

#TRUTHBETOLD



RESIST TRUMP'S EQUITY GAG ORDER

"This effort to suppress the truth repeats an ugly history of efforts to protect slavery by criminalizing abolitionist literature, intercepting it in the mail, and surveilling those to whom it was addressed. It was un-American to write about the unfulfilled promises of America. This same twisted lie is in play today in Trump's effort to portray this gag order as motivated by racial justice when the truth is that it is designed to eviscerate the thinking to advance racial justice."

KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW

AFRICAN AMERICAN POLICY FORUM

#TRUTHBETOLD: TELL THE WHITE HOUSE TO REPEAL THE EQUITY GAG ORDER

PRESIDENT TRUMP HAS DECLARED A FULL-FLEDGED WAR ON RACIAL AND GENDER JUSTICE.

On September 22nd, the Trump Administration issued [Executive Order 13950](#) banning federal agencies, contractors, and grant recipients from conducting essential trainings and other activities that address systemic racism and sexism. This Equity Gag Order represents a dangerous suppression of vital knowledge about the sources and consequences of inequality and threatens to undo decades of progress toward racial and gender equity in the federal government and across society. It must be repudiated.

The [#TruthBeTold Campaign](#) aims to galvanize support for the immediate rescission of the Equity Gag Order, raise awareness of its widespread harms, and provide organizations and institutions with the resources to challenge efforts to suppress honest conversation about our country's history. The campaign catalogs and disseminates the stories of organizations, educators, and activists whose equity projects have been censored or canceled. Most importantly, the campaign provides educators, employers, and organizations with the resources they need to understand, discuss, and dismantle the continuing sources of race and gender inequality.

The Equity Gag Order reflects the formal adoption of a twisted right-wing ideology that frames anti-racism as racism against white people, treats feminism as sexism against men, and seeks to abolish the use of anti-racist and anti-sexist tools and methods that help us understand the inequalities all around us. In the president's words, "Critical

race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country." This ban extends to an array of interrelated social justice concepts: diversity and inclusion, intersectionality, implicit bias, structural racism, privilege, and gender equity.

The Equity Gag Order and the rhetoric deployed by those who support it are a direct attack against the groundswell of citizens who have taken to the streets to demand racial justice this year. The ban amplifies grievances rooted in zero-sum approaches to the progress that has been made to embrace our national ideals of equity and inclusion in the workplace and across American society. Alarming, the federal government's resistance to these ideals reflects grievances and distortions of a neo-nationalist fringe that Trump has courted throughout his Administration.

The Equity Gag Order is only one part of a broader and long-standing war on equality in America waged not only by militias, neo-Nazis, Proud Boys, and other right-wing groups, but by the White House itself. These attacks on racial and gender justice tools are finding global currency in, among other places, the U.K., France, and Australia. Left unchecked, the mounting pressures not to talk, train, or learn about social justice issues will continue to travel far beyond the orbit of the federal government.

The chilling effect of the Equity Gag Order has been staggering. Since the order was announced, along with the creation of a [federal complaint line](#) to report alleged violations, a climate of fear has spread like wildfire across government agencies, businesses, schools, and civil society.

The State Department cancelled all diversity trainings for its 76,000 employees;¹ universities have paused programs, including trainings on race or sex stereotyping;²

researchers that use critical race concepts have been warned that their grant applications will be thrown out;³ and public lectures and celebrations, including one on Hispanic heritage and another on LGBTQ+ pride, have been abruptly cancelled.⁴

At the March on Washington nearly 60 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. maintained that the Constitution contained a promissory note to African Americans, a guarantee of equality and deliverance from the badges and incidents of slavery. Rather than honoring this sacred obligation, Dr. King lamented that African Americans had been given, "*a bad check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'*" Today, with this executive order banning tools necessary to fulfill this promise, our government has done more than default on that obligation; it is now attempting to tear the note right out of our hands and destroy it, silencing ways of holding our nation accountable for meeting these obligations.

Although the Biden Administration will be inaugurated in January 2021, we must understand that rescinding the Equity Gag Order is only a first step towards undoing the damage that the Trump Administration has wrought. Racial and gender inequalities will not simply disappear under a colorblind or gender-blind ideology. Beyond rescinding the ban, we call on the Biden Administration to implement bold and proactive steps towards addressing racial and gender injustice. Essential in the pursuit of our cherished ideals of race and gender equity is the development of knowledge about how racism and sexism have shaped our society along with the transmission of the tools to recognize their continuing presence. To address the lingering dimensions of our nation's long history of white supremacy and patriarchy, we must set aside discomforts born of guilt and denial and embrace instead truths that ground our national commitment to liberty and justice for all.

Sign the #TruthBeTold petition to demand the immediate rescission of the Trump Administration's Equity Gag Order. Further, we call on the incoming Biden Administration to strengthen the nation's commitment to race and gender equality by advancing the dissemination of knowledge and best practices through enhancing and mandating training, education, research, and programming.

African American Policy Forum

“Trump's executive order is extremely dangerous because it seeks to erase the truth, to advance a revisionist, erroneous story about our past and our present. It's a blatant attempt to suppress the lived experiences of millions in this nation. But if we do this, we will only jeopardize our future.”

