evangelicals, and members’ views on social issues mirrored those of the religious right (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). Furthermore, being Evangelical increased the likelihood of supporting the Tea Party, and many Tea Party groups formed in communities with high numbers of Evangelicals (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). So, Evangelicals certainly flocked to the Tea Party and joined in large numbers. However, Evangelicals had little influence on the Tea Party as a whole. The organizational base of the Tea Party centered on pro-business conservatism rather than church-linked social conservatism (Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). Nevertheless, the Tea Party changed the traditional conservative playing field and reshaped norms, values, and ideals for the religious right. Therefore, although white Evangelicals comprise a significant segment of the Tea Party, the Party is not synonymous with the religious right yet.

Additionally, the Tea Party was quite split regarding its goals—the movement never had a singular leader or agenda. Therefore, one faction was a reaction to Barack Obama’s presidency and America's changing “face” (Parker & Barreto, 2013; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Reactionary conservatives joined the Tea Party to push America back to an earlier time when “political, economic, and social power was concentrated in the hands of white, hereto-normative, Christian men” (Schmitt et al., 2019). This perspective manifests in conservative social views, especially on immigration (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012). Although this kind of rhetoric is not new, as detailed in earlier chapters, it certainly did contribute to Congress’ rejection of Obama’s

policy agenda and stricter immigration laws (Schmitt et al., 2019). In addition, the Tea Party's voting behavior pushed Congress to the right (Schmitt et al., 2019). Trump's economic populism and immigration policies certainly aligned with Tea Party goals and appealed to Tea Party voters and themes (such as immigrants as a threat) (Schmitt et al., 2019). The Tea Party "shook up the entire Republican Conference, shaping the legislative agendas of many Republican senators at the height of the movement" (Schmitt et al., 2019).

Although the Tea Party's membership split into two groups, one religious and one not, the overarching organization emphasized core values that were economic in nature and built collective action frames (Benford & Snow, 2000) regarding the mortgage crisis and deriving from a conservative, libertarian worldview (Prior, 2014). In addition, many southern Tea Party organizations used quality control to prevent social issues from entering their sphere. For example, Francis Prior (2014) shows how Tea Party leaders would prevent certain signs and language from being used so that controversy would not arise. So, although at least half of all Tea Party members were religious (and often Evangelical), their most significant issues and concerns like abortion were not being addressed and were actually pushed to the side.

Furthermore, the Tea Party and its successor, the Freedom Caucus, have purposefully disrupted "the governing capacity of the Republican party and have potentially threatened the party's long-term viability" (Rouse et al., 2021). Because of the nature of the two-party system in the U.S., factions of those parties infiltrate rather than operate independently as a third party, where they would gain much less influence (Blum, 2020). In addition, the Tea Party transcended traditional ideology by pushing an anti-establishment sentiment (Rouse et al., 2021). Certainly, the Tea Party is the far-right wing of the Republican Party—a whiter, more conservative sect. However, the Tea Party is also anti-establishment and intends to disrupt the partisan status quo

and eventually take over the Republican Party (Rouse et al., 2021). Therefore the ultra-conservative messaging being pushed by Evangelical and conservative leaders is concerning because it signals the shift further to the right.

Additionally, a growing network of support, energy, and resources is being thrown into the political debate around schools. Republicans are looking to lay the groundwork for a comeback in the 2022 midterms, and some see the high levels of local organizing on the right as reminiscent of the Tea Party (Beaumont & Groves, 2021). Opponents label much of the activism is labeled “astroturf” by opponents because although it looks like grassroots organizing, much of the activism is manufactured by powerful interest groups (Beaumont & Groves, 2021). However, the impacts of this activism have been felt across the country. Facebook groups, such as “GOP Tea Party 2.0,” are pushing back against mask mandates and other COVID regulations through local organizing. Essentially, the GOP and conservatives are gearing up to create a “red wave” in 2022 that will restore Republican power in Congress and mobilize white, Evangelical, conservative voters like in 2016 with Donald Trump’s election. Therefore, a “Tea Party 2.0” in 2022 is highly likely due to the organizing efforts of religious and political leaders. However, it is essential to understand where white Evangelicals stand in the debate considering their clout within conservative circles and voting power.

