

Opinion: Students need to learn about the haters and the helpers of our history



Women at William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans yell at police officers during a protest against desegregation at the school on Nov. 15, 1960. (Bettmann Archive)

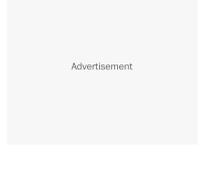
Opinion by [Michele L. Norris](#)
Columnist

Yesterday at 6:51 p.m. EDT

When a former federal marshal named Al Butler died almost a decade ago, he asked his wife to spread his ashes in front of an elementary school in New Orleans where he protected Black children as they tried to integrate all-White schools. He made this request because, he said, it was the most important work of his life. And he wanted people to always remember.

I thought of Butler recently when a group called Moms for Liberty tried to shut down the use of a [curriculum in Williamson County, Tenn.](#), that includes an autobiography by Ruby Bridges. As a 6-year-old in 1960, Bridges became an international symbol of the civil rights movement, and one of the first Black children to integrate New Orleans schools.

The Tennessee Moms argue that her book, "Ruby Bridges Goes to School: My True Story," contains too many truths that cut too close to the bone. The mothers find the story objectionable, [citing a description](#) of a "large crowd of angry white people who didn't want Black children in a white school." They say that's too negative a rendering of a moment that is well documented in books, film and photography.



Have these mothers not seen the pictures from that year-long struggle over integration? Have they avoided the photographs of White women with their necks jutting out and the mouths screaming as though their world was coming to an end? One of the protesters from 1960 carried a sign that read: "All I want for Christmas is a clean white school."

The Moms for Liberty also complained that Bridges's memoir offers no "redemption at its end."

This is where their display of strategic umbrage goes fully off the rails and into a muddy ditch for me.

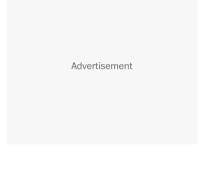
We do our children no favors if we only feed them a steady diet of fairy tales that sidestep life's complexities. We commit long-term harm as guardians when we sanitize our history in the name of protecting our kids from feeling bad about themselves. What's really at work is adults trying to outrun a sense of shame.



Across the country, states are willing to engage in lies of omission, with limits and outright bans against discussions of slavery, the civil rights movement and the white supremacy doctrine that fueled groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.

If those moms in Tennessee really want to see redemption, it can easily be inserted into the curriculum.

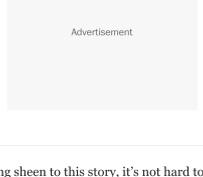
Which is what brings us back to Al Butler and his ashes. Butler was one of the U.S. Marshals who traveled throughout the South in the early '60s, protecting children trying to enroll in segregated schools, as required by federal law. His path to being an integration warrior was not linear. He had Southern relatives who stopped speaking to him amid the tumult — and at one point, after his stint on the integration team, he was one of a group of marshals who were sued by their Black peers for secretly meeting [once a week](#) "to work out details of keeping Black Marshals in low positions and inferior assignments."



I interviewed Butler years ago, when the former marshals on the integration squad were starting to pass away. He said he was eager to talk because the integration work was the most rewarding assignment of a long career. I was not surprised when he asked his wife, Patricia, to spread his ashes outside McDonogh 19, the New Orleans school where he escorted three other Black girls, [Gail Etienne Stripling](#), [Leona Tate](#) and [Tessie Prevost](#), who were crossing the color line along with Ruby Bridges.

Stripling, Tate and Prevost were all there to bear witness when the ashes of their federally assigned protector were spread in front of their old school.

If those moms insist on an additional dose of uplift, they could remember Barbara Henry, the teacher who instructed Ruby day after day in a classroom with just the two of them — because all the other students had pulled out. They could remember the psychiatrist Robert Coles, who counseled Ruby's parents amid death threats and helped provide clothes so Ruby would be spiffed up when walking past the cameras.

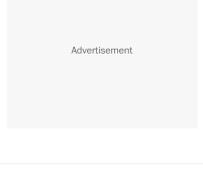


If you need an uplifting sheen to this story, it's not hard to find. The complaint was an excuse of avoidance.

But students should also learn that Bridges faced that crowd every day for a year, that she had to bring food from home every day because of fears for her safety, that her parents lost their jobs and relied on donations to get by, and that Ruby once sent a letter to Santa saying all she wanted for Christmas was for her father to get his job back.

Students need to learn the full story — the haters *and* the helpers — and years from now, looking back on this moment too, they should know that a group of hesitant scolds tried to keep America's schools from addressing the forces of racial bias and white supremacy that have shaped almost every aspect of American life.

Their effort to sweep away an uncomfortable history is like trying to step out from under the sky. Go ahead and try. In the end, you can't escape.



- Read more:**
- [Robert Gebelhoff: Should desegregation be the top priority for school reform?](#)
 - [Nate Tinbite, Ananya Tadikonda and Matt Post: Montgomery County's public schools are still segregated. It's time to fix that.](#)
 - [Michele L. Norris: Why the military is so well-suited to close down the critical race theory war](#)
 - [Elise Boddie: Five myths about school segregation](#)
 - [Matthew D. Lassiter: How White Americans' refusal to accept busing has kept schools segregated](#)

Updated March 3, 2021

America's Racial Reckoning: What you need to know

Full coverage: [Race & Reckoning](#)

Newsletter: [Subscribe to About US to read the latest on race and identity](#)

George Floyd's America: [Examining systemic racism through the lens of his life](#)

Resources: [Understanding racism and inequality in America](#)

309 Comments

MORE FROM MICHELE L. NORRIS

Why the military is so well-suited to close down the critical race theory war
June 29, 2021

Here come the Juneteenth knickknacks. Where are the lesson plans?
June 18, 2021

Germany faced its horrible past. Can we do the same?
June 3, 2021

Darnella Frazier is a hero in this story
April 21, 2021