LISA RICE

PRESIDENT AND CEO, NATIONAL FAIR HOUSING ALLIANCE (NFHA)

“This is ultimately thought and belief control. It is knowledge policing, a clear and direct authoritarian dictate on what we can think and believe. The very terms of the order prohibit thoughts and concepts and discourse that may make people feel uncomfortable or feel a certain amount of anguish, which immediately takes, in my mind, almost any discussion of race that grapples with the deep entrenched history of it in this country off the table. Those conversations are necessarily anguish-producing, to get us to a point of progress in this country.”

JANAI NELSON

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR-COUNSEL, NAACP LEGAL DEFENSE FUND

Trump's Attacks on Racial and Gender Justice Explained

How the Equity Gag Order Operates

- **The Equity Gag Order codifies alt-right perspectives on equity programs and initiatives into federal policy.** In opposition to massive national protests seeking racial justice, the power of the Presidential office is being marshaled squarely in service of white supremacist grievances and rhetoric.
- **The Equity Gag Order groups together a variety of social justice concepts and bans them all at once.** Targeted ideas include: Critical Race Theory (CRT), white privilege and white supremacy, sexism, structural racism, intersectionality, implicit bias, the 1619 Project, and race or gender-based oppression.
- **Banning these ideas devastates our ability to tackle social injustice.** Without an understanding of implicit bias, we will fail to engage how well-meaning people can nevertheless make biased decisions. Without an understanding of structural racism, we will not be able to understand how historic inequalities can be reproduced across institutions without racist intent. And without intersectionality, we cannot address how women of color and other groups experience compounded disadvantages in the workplace, or how Black women face heightened risks of maternal mortality.
- **Repression and suppression are happening now.** A survey within AAPF's network has turned up evidence of over 300 instances of canceled, altered, or halted programs from over 30 states – at federal agencies, contractors, universities, non-profits, and more.
- **We are losing out on opportunities to improve our government and society.** Implicit bias, anti-racism, structural racism, and intersectionality are tools to identify how bias is perpetuated in systems of governance and society at large. Efforts to discuss and address disparities in federal employment, exposure to environmental harms, access to housing, and the consequences of COVID-19, are being paused, undermined, or even eliminated altogether.⁵
- **Along with censorship, the Administration is engaging in historical revisionism.** In the text of the Equity Gag Order, the Administration specifically targeted a Smithsonian Museum graphic discussing whiteness and race through a critical lens. These actions censor how museums, government-funded archivists, and historians document our history; forcing our institutions to fall in line behind one approved narrative.
- **Federal contractors that focus on social justice are effectively banned from pursuing their own missions.** Organizations such as the National Urban League and the National Fair Housing Alliance are effectively banned from discussing the very concepts that are core to their historic mission. How, for example, can efforts to advance fair housing proceed without the capacity to name and discuss the impact of structural racism in the housing market?
- **Banning these ideas makes truth and reconciliation impossible.** Censorship of social justice discourse will have a massive impact on the ability of educators to teach histories of colonization, enslavement, segregation, sexism, and racial disenfranchisement. Learning about our history should not be optional. The challenges from our past set the agendas for the future.

“EVERY PERSON WHO EXERCISED THEIR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT TO PEACEFULLY PROTEST RACIAL INJUSTICE THIS YEAR; EVERY PERSON WHO HAS BEEN AWAKENED TO THE NIGHTMARE OF STRUCTURAL RACISM BY THE RACIALLY DISPROPORTIONATE DEATH TOLL OF THE COVID CRISIS; EVERY PERSON WHO HAS BEEN PROMPTED TO RETHINK AMERICAN HISTORY BEGINNING WITH THE SLAVERY THAT BUILT THE WEALTH OF THIS NATION; EVERY PERSON WHO HAS WITNESSED THE UNDENIABLE PATTERNS OF IMPLICIT BIAS BY WELL-MEANING COLLEAGUES WHO UNDER-EVALUATE, OVERTALK, OR MANSPLAIN TO THEM...THIS GAG ORDER IMPLICATES YOU.”

KIMBERLÉ CRENSHAW, THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POLICY FORUM

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

THE MYTH:

Gender and racial equity language and the 1619 Project are anti-American propaganda.

THE FACTS:

Concepts such as CRT, structural racism, implicit bias, and intersectionality are conceptual tools through which we can identify the specific mechanisms that create disparate outcomes in our society. Far from believing that racial and gender disparities are “inherent,” these concepts and associated trainings were created so that we can begin the work of correcting those disparate outcomes. Similarly, the 1619 Project helps us better understand the story of our nation’s history in a way that centers the experience of enslaved Black people, so that we may better understand slavery’s many legacies. Only by grappling with the reality of racism and sexism can we actually create the equitable conditions of an America “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

THE MYTH:

Gender and racial equity language is grounded in ideologies of hierarchy.