### *White Evangelical Response*

To understand the effects of anti-CRT legislation on societal norms and the sociopolitical realm, it is important to consider how white Evangelicals respond to conservative efforts. As a major voting bloc for the right, their contribution to Republican campaigns cannot be ignored. Republicans’ efforts to push social issues to the fore of the political debate clearly indicate that

they intend to run and win on societal and cultural tensions in 2022. Therefore, I will analyze Evangelical support or disagreement with these measures to predict voting patterns in 2022. First, I'd like to note that although Republicans have tried to make inroads with Black Evangelicals on social issues such as gay marriage, their messaging on CRT goes entirely counter to any indication of making progress with Black Evangelicals (Lockerbie, 2013). Furthermore, Black Evangelicals see a "much larger role for the national government in helping those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder," unlike white Evangelicals (Lockerbie, 2013). Thus despite agreement on some social and moral issues, white and Black Evangelicals are likely to vote quite differently. This political difference between the two groups is another divide between white and Black Evangelicals that highlights the differences in values and social actions between them.

Traditionally, factors that influence white Evangelical voting patterns include belief in the innerance of the Bible (Lockerbie, 2013), geographical location (Mather, 2011), and communal associations (Mather, 2011). Interestingly, generational gaps do not have a significant difference in terms of voting patterns regarding racial policies. Although post-Boomers are more comfortable with varying forms of religious and social diversity, they share attitudes with older generations towards racial inequality (Mather, 2011). Both generations emphasize individualism and meritocracy and their roles in racial inequality and oppose structural remedies like affirmative action (Mather, 2011). Additionally, when organizations, institutions, and state agencies mobilize politically along racial lines, as white Evangelicals and conservatives have done, they engage in "racial signification" (Winant, 1998). They thereby represent race as illusory and spurious. Efforts to politically mobilize conservative, white, Evangelical voters

change the social structure and represent race regarding the Evangelical, conservative agenda–decentered, flexible, and individual (Winant, 1998).

Today's response to CRT is unsurprising because of the long history of fundamentalist and Evangelical beliefs that entered the mainstream via the Tea Party and modern conservative movement (Stephens, 2015). Racism is still considered the product of a sinful heart, and notions of personal responsibility and individual salvation alongside suspicion of the state shape the beliefs and behaviors of white Evangelicals today (Stephens, 2015). It's also important to note that social actors like clergy and congregants play a central role in keeping Evangelical churches segregated via “race tests” on BIPOC (Bracey II & Moore, 2017). Thereby the combination of racially segregated churches with traditional conservative beliefs contributes to the response to progressivism as a whole and CRT in particular.

Furthermore, as exemplified by the Evangelical support of Trump, shared outgroup hostilities against groups that threaten the sociopolitical status quo are powerful markers of future political support (Marsh, 2021). White Evangelicalism's theology of individualism and American exceptionalism, alongside their high religiosity, make them more prone to defending the status quo through the electoral process (Marsh, 2021). White Christianity is increasingly protective of white supremacy and its sociopolitical dominance (Jones, 2020). It can then be expected that other white conservatives–religious and nonreligious–would exhibit the same behaviors and beliefs because of the social environments that rural and working-class white people exist in (Marsh, 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that white people, especially white Evangelicals, will continue to turn out in strong waves of support for Republican candidates, and we will likely see a “Tea Party 2.0” movement in the coming years.

