

What 'woke' means now depends on who you ask

Myron Thompson

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OAK RIDGE, Tenn. – The word “woke” is tossed around a lot in political and social debates all around the country.

The term carries different meanings and strong emotional connections for people, and it has changed over the years.

The term “woke” used to have a different meaning. It was first used by Pan-African activist and racial separatist Marcus Garvey as early as 1923. “Woke” initially was meant to acknowledge the struggles of African Americans and be a word of empowerment for some Black people.

When the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum about a decade ago after high-profile police killings of Black people, the term “woke” expanded outside of Black communities into the larger public lexicon. It became co-opted or appropriated for various po-

litical agendas, with the definition of the word evolving and coming to mean different things to different people.

The term woke has been used by conservative figures as pejorative term to describe the following social justice initiatives:

- **LGBTQ+ rights:** A movement advocating for the equal treatment and elimination of discriminatory policies hurting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people, according to Britannica.

- **Gender-affirming care:** Access to mental health, medical, surgical and nonmedical services for nonbinary and transgender people, according to the Office of Population Affairs.

- **Diversity, equity and inclusion measures:** A form of hiring and employee retention meant to reduce biases and improve the accessibility of jobs for disenfranchised minorities. Companies such as Harley-Davidson and Tractor Supply have faced boycotts over these measures.

- **Critical race theory:** A social and

intellectual movement that studies the relationship between race, racism and power, as described by theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their book, “Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge.”

A USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll from March 2023 demonstrates the varying ideas for what “woke” means among Americans between Republicans and Democrats.

Of those surveyed, 56% say the term means “to be informed, educated on and aware of social injustices.” That includes not only three-fourths of Democrats but also more than a third of Republicans. Overall, 39% say the word reflects what has become the GOP political definition, “to be overly politically correct and police others’ words.”

For years, conservative activists, lawmakers and politicians have used the term “woke” as a slam against progressive values and liberal initiatives.

Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, a Tennessee municipal official who previously wrestled in the WWE as the in-



When the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum after high-profile killings of Black people, the term “woke” entered into the larger public lexicon. CAITIE MCMEKIN/KNOXVILLE NEWS SENTINEL FILE

ring character Kane, has warned Republicans against allowing a “woke” culture to flourish. Jacobs posted on X to say the “wokeness is weakness” and it has no place in schools or military. He didn’t detail what he meant.

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