THE FACTS:

White supremacy and patriarchy are ideologies that perpetuate and justify hierarchy both in the past and present. Gender and racial equity concepts which are attuned and alive to the ways that inequalities are reproduced in governance and the workplace do not create new hierarchies. They perform the opposite role; they neutralize the illegitimate role that racism and sexism play in our institutions across American society. They do not create new hierarchies; they neutralize the illegitimate role that racism and sexism play in our institutions across American society.

THE MYTH:

Gender and racial equity language is divisive.

THE FACTS:

There is a widespread belief, exemplified in the ideology of colorblindness, that we can fix our problems by not naming them. But avoidance is not a solution to systemic racism and sexism. Ignoring the histories by which they originated and their current evolution will not change the underlying realities but will only result in a recurrence of cycles of injustice, unrest, and denial. Rather than being divisive, exposure to such concepts presents an opportunity for people of all social identities to learn how they can unite against racism and sexism.

THE MYTH:

Gender and racial equity language demonize and assign fault to white men.

THE FACTS:

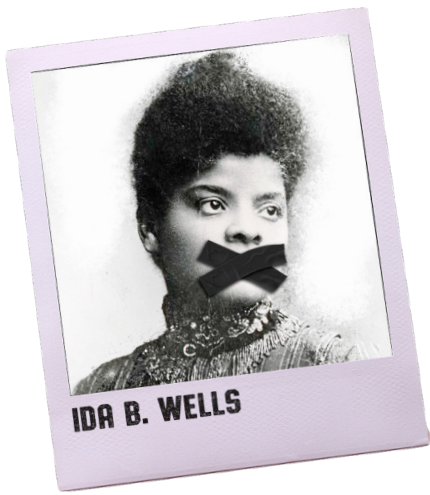
This is false. These concepts do not state that white people are inherently racist or that men are inherently sexist. Rather, they provide frameworks and tools to engage government, systems, and individuals about how policies and practices work to disadvantage and harm racially marginalized populations. For instance, applying a critical race lens to the issue of mandatory minimum prison sentences helps us focus on the over-policing of Black youth (making them more likely to be searched, arrested, and tried for minor offenses). Critical race tools help us spot and remedy how systems and processes may be disproportionately harming Black youth. Such an approach would be less interested in determining whether an individual decision-maker is racist.

THE MYTH:

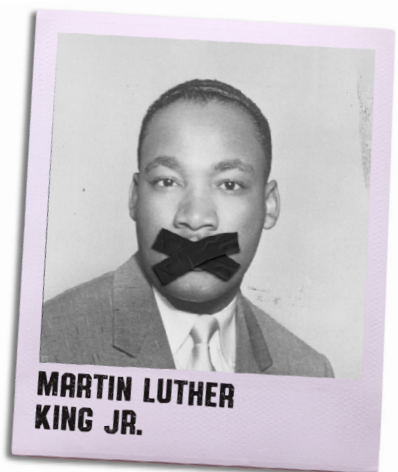
The ban only applies to diversity and inclusion training.

THE FACTS:

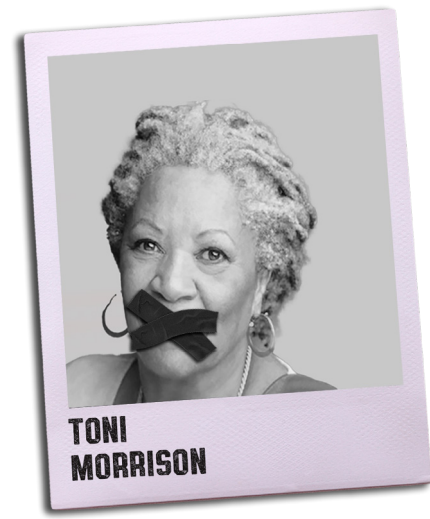
The Equity Gag Order doesn’t just apply to diversity and inclusion trainings. Its chilling effect impacts a vast number of individuals and organizations by threatening their access to federal funding. Our survey has found that important health research on structural racial disparities is being halted, LGBTQ+ Pride events have been cancelled, and rape prevention education that addresses the root causes of sexual violence has been paused. Further, the survey reveals a broader, intense fear of reprisal merely for talking about the Gag Order. The Equity Gag Order has already done massive damage and continues to directly harm marginalized communities and workers on the frontlines of racial and gender justice.



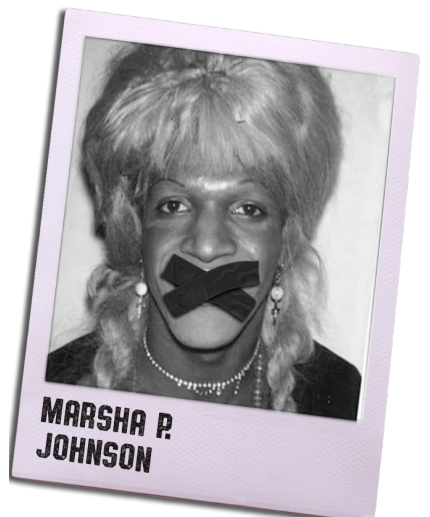
IDA B. WELLS



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



TONI MORRISON



MARSHA P. JOHNSON

TIMELINE

4 SEPTEMBER



The Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), Russell Vought, releases a memorandum relaying President Trump's direction that federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund anti-racism trainings, which he defined as trainings teaching Critical Race Theory, white privilege, or that suggested any inherent racism of the country or any race.

