

## **Introduction**

To my luck and dismay, this year's Legislative Session was later explained to me as one of the worst years to introduce a prospective civil rights advocate into the political scene. Your first time is supposed to be inaugurated with the expectation that your naïve perceptions of the political process will be gently dismantled via the tenacity of the opposing party's consistent, seemingly left-field opposition. Your first time should solely consist of the jaw-dropping realization that those who disagree with you are not blubbering idiots, and in fact, are similarly fellow human beings who are mutually dedicated to contributing what they think is best for the world. Your first time is supposed to be limited to only intellectual disappointments – such as lessons you're inevitably forced to learn about the world when you place yourself in an environment where various individuals have the power to impart their perception of the world into legislation. This lesson, one not confined to the political universe but one that all growing and developing humans encounter at least once in their life, is: Life Isn't Fair.

At least, I'd like to think that this is how your first should unfold. In this way, you don't suffer to the degree that you develop a mind to leave the state of Florida in your taillights. But still, you fantasize of the heavenly matrimony between your frontal lobe and a brick wall enough to recognize a moral obligation to prevent that agony for your fellow incumbents.

So, I eagerly came into this process knowing the limitations of my own experiences and their contributions to my naivete, challenging myself to learn this lesson in any way I had to. I had to look these people in the face, breathe the same air they did, and hear the things at the time they were hearing them to merely begin. I was expecting heartbreak, disappointment, confusion, and frustration. I was ready to struggle through emotions that my eighteen years hadn't yet exposed me to, but still, I was not prepared for this Session. There's an obvious correlation between issues we are passionate about and their personal significance to each person, but given the setting and possibly, my inexperience with the professional environment outside of the occasional parent-teacher conference, I expected a big, black line that implicitly noted the table manners of our interactions. Politics can get personal, but there have to be limits. My issue was that I expected limits. I expected there to be a moderator, physically or imaginary, present to stop questioning when things approached the giant, sinister black line. Apparently, this was a part of the lesson.

This year's Session, not comparable to most, was a circumferential assault on the average liberal. Before I started my internship, I started hearing buzz about an abortion ban – which I regarded with a grain of salt – who has the gall to challenge the legendary Roe V. Wade? I was also introduced to HB 1557 (entitled Parental Rights in Education), which I initially thought was nothing more than another attempt at parents trying to ban sex education (painfully mistaken). At the same time, I was informed of the governor's attack on critical race theory. Only then did I get the feeling that something was horribly amiss, but my assumption was that these egregious attacks were a part of a regular day at the Capitol. By the end of

Session, I was sure we'd be dancing on these bills' graves. Instead, after hours of debating (and crying), we've found ourselves standing amidst bloodshed in a centuries-long battle of morals.

## **What Happened**

### *HB 1557*

I later learned that HB 1557, referenced as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” was not in any way anti-sex-ed but rather a very subtle piece of anti-gay legislation (if you count a party bus as a subtle mode of transportation). Though many attempted to portray this bill as addressing sex education in primary schools, the language plain and simply bans discussion of “gender identity and sexual orientation.” Now again, I never had sex-ed, so maybe you could make a loose argument that sexual orientation is bordering the line of the birds and the bees, but the mention of gender identity virtually smacks you in the face with good old-fashioned, white-collar anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. (Read the official language [here](#) and the bill analysis [here](#).)

The bill, as the title suggests, does, in fact, address parental rights. The bill, in its majority, addresses a more thorough involvement of a student’s parents concerning their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Ninety-eight percent of the bill’s language encourages a more robust integration of a parent and their child’s learning environment. I am not certain how putting this intention into law will make the difference its supporters are gassing it up to be. However, I’ll relent that it symbolically establishes an olive branch between school administrators and parents. If you think about how much (how little) ninety-eight percent of this language will change school life, we can agree that ninety-eight percent of this bill covers, arguably, a non-partisan issue. The remaining two percent of this bill, ironically, is what made this bill so infamous – and conveniently, where most of its broad and evasive language un-peacefully resides.