## **Conclusion**

The war against CRT is a manufactured, inflammatory attempt at mobilizing issue-based voters in 2022. Because of the current tense and polarized political environment, conservatives are structuring their platform around specific sociocultural themes that incite and engage with their traditional base. Put simply, CRT is a scapegoat for conservatives. Rufo created fear among the right of a serious threat to conservative values that was affecting children, and Republicans used this issue as one way of manipulating voters into supporting and acting for their causes. Capitalizing on the fact that CRT is a hot topic, conservative Evangelical leaders spread hateful, harmful rhetoric denouncing the tenets of CRT and social justice as a whole. This, aligned with conservative efforts, will likely lead to widespread mobilization among white, conservative Evangelicals in future elections.

An abundance of evidence points to a looming wave of political activism from white, conservative Evangelicals in 2022 due, at least in part, to the anti-CRT rhetoric espoused by elites. Other issues, especially as vaccine mandates, mask mandates, and other COVID-19-related issues, will likely add to the storm of angry, defensive, and scared white Evangelicals taking to the polls and entering office.

However, it is still debatable if a Tea Party-like wave will happen again. Although the Tea Party certainly abides by Republican ideals, it also violently shook up the political scene and the status quo. For Republicans, 2022 is an essential opportunity to regain power. They cannot afford a grassroots movement that would prevent establishment Republicans from entering office and sweeping Congress. In 2014 Republicans worked to neutralize the Tea Party's impact on mainstream politics (Reinhard, 2013), so this may play out in the coming year. However, Trump completely changed the Republican party and mobilized millions of white, Evangelical,

conservative voters across the country in ways that they hadn't been before. So, there may be efforts to subdue these voters, or they could be tapped as a tool to regain power.

It will be important to consider the social movements against CRT alongside the political action to better understand the implications of the anti-CRT crusade among the right. Whereas the political efforts to ban CRT and counter it in K-12 schools create a legal standard and frame for how people perceive and understand CRT, the social action contributes to far broader racist, nationalist, anti-communist, and other conservative frameworks that shape America's political, cultural, and social landscape.

Coupled with political organizing against CRT are social movements and waves of protests across the country fighting against CRT in K-12 schools. Anti-CRT protests by concerned parents have swept the nation, with 22 states seeing anti-CRT demonstrations (ACLED, 2021). There are now at least 165 local and national groups trying to disrupt or block lessons on race and gender that are reinforced by conservative think tanks, media outlets, and law firms (Kingkade, 2021). These groups disrupt school board meetings, oust liberal school board members, and harass parents and teachers who support teaching about equity issues (Kingkade, 2021). Coupled with the anti-CRT legislation being passed, this constitutes an all-out attack on progressivism and equity efforts in schools.

The protests first started in October 2020 and peaked in June 2021 (ACLED, 2021). People are showing up to countless school board meetings and accusing schools of teaching CRT, from Fort Worth, TX to Louisville, KY. These protests were so disruptive that the National School Boards Association asked President Biden to step in, leading Attorney General Merrick Garland to direct the FBI to help schools handle the protests (Kamenetz, 2021). For example, the Loudoun County, VA School Board saw more than 200 people show up to a meeting, which led

to at least two people arrested (Bernstein, 2021). This level of mobilization is not happening sporadically, either. At least 50 other school districts have seen anti-CRT protests from Washington to Florida (Kingkade et al., 2021). These kinds of movements begin with real anger, in this case towards teachers and animus towards a changing culture; however national money and resources are uplifting, supporting, and encouraging protestors.

Some of the groups backing the anti-CRT movement include the Manhattan Institute, Citizens Renewing America, Parents Defending Education, Turning Point USA, the Conservative Baptist Network, the Proud Boys, and PragerU. These groups offer help to parents who question or object to what their children are being taught or how schools are being run. For example, the groups will sell t-shirts and lawn signs, make flyers, publicize events, supply information and legal advice, and provide template letters and scripts to parents wanting to disrupt their school boards (Kamenetz, 2021). They also provide webinars and training sessions to people wanting to protest (Kamenetz, 2021). Questions about who is funding, supporting, and encouraging these actions must be answered to better understand what interest groups are contributing to the debate over CRT, and more broadly, who is pushing white Americans to the right.

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