5 SEPTEMBER



Trump celebrates the "purge" of CRT from federal agencies.

Sherrilyn Ifill, the President of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, says "[Trump] has done something that is beyond the bounds of anything we have seen."

8 SEPTEMBER



Reps. Judy Chu (D-CA), Joaquin Castro (D-TX), and Karen Bass (D-CA) release a joint statement as heads of the Congressional APA Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and Congressional Black Caucus calling on the Trump administration to "reverse its effort to end anti-racism training."

17 SEPTEMBER



Trump announces his plan to create by Executive Order a "1776 Commission" to promote patriotic education. "Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda," the President says.

22 SEPTEMBER



The White House releases an "Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," expanding the ban on "training that promotes race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating" to the U.S. Military, government contractors & their employees, and to other Federal grantees, and "not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes."

7 OCTOBER



The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) releases guidance in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQs) regarding the September 22 Executive Order (EO) 13950 - Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.

9 OCTOBER



The Trump Administration issues a statement on Columbus Day lambasting those who would critique Columbus, and says, "I have also taken steps to ensure that we preserve our nation's history and promote patriotic education."

MYTH:

The ban only applies to diversity and inclusion training.

FACT:

The Equity Gag Order doesn't just apply to diversity and inclusion trainings. Its chilling effect impacts a vast number of individuals and organizations by threatening their access to federal funding. Our survey has found that important health research on structural racial disparities is being halted, LGBTQ+ Pride events have been cancelled, and rape prevention education that addresses the root causes of sexual violence has been paused. Further, the survey reveals a broader, intense fear of reprisal merely for talking about the Gag Order. The Equity Gag Order has already done massive damage and continues to directly harm marginalized communities and workers on the frontlines of racial and gender justice.

“My trans-inclusion training and consulting company TransClue was contracted by the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a Pride event celebrating LGBTQ resilience in the age of COVID-19. I worked with the agency’s Pride network for months to produce a great event. A few days before the event – after the second memo came out – it was canceled ‘until further review.’ I broke out crying when I heard. It was the day after the debate when Trump had talked about the Proud Boys. It struck me so profoundly that, these days, only Proud Boys are the ones allowed to have Pride.”

STERLING CRUZ-HERR (SURVEY RESPONDENT)

THE IMPACT OF TRUMP'S EQUITY GAG ORDER

In the first two months after the Trump Administration's "[Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping](#)" purge of anti-racism and anti-sexism concepts from federal training, contracting, and grantmaking, the effects of that purge were felt far and wide. As our survey responses suggest, the order's censorship and suppression will continue to wreak havoc on an increasing number of individuals, organizations, and institutions if left unchecked.

In order to better understand the scope and severity of the Equity Gag Order's authoritarian censorship of speech and equity initiatives, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) conducted surveys to track the Executive Order's effects on individuals, groups, and institutions.

The surveys were first conducted on October 11th and sent to AAPF's network. In just two days, over 200 survey responses were submitted from across 31 states. We received testimonies from people who reported that they or someone they knew had been directly or indirectly affected by the Executive Order and administrative actions taken as a consequence of it.

Survey responses revealed censorship and suppression of activities across a wide variety of sectors and industries, including trainings within federal agencies such as national security and intelligence, environmental protection, and veterans affairs, research projects in institutes and higher education and programs pertaining to disparities in health, sexual violence, and the LGBTQ+ community.

The data detailed postponements, cancellations, and alterations of diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings — some in eager compliance with the new guidance on censoring anti-racism training, others out of fear of losing funding, contracts, or accreditation. On September 29th, a hotline was created within the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) to receive complaints and to investigate any training suspected to be in violation of the order. In addition to the "snitch" hotline, the Equity Gag Order offers to intervene in cases where contractors are sued by defenders of racial and gender justice.

The nature and volume of the survey responses make it clear that the Equity Gag Order is already causing harm and that it will

continue to cause harm every day it is left in place. Its immediate rescission is necessary.

This Equity Gag Order threatens to roll back a decades-long struggle for racial equity in housing, criminal justice reform, racial and gender equity in the workplaces and to suppress the full truth about American history in schools.

How does the Equity Gag Order hurt everyday Americans?

- Important health research that discusses racism and racial disparities is being modified or halted during the review and grant application process, according to multiple survey respondents.
- Speakers and lecturers have been asked to remove slides or keywords out of fear of non-compliance.
- Respondents have censored their language in work emails.
- Professors and university administrators have suspended diversity and equity initiatives at their institutions out of fear that existing or future funding will be revoked.
- LGBTQ+ pride events are being canceled.

The survey makes clear that this attack has material consequences for all Americans, not only for those who work for government agencies or contractors. By attacking and silencing those who endeavor to create more welcoming and equitable workplaces and communities, the Equity Gag Order directly harms marginalized communities.