To exemplify the bill’s aforementioned crypticity is the language, “Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students...” As written, instruction that includes sexual orientation and gender identity, plainly, is banned. A hot point of debate was the phrase, “age-appropriate.” Given the clear reference to the LGBTQ+ community, opponents of the bill interpreted this as an attempt to discreetly imply that discussing anything related to the queer community isn’t developmentally appropriate (I agree, only I wouldn’t say it was discreet). It was proving and developing this point that dominated time during hearings, unfortunately ignoring many key and inarguably more [sinister implications of this bill](#). Long story made short, unsurprisingly, further discussion revealed that the bill sponsor, Senator Baxley, discredits the rise in queer-identifying young people to “social engineering,” tragically oblivious to the decrease in the social acceptance of homophobia.

### *HB 7*

The note of ambiguity was a familiar one for the prominent bills of this Session. The bill that allegedly protects individual freedoms (HB 7) produced an excruciatingly long hearing in the House that

exclusively revolved around attempting to operationalize subjectivity versus objectivity. House Bill 7, entitled, Individual Freedoms, set to amend the Florida Civil Rights Act by defining principles that would qualify as both unlawful employment practices and guidelines for proper instruction. This bill, if any, exemplifies the sinister horrors of the legislative process, particularly the grand effects of ambiguous language. The intentional misuse of the English language in an attempt to achieve success in a political endeavor has worked wonders for the Republican party this year. Below I have outlined [a few examples from HB 7](#). (Read the official language [here](#) and the bill analysis [here](#).)

If you're anything like me, you may have read the official language and have been rendered speechless. As I read the bill for the first time, there was an intangible constriction of what I'll figuratively define as my perception of the universe. My senses were paralyzed, and despite the intense, visceral reaction I was experiencing, I could not form the thoughts or words that could appraise the internal panic consuming my body. In hindsight, I believe this was where my reality, my naivete, had collapsed in on itself, and I was left a blubbering mess. That being said, I also hate to blame my frustration on my inexperience in the world of politics, because this was not only an attack on my values but an attack on my identity as a Black American.

HB 7 was marketed by Governor DeSantis as an attack on CRT in schools and businesses. For one, CRT, being a Black-formulated, graduate-level approach to analyzing the progress of racial relations, should never have been presented to the public. Not because the public is incapable of reading and absorbing a scholarly paper, but because most are just not going to. Due to its complexity, the easiest place to get information about CRT is the overwhelming majority of White, conservative politicians who maliciously market it as a theory to make our (White) children hate themselves. Thankfully, HB 7 was submitted to save the day, bravely amending our Civil Rights Act to take a stand for the mental health of our children, ensuring its safety from the dirty, blue-pill liberals. I will bitterly add that the school system has rarely been concerned with me hating the color of my skin nor preserving my psychological health – this “equal rights bill,” like all others, was never created to protect the interests of all people, just a privileged few.

What citizens are not shown are the explanations by the individuals who composed CRT, explaining what the theory is and what it is not. This bill represents a significant hurdle toward disgracing (peer-reviewed!) academia because of its affinity with an opposing partisan (CRT is primarily accepted by Democrats). It also serves as yet another time we are discrediting Black voices on an issue that overwhelmingly affects Black people. It seems that all it takes to fact-check information is for a (White) politician to refute it, valid or not. Since, as I've implied, this bill is using the amassed negative response to CRT to justify supporting this bill, the cutthroat implications of this bill are unfairly invalidated.

The controversy we face results from a group of non-Black citizens convened to draft a document to ensure and protect equal rights, only confounding variables – White privilege, sexism, and racism, among others – cause this allegedly unassuming legislation to unfairly target an already marginalized group. To clarify, I'm alluding to House Bill 7, though it seems there are multiple situations in precedent this can apply to. Alert Guinness Book of World Records for the Fastest Passing of a Civil Rights Bill! To the martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement - take notes! The Florida Legislative Branch is coming for your title!

