

Editorial: Virginia's war on ideas

Jan. 30, 2022

Virginia is at war with ideas.

The war was declared by Glenn Youngkin in his first official act as the 74th governor of the commonwealth. Executive Order No. 1 orders the Virginia secretary of education to “identify [all policies] that promote inherently divisive concepts ... Such policies shall be ended.”

That raises an obvious question: What is an “inherently divisive concept”?

Well, that depends on whom you ask — and who's doing the asking. It's often said that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter; the determination depends on the perspective of the observer.

In this case, the inquisitor is the state, in the form of Youngkin and the members of his administration. And they intend to root out any “divisive concept” in public school classrooms, something that — were Democrats in charge — would draw howls of opposition from the governor's fellow Republicans.

Putting the state in the role of policing history in the classroom is a deeply troubling prospect, especially in the birthplace of Jefferson and Madison. Involving parents in discussions about curriculum and instruction is a noble goal, but this approach hardly seems the way to do so.

Consider, for instance, the Civil War. The conflict between North and South is, by its very nature, a divisive topic of debate. One can reasonably argue that many of those who fought did so with courage and bravery and honorable intent, while also acknowledging the brutal inhumanity of human bondage that the South unquestionably sought to perpetuate.

The Civil War was complicated, and its scars are plainly evident to this day. Teaching those concepts is certain to inspire difficult conversations without educators fearing punishment should those conversations make students feel uncomfortable.

Extend that to the whole of American history. The founding of this country is both remarkable and romanticized, a nation born of ideals it routinely violated and whose authors fell short of in their own lives. The aspiration to meet them drives us even as our failure to achieve them infuriates us.

How can we talk about segregation without acknowledging that it was exclusively white officials who used the power of the state to deny Black Americans the full measure of their citizenship based only on the color of their skin? How can we discuss Virginia's history of racial terror and discrimination, including Massive Resistance to integration, without stating clearly who was responsible and why?

It's almost as though the critics would rather not have such discussions. But Youngkin insisted on the campaign trail, and has repeated since taking office, that Virginia will teach the full scope of history — the good and the bad. But history is, more often than not, a chronicle of “the bad” and this executive order intends to make its teaching perilous for educators, who will rightly fear wading into turbulent waters as a result.

But Youngkin isn't alone in his efforts. State Sen. Jen Kiggans, a Republican from Virginia Beach with aspirations for a seat in Congress, has sponsored a bill that would codify this unenforceable proposition in state law. What effect would it have? Nobody can say, though we can speculate it would be grim.

Let's not forget how the governor has proposed to collect information about potential violators: an email “tip line” he touted during a radio talk show appearance that week. The visceral response it received, along with comparisons to some of the darkest moments in history, should tell the administration it's on the wrong path.

Youngkin campaigned against “Critical Race Theory,” a framework taught in law schools employed as a catch-all term for policies and initiatives that seek to advance equity and diversity. Though it is not taught in public schools, it has been employed as a cudgel to beat back efforts to make classrooms and instruction more inclusive.

Virginia would be poorer should such efforts succeed, just as its students would be less prepared for their futures without understanding, discussing and debating difficult ideas in the classroom.

A war on ideas is a war Virginia doesn't need. It's a war the governor cannot win.