The responses to the survey reveal an intense fear of reprisal merely for talking about the gag order. Many respondents requested that institutional names be withheld, fearing possible job loss or other negative consequences for themselves or their colleagues. There was also fear that suspended programs would be axed entirely. Some respondents feared that their names would be reported through the "snitch line" and their identities might land on Fox News or in a Trump tweet, leading to personal and professional repercussions. Government employees lamented that fear and confusion around the Equity Gag Order and vague restrictions on "political activity" under the *Hatch Act* had even made people afraid to use certain words in conversations.

Below are excerpts from the AAPF survey respondents:⁶

In Health:

“At [a large government funded healthcare provider], we have had a conversation series canceled, trainings and discussions pulled at the highest level, all efforts to highlight structural racism and health disparities within and by my research center are in a holding pattern. Current active research is on administrative hold. Proposals under review are on hold, new proposals in development that include evaluation of racial equity in [h]ealthcare are in a hold status.”

“Trainings at my hospital have been canceled or put on hold while we await further clarification. It has been demoralizing to staff and trainees, and individuals are rethinking whether [Veterans Affairs] and the federal government can really be an employer of choice. Trainees may elect not to seek further training or work in [Veterans Affairs]. Some current staff have indicated they may leave.”

“[F]unds [earmarked for rape prevention education by a major government public health agency]...have been put on pause. ...[O]ne of the major accomplishments of the field since that time has been moving the focus of prevention activities to [root] causes of sexual violence, including systemic oppressions such as sexism or racism. Because of this EO, the program officers at [the public health agency] suggested that we eliminate all items related to 'anti-oppression frameworks' or rephrase them as 'social determinants of health.' This has chilled our work. We put the project on pause until after the election because we were unwilling to eliminate or change the focus of these assessment questions.”

In Research:

“On a recent call with [a review officer from a government funded health research agency], we were informed that we could not use specific terms related to Critical Race Theory, white supremacy, white privilege, etc. in our specific aims page or proposals. It was communicated to us that there were entities who were reviewing proposals for these terms and would throw them out if identified.”

In LGBTQ+ Rights:

“My trans-inclusion training and consulting company TransClue was contracted by the Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a Pride event celebrating LGBTQ resilience in the age of COVID-19. I worked with the agency's Pride network for months to produce a great event. A few days before the event — after the second memo came out — it was canceled

'until further review.' I broke out crying when I heard. It was the day after the debate when Trump had talked about the Proud Boys. It struck me so profoundly that, these days, only Proud Boys are the ones allowed to have Pride.”

“Just learned a [Department of Justice] program on gender diversity was cancelled. Staff are asking whether universities that received federal financial aid will be impacted.”

In Education:

“We have been told to not teach a part of our history curriculum, the 1619 Project which covers the history of the slave trade and Black Americans in this country. We were told... to not talk about 'controversial topics' involving freedom and police brutality and keep the conversation neutral. This was the first time in 20 years I have had a principal tell me to not teach about the election.”

“Several of our contracts and workshops are on hold, canceled, or just in limbo. One group asked if we could just talk about 'inclusion' and not say [d]iversity or [r]acism. A [K-12] school system has put all [e]quity training on hold. There is a hotline where people can report trainings that would put the organizer of the training in trouble. Our last session ended up talking about [just] [t]rauma instead of [r]acial trauma.”

“I developed a Critical Analysis of Diversity course that includes sections on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality. A graduate student in my department is teaching an 8-week course based on my course design. There is a student in the 8-week course who sent the Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping to the graduate student as a protest of the course material. The student is also refusing to read the course materials and he has insulted the graduate student. The legal department at my institution is investigating the extent to which the Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping applies to the university and my course. I am afraid that I will be asked to revise my course to remove the theoretical content that relates to race. I am interested in learning how other institutions are dealing with this issue.”

In Environmental Work:

“I was scheduled to do two sessions with [a government agency], at the behest of two employees there. The sessions were on white allyship and undoing systemic racism, and were scheduled even before the uprising stemming from the killing of George Floyd. But the day before the first event, [scheduled in

June] both events were canceled. According to the employees who had put the events together (both career employees there), they had been threatened internally by political appointees at the agency, and told they would either cancel the events or lose their jobs. Obviously we canceled both.”⁷

“In my federal government office...we were planning to use contract dollars to continue our work with an anti-racism trainer in late Sept. 2020. That was indefinitely postponed/canceled by our senior leadership. In addition, a lecture series for the entire agency on Systemic Racism and Environmental Racism using maps of redlining and pollution clusters was preemptively postponed/canceled.”

In Intelligence and National Security:

“[At a government intelligence agency], [a]fter the OPM [Office of Personnel Management] memo was issued on Oct 2, all diversity programs were suspended pending review by OPM. This included government courses; a diversity book club that had been running for over a year; informal discussion groups on racial inequality that formed in response to this summer’s uprising; and self study that had been permitted...in response to the pandemic.”