## *HB 5*

On the note of ghastly, emotionally-debilitating social issues, lastly, but certainly not the least, both House and Senate hearings for House Bill 5, or the 15-week abortion ban, were one of the most nauseatingly heinous moments I had witnessed all Session. Like HB 1557, the abortion restrictions are delivered in an unassuming package, adorned with the promise to reduce infant mortality, not only by restricting abortion access but also, naturally, by expanding tobacco use education to all those who are and may become pregnant. (Read the official language [here](#) and the bill analysis [here](#).)

The practice of abortion has been controversial since the invention of the wheel. I also know that with the uprising of social media, pro-choicers and pro-lifers have been further polarized, recruiting supporters through ill-developed twitter-threads and loosely validated accusations by stay-at-home-parents-turned-gender-advocates. Understanding the extremism abundantly available on the internet, I was prepared for my half-baked opinions to be challenged as I entered this Session. I was excited to hear what I thought would be a professional discussion from both sides about how the state of Florida will approach restricting access to abortion.

The rhetoric was that it was all but confirmed that HB 5 would pass, as with the other bills - so the goal was to minimize the damage the bill inflicted. This effort concentrated on providing exemptions for those whom this bill would hurt the most, largely exemptions for those in circumstances of human trafficking, rape, and incest. The failure of these amendments and those similar paled in comparison to the horror of the legislators' stoicism as they listened to colleagues and constituents recount instances of graphic, horrific sexual assaults and debilitating emotional and mental incapacitation that resulted. And only to be met with a defense nourished with the immunizing defenses of their own personal, moral, and religious beliefs - with [little other evidential support](#).

## In Conclusion

Emerging into the realm that is the morality of abortion is not what I mean to focus on. Yet, the concept of morality's role in legislature is something I feel is important to explore, especially with this Session. A Session where we did not debate legislation, as I thought, but instead voted to assert one's moral values over the other— often presented with the tagline seeking to separate objectivity from subjectivity or bias from fact. I would say that it was a great philosophical feat to witness, but it was more comparable to drinking glass. Impossible, painful, and glaringly pointless.

The idea of a fact is meant to support the notion of objectivity. To illustrate, the soles of my shoes are primarily made of rubber. That is objectively true, and there is no subjective alternative to the composition of my boots. There is no subjective alternative to my shoe's design because this fact was imposed on an inanimate, non-sentient object. And I believe therein lies the root of this Session's conflicts. There is either an expectation that it be possible for a human to think like a computer or that a human's mental capabilities be diminished to that of a rock. For example, and I hate to bring it up, but the morality behind the infamous issue of segregation between friends, neighbors, and academic professionals

was up for debate less than a century ago, and unfortunately, embarrassingly, it is becoming exponentially apparent that our country has yet to reach a consensus in eradicating it. Since this is the case, then how can we expect to have legislators attempt to say that they are valid in operationalizing a curriculum covering things we have yet to completely understand? How can we be entirely sure that our unconscious prejudices are not glimpsing over what could be considered a massive human rights violation in a short sixty years? Because less than ten years ago, people were sitting in a room inarguably greater than the Florida Senate chamber to ensure whether all American citizens, plain and simple, have the legal allowance to be married! And that vote, seven years ago, was split five to four.

Simply asserting that a fact must be objective diminishes humanity to autonomy. It reduces our beautiful nature to question ourselves and the world around us to algorithms. And to be clear, that is not what these bills will do. These bills won't stop people from having these questions; they will make people afraid to ask them. Proponents argued that the bill's language was clear as day, and this alleged "chilling effect" was dismissed as "hypothetical." Yet, before the bill even left the Senate floor, my high school, minutes before the annual Black History Program, banned a trivia question about the colors of the Black Liberation Flag while also restricting a clip of a Black student sharing that slavery is not discussed nearly enough in classrooms – not theories about slavery, not opinions about slavery, FACTS about slavery. Facts like enslaved Africans were skinned and used as couches, facts like those who sold those things and bought those products, are the people who made the fundamental laws that made this country the "great" one it is. The reason for his banning, from the lips of my principal, was that it discussed Critical Race Theory. A graduate-level theory that was not present in that program, one that had yet to be officially (legally) condemned in public schools, but also one that is being used to fearmonger and radicalize sharing facts about Black history.

