

Virginia Republican candidate for governor targets author Toni Morrison

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The Virginia gubernatorial election has been roiled in its closing days by an ad used by Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin against his Democratic rival Terry McAuliffe that makes thinly disguised appeals to racism.

The October 25 social media ad features Laura Murphy, described as a concerned “Fairfax County mother,” from the northern Virginia suburbs outside of Washington D.C.

In reality, Murphy is a right-wing Republican activist married to a Washington D.C. lobbyist and donor, who in 2013 set to pushing through a bill in the Virginia state legislature, then Republican-controlled, which, in her words, would “require schools to notify parents when explicit content was assigned.”

The text of H.B. 516 requires a public school to “notify the parent of any student whose teacher reasonably expects to provide instructional material that includes sexually explicit content.” The school must “permit the parent ... to review instructional material that includes sexually explicit content upon request” and “provide, as an alternative ... nonexplicit instructional material.”

The Republican-backed “Beloved bill,” named after Toni Morrison’s 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, about an escaped slave from Virginia who killed her children rather than returning them to bondage, was eventually vetoed by McAuliffe, who was the state’s governor at the time.

The Murphy family claims that the “explicit content” in *Beloved* caused her son, Blake, to have “nightmares” because it was “disgusting and gross.” Today this son Blake, who was then a senior in high school, is an attorney for the Republican Party.

According to the American Library Association (ALA), the award-winning novel is one of the most

frequently challenged books in American classrooms. Given its controversial subject matter, which is based on real events, a spokesperson for the ALA said to the *Washington Post* in 2013, “we would strongly advise people to read the book as a whole before they make a judgment.”

Youngkin raised this episode from nearly a decade ago during the first McAuliffe administration in order to paint the Democratic candidate as standing “between parents and their children.” It has been launched amid the candidate’s general appeals to political reaction and social backwardness during the election.

In particular, Youngkin has zeroed in on policy fights relating to masks and social distancing in public schools. Youngkin has disguised his right-wing policies surrounding masks and other public health concerns as examples of “parents’ rights,” meaning parents should have ultimate say over whether their child adheres to public safety mandates, even if it means infecting peers and teachers freely in the process. In the view of Youngkin and other representatives of big business, such health measures are reminders of the spiraling pandemic, which must be buried and forgotten in order to encourage returning to full economic operation.

In addition to this, Youngkin has attacked schools believed to be teaching “critical race theory” to their students. Rather than confronting Critical Race Theory, or “CRT,” a college-level academic course, Youngkin has targeted any curriculum touching upon the subject of racism or social class in America. “[T]here’s no place for critical race theory in our school system,” stated Youngkin Sunday on Fox News. “On day one, I’m going to ban it,” he added.

Youngkin’s threats against Morrison’s *Beloved* and “critical race theory” are of a piece with other policies pursued by Republican administrations throughout the

United States. The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote this year that the effort to ban “divisive concepts” from being taught “can be interpreted by local and state officials as prohibiting a wide range of left-wing and progressive viewpoints.”

In this context, Youngkin’s attack on the teaching of racial concepts and his appeals to “parents’ rights” has a distinctly fascistic ring similar to the Republican mantra of “state’s rights” from several generations ago.

The Youngkin campaign’s dredging up of such censorship efforts to remove “discomforting” images from classrooms demonstrates the reactionary character of similar efforts pursued by the advocates of identity politics to establish identity-exclusive “safe spaces” in public areas.

All efforts to restrict the democratic rights of working people, including the right of public school and college teachers to teach what in their judgment and experience helps educate students, are reactionary and strengthen the political right wing. They have nothing in common with promoting equality or other progressive values.



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