In the Arts:

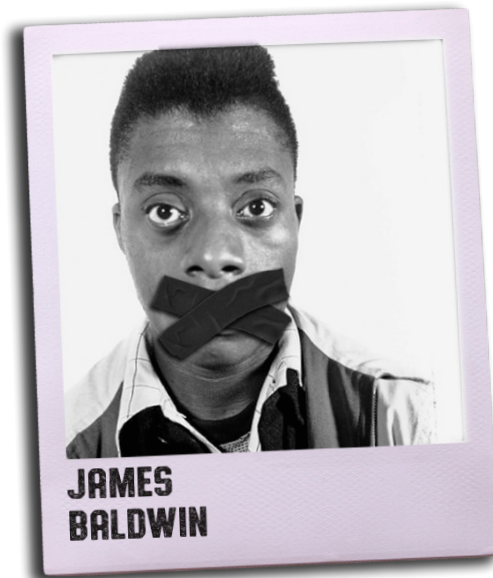
“We were told [w]e probably shouldn’t apply for any federal grants or funding based around a project we are doing on Black Arts and research. I have had a workshop cancelled. A close friend who gets inspirational speeches about overcoming his disability had that canceled because it fell under the title of diversity talk.”

In Employment Law:

“As an employment lawyer, I often negotiate for workplace anti-discriminatory training to keep the discrimination from happening again. I’m worried...that this executive order will make that particular bargaining tool (often very important to my clients) less available.”

In Bioethics:

“I wrote a certification module for an online Bioethics training. I was contracted to do so by a major corporation. I received a message on October 23 from the corporation asking author permission to remove the section on ‘intersectionality.’ The module I wrote was on Gender and Bioethics. This cannot be covered competently without discussing intersectionality, which should not conflict at all with the EO. This training program isn’t even a Diversity and Inclusion program. It is a Bioethics program that concerns itself with diversity and bothers to be inclusive.”



**JAMES
BALDWIN**



**GLORIA
STEINEM**



**DOLORES
HUERTA**

**HISTORY ISN'T
IN THE PAST**

#TRUTHBETOLD: THE SUPPRESSION OF DISSENT IN AMERICA'S PAST & PRESENT

"BUT THE PEOPLE KNOW, THE PEOPLE KNOW
IT'S WINTER IN AMERICA (A TIME WHEN
ALL THE HEALERS HAVE BEEN KILLED OR
BETRAYED) AND AIN'T NOBODY FIGHTING
'CAUSE NOBODY KNOWS WHAT TO SAVE."

- GIL SCOTT-HERON

The Equity Gag Order is but the latest iteration of a long history of state and federal governments using their coercive powers to suppress speech that challenges injustice and inequity. The repression of anti-racist and anti-sexist thought and speech follows a historical pattern: repression has appeared repeatedly during moments of heightened political consciousness, violently countering movements for freedom, justice, and equality in America.

From the criminalization of abolitionist literature to the violent suppression of Black political activity during Redemption (a period of calls for a return to white supremacy and the removal of rights for Black people) to the McCarthy-era witch hunts, there is a long history of the government responding to liberation movements by criminalizing and suppressing dissent. This pattern is not merely a historical artifact. More recent examples, including COINTELPRO and the FBI's decision to label Black Lives Matter activists as "Black Identity Extremists" — putting them on par with the Ku Klux Klan and other domestic terrorists — show how efforts to suppress and criminalize the struggle for justice are just as much a part of our present as they are of our past.⁸

It is this history and these tactics that the Trump Administration drew from when it promulgated Executive Order 13950. It is this history we must learn and never forget. Most importantly, it is this history that we must teach.

Repeating History

In the lead up to the Civil War, sedition laws were weaponized to ban the mailing of abolitionist materials, fomenting white supremacist terrorism against both Black people and white abolitionists. In 1835, abolitionists in the North engaged in a mailing campaign, sending over 100,000 anti-slavery newspapers

and pamphlets to the South via the postal service.⁹ The campaign inflamed enslavers — including President Andrew Jackson. Abolitionists found their ideas criminalized as President Jackson advised that the papers were to be delivered selectively and, “in every instance the Postmaster ought to take [the senders] names down and have them exposed.”¹⁰ Southerners in support of chattel slavery reacted violently to the news that the South was being inundated with anti-slavery papers, and those found distributing abolitionist literature were attacked.

In one instance in Charleston, South Carolina, a group known as the “Lynch Men” broke into the local post office and burned the mail while hundreds watched.¹¹ The retaliation in the South soon turned against flesh and blood, as those suspected of participating in the mailing campaign were imprisoned or lynched. State governments criminalized abolitionist ideas by passing seditious libel laws that were used to indict those critical of slavery. Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina all quickly passed laws outlawing such publications. What began as attempts to stifle speech that opposed slavery evolved into a full campaign of violence, criminalization, and terror waged against abolitionists.

Even after the Civil War ended slavery, attempts to suppress and repress those fighting for liberty and equality did not disappear. As Black political participation flourished both during and after Reconstruction, the backlash to suppress speech and political participation was exceptionally violent and changed the face of democracy.