In fifth grade, in the English portion of my school day, my classmates and I were learning about grammar conventions, particularly comma placement. My teacher stood in front of my class and confidently taught my fellow peers that comma placement is entirely dependent on the author's location of emphasis – to my surprise, that day, I learned that a dramatic pause here and there was encouraged by the omnipotent and never-ending laws of grammar. If this sounds odd to you, don't worry – it also sounded strange to another English teacher, a short five years later, upon reading my passionately-written, comma-ridden essay. He proceeded to explain to me that a comma, in fact, separates some independent clauses from dependent ones or modifying phrases from adjectives, and it blew my mind. Now I say this not to embarrass my 5th grade English teacher or to challenge my freshman English teacher, but I say this to exemplify the vastness of information that has yet to disseminate to both our students and our education professionals. Some people are still unclear on whether a period should be located inside or outside the parentheses. All of us are still unclear on where we, as a country, stand when it comes to race and gender relations – and do we solve this by declaring the answer to present itself? Yes, it would be great for racism and sexism to be solved, for our country to be evolved to the point where racial colorblindness and wage equity could actually exist, and it would be great if someone would make a decision on whether or not you can start a sentence with "Because." However, we are not there yet. As crazy as it sounds, after centuries, the looming discussions of racism, sexism, and grammatical correctness have not been put to rest, and thus, it is egregiously irresponsible to legally assert it has been.

Objectivity is not within the legislature's power to define, much less dictate. It would be nice if you could, but unfortunately, come next school year, watch as their words send school boards into battlegrounds. Watch as their inboxes flood with questions, teachers mobilize in protest, and students and businesses are deterred from the intellectual chaos present in this state. My philosophy textbook is not 1,200 pages long for the Florida Legislature, reigned by conservative shut-ins to make up their minds about arguments that have been occurring for centuries. Becoming a lawmaker does not bestow omnipotent ethical and moral insight, nor does it require it. So, in conclusion, the Florida Legislature should get off their high horses; they are not Aristotle, they are not W.E.B. Dubois – they are public servants. Public servants with the duty and privilege to maintain and encourage public safety and well-being, a job accomplished by passing water sanitization and heat illness prevention bills, not greenlighting legislation that necessitates ignoring horrific stories detailing rape, grief, and suicide - which is precisely what happened this Session.

I'm finding that frustration arises as I try to transcribe my already overwhelmingly indescribable emotions stemming from the Session that took place a few months ago. I was prepared for intellectual disappointments, but right now, it feels as if the expansive world I was excited to mature into is disintegrating into ashes. I worry about what next year will bring - whether it be my first college party or fiery oblivion. However, as I, ironically, find myself leaving (or fleeing) Florida to the considerably more tolerant state of California in pursuit of post-secondary education, I remember my commitment to acknowledging the limitations of my experiences (and my affinity to hyperbole). The anger and betrayal that I'm feeling - that I'm sure many are feeling - serves a purpose. I believe this affliction, this twisted and humbling experience, is only one of many. I've seen that life is not what I thought it was, and right now, it isn't fair. In fact, it seems cruel and evil. And rather than being paralyzed by the unknown trials ahead of me, embracing the unsophisticated hopes of my childhood is what has sustained my reverence for activism and the social sciences. Time goes on, more will come, and in the words of Toni Morrison, the purpose of evil is to survive it. It's darkest before dawn, don't stop believin', let it go - whatever run-through, fantasy-driven solace does the trick, this year has proven that there are evidently no limitations on what the future holds for us.