One of the deadliest incidents was the Wilmington Insurrection of 1898, a white supremacist-led coup.¹² Shortly after the November elections in which Black Republicans and Fusionist candidates were re-elected to almost every local office in Wilmington, NC, a mob of 2,000+ white vigilantes carried out one of the most violent terrorist attacks in the state's history. In addition to removing the democratically-elected government from power and murdering countless African Americans in the streets, the mob descended upon the *Wilmington Daily Record* — one of the state's only Black-owned newspapers — and burned it to the ground. The men who carried out this white supremacist terrorist attack — one of whom would go on to become Governor of North Carolina — targeted the *Daily Record* due to their outrage over a recently published editorial denouncing lynching of African Americans. Daring to challenge the idea that racist violence was justified led to violent repression that was not only sanctioned by the state, but led to the takeover of it.

Both the actions of the “Lynch Men” in Charleston and the white mob in Wilmington serve as reminders that crusades to demonize the very idea of social justice are not bloodless crimes. The actions of the government in banning progressive dissent have historically offered invitations for violent militias to take matters into their own hands by harassing, harming, and even killing critics.

Extralegal efforts to suppress thought and speech can also morph into censorship efforts that have the formal backing of the federal government. During the Red Summer of 1919, in which a wave of white supremacist violence spread across the country, the government responded by surveilling Black leaders and activists in an effort to pin the blame for the racial violence on African Americans and to label those who resisted the violence as “radicals.” The charge was led by Attorney General Mitchell Palmer and the head of the Radicals Division of the Bureau of Intelligence (the precursor to the FBI), J. Edgar Hoover. In particular, the Justice Department accused *The Messenger*, a Black trade unionist publication that advocated for social change, of being a vehicle to foment seditious conspiracy.¹³ In the previous summer of 1918, FBI agents ransacked their editorial offices and a Justice Department official arrested founders Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, charging them with violating the Espionage Act.

The *Messenger* was not the only Black publication to be accused of sedition and agitation for truthfully reporting on the plight of Black people in the Jim Crow South. In Arkansas, Governor Charles Brough accused the *Chicago Defender* and the *Crisis* of agitation.¹⁴ The message was unmistakably clear: honest reporting about racism and inequality would be treated as seditious and un-American speech.

By the late 1940s, Senator Joseph McCarthy had taken up the mantle of persecuting human rights defenders. McCarthy's Senate Intelligence Committee, along with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). McCarthy conflated the promotion of any economic system or political framework that challenged the post-WWII racial, political, and economic status to communist conspiracies that would undermine the American way of life, which he described in religious terms as “a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity.”¹⁵

McCarthy and HUAC went after activists, policymakers, and artists who demanded housing equality, economic justice and equal rights — demands that were recast as “un-American.”¹⁶ McCarthy's actions were a deliberate effort to use the Soviet bogeyman to smear and silence figures who sought to combat

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Jim Crow, eradicate systemic racism in government, and call for economic justice across race and class divides.

In a purge that uncomfortably echoes the present, HUAC singled out Black artists, such as Lorraine Hansberry and Paul Robeson, for daring to question America's commitment to racial justice and for promoting progressive economic ideas for Black liberation.¹⁷ Queer folks in government also found the bullseye on their backs, as many "were systemically targeted for their sexual orientation" in what was termed the Lavender Scare. Many queer civil servants were fired from their posts during this era.

McCarthyism was also influential in stoking attacks against women in the federal service, employing misogynistic fears that promiscuous women were sleeping their way to the top and that Washington was becoming a "femmocracy." Female civil servants who were pro-labor, pro-consumer, and pro-civil rights were accused of being disloyal — hindering and destroying the careers of many such women.¹⁸ In sum, McCarthyism successfully promulgated a widespread, knee-jerk fear of anything deemed foreign un-American threatening to the dominant social order.

The Civil Rights Movement was another example in American history of the suppression of speech and political violence against Black thought leaders. FBI surveillance of Black activists through its Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), as crafted by J. Edgar Hoover, specifically targeted civil rights movement leaders. The aim was to prevent them from uniting political activists of all backgrounds during the 1960s. Hoover once labeled Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. as "the most dangerous man in America," and directed COINTELPRO agents to "prevent the rise of a Black Messiah" by any means necessary: surveilling their actions and speech, jailing them, or setting them up for violent attacks and even assassination.¹⁹

The movement's ideas — to unite multiracial, intergenerational communities to organize collectively for civil rights — were labeled "seditious" precisely because they unified people across race, gender, class and region throughout America. The assassinations of Reverend King and other civil rights activist were enabled by the government's condemnation and repression of their ideas. We see similar attacks now, undermining civil dissent, labelling diversity, equity and anti-racist training as "un-American."

Seen in this light, the recent attacks on anti-racist and anti-sexist equity work by the Trump Administration has gone full circle by tapping into the legacy of surveillance, censorship, and violence against social movement ideas and thought leaders: from COINTELPRO and McCarthyism to the state-sanctioned violence of both the Reconstruction and Antebellum period.

What we are seeing today is the revival of a new McCarthyism. Following in Senator McCarthy's footsteps, the Executive Branch is now attempting to outlaw Critical Race

Theory and so-called subversive discussions of racism, sexism and structural violence and threatening those whose scholarship and teaching have bravely presented the way towards a more just and inclusive society. Trump's current crusade, much like McCarthy's crusade seventy years prior, is not about protecting an American way of life, but about protecting established racial and gender hierarchies.

The Equity Gag Order is the latest move in a centuries-long battle to thwart social progress. We must fight this authoritarianism for Americans who courageously live up to the promise of freedom and justice for all. That includes civil rights activists, Black liberationists, educators, and those who wish to know the full truth and nuance of American history. Only by understanding history can we mount a defense against present and future injustice. Only through honest reconciliations with past wrongs can we achieve social progress. Our history teaches us how fragile this progress is and how decades of work can be dismantled and censored if we do not urgently resist together right now.

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“This executive order is not worth the paper it's written on. This executive order smacks of a totalitarian endorsement of White Supremacy. It smacks of what happens in places like North Korea and other nations that do not practice democracy or recognize individual rights and liberties, including freedom of speech. This executive order seeks to chill the very essence of what the National Urban League was founded to do: That is, to promote truth when it comes to racial justice and racial reconciliation. To be an advocate for this nation to confront its long history of racial exclusion, racial injustice, and discrimination in slavery and segregation.”

MARC MORIAL

PRESIDENT, NATIONAL URBAN LEAGUE

A CALL TO ACTION

The White House's Equity Gag Order is merely one part of a broader campaign to roll back civil rights and suppress the language necessary to openly discuss racial and gender justice. As one AAPF survey respondent revealed, "As a woman of color, I am continuing to see those around me respond in dismissive ways to my concerns about repercussions from this administration for moving forward with my diversity teachings and fail to recognize the erasure of POC's lived experiences by this order."

This Equity Gag Order threatens to turn back the clock on more than a half a century of social progress. If we ever hope to cash America's promissory note, all of us must hold the government accountable to its promise. It requires us to look at the fine print, to support the research and communications that amplify truth-telling, promote truth and reconciliation initiatives, and provide individuals with the tools to understand continuing sources of inequality in a way that extends knowledge and engages in open dialogue.

Sadly, America is being discouraged from the courageous conversations it so desperately needs. One respondent informed us, "I am part of a small group...working to develop a safe space to support providers of color -- especially how to deal with racism on interdisciplinary teams...We are spending an inordinate amount of time on what words we can/cannot use so we don't run afoul of this executive order."

Yet as abhorrent as it is, the Equity Gag Order is not the first attempt to stifle honest conversations about America's history of white supremacy and patriarchy. Nor will it be the last. In crafting his repressive executive order, President Trump drew from a deep well of right-wing tactics and strategies for shutting down and silencing critical inquiry in public education. Those strategies have been and continue to be deployed by reactionary school boards, right-wing university administrations, and state and local governments across the country. The #TruthBeTold Campaign is our effort to combat not only the Equity Gag Order but also the very narratives, strategies, and tactics that made the gag order possible in the first place.

The chilling effects of the Equity Gag Order will extend far beyond federal agencies and contractors who are directly affected. K-12 schools, private universities, and state agencies

are preemptively purging consciousness-raising and equity-focused programming from their workplaces and classrooms. The #TruthBeTold Campaign aims to equip both educators and institutions with the tools needed to counter systemic efforts to frame anti-racism as racism and subordination as equality. The campaign brings together organizations, institutions and individuals committed to equity, justice, and freedom of thought and expression.

This moment of racial reckoning has allowed us to tell a new story about this nation. And across the country, there is a groundswell of energy from educators who recognize that basic changes in curriculum and the way we tell our history are long overdue. The Equity Gag Order is an effort to stigmatize and demonize the concepts that have underwritten transformative progress and interrupt their activation across society. That confrontation goes far beyond the possibilities of a Trump or Biden Administration — it goes to our fundamental truths as a society, and to the defining ideological battle of a generation. Miseducation is ground zero in this attempt to impose a whitewashed American mythology, itself an essential dimension of the government's authoritarian shift. It is urgent in this moment for us to come together to reclaim the narrative of this political moment and courageously revitalize the fight for social justice.

Join the African American Policy Forum's #TruthBeTold Campaign, which demands a full rescission of the Equity Gag Order and a nationwide effort to prioritize truth and racial healing. The #TruthBeTold Campaign calls on the Biden-Harris Administration to develop a coordinated government-wide approach to promoting diversity and inclusion, and require that all federal agencies establish diversity, equity, and inclusion benchmarks.

Diversity isn't a weakness; it is our greatest strength. You can support the campaign in the following ways:

(1) Sign the petition below in support of our campaign to stand up against these attacks on crucial racial and gender equity work: [Rescind the Equity Gag Order Petition](#)

(2) Fill out the form below to share your story if you or those around you have been affected by the Equity Gag Order and related administrative actions: [Effects of the Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping](#)

All submissions will be used to better understand and communicate the current situation. If you are willing, there is an option in the survey to provide your phone number for us to contact you for a brief interview/follow-up statement, if requested.

Continue to check our website, aapf.org/truthbetold, follow us on social media at [@aapolicyforum](https://twitter.com/aapolicyforum), use the hashtag #TruthBeTold, and sign up for our newsletter, aapf.org/subscribe, as we continue researching the long-term impacts of the ban and share resources and opportunities to galvanize our collective power!

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