

Historical Correctness is Worse Than Political Correctness

If you think political correctness is disturbing, you probably aren't fully aware of how deeply entrenched it is in American culture. But it is such an immutable characteristic of the Left that it can never be satisfied, and must always push on to the next frontier to satisfy its grievances. And the Left has already advanced deeply into its next future stronghold: historical correctness.

From coast to coast, left-wing campus agitators who provided the seeding (and a lot of fertilizer) for various progressive causes over the last fifty years are succeeding with breathtaking alacrity in persuading supposed grownups to destroy, expunge, and sanitize the historical record of the United States. There is no logical limiting principle to the Left's efforts to turn history into a safe space, no reason whatsoever there can't or won't be a movement to wipe George Washington's name from the capital, or to demand that the Washington Monument be renamed the People's Pillar. A certain northwestern state had better be prepared to have itself named after the Native Americans.

Surely this is a joke, you think. But it isn't. The latest new low in historical correctness was reached last weekend, when Yale University President Peter Salovey [announced](#) that the residential college named for John C. Calhoun would be renamed after Grace Hopper, a Yale graduate who went on to a notable career in computer science and the U.S. Navy. Students lost no time in defacing the name of Calhoun College before administrators could rush to ratify their handiwork.

John C. Calhoun, a vice president and defender of slavery, was

“a white supremacist,” declared Salovey, and who could deny it? After all, Calhoun once said,

I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races. . . [nor] in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.

He added, “While they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

These are shocking, racist comments, and no one would be excused for making them in twenty-first century America. But such sentiments were so common in the 19th century that they were hardly considered controversial. So banal were these ideas, in fact, that [Abraham Lincoln](#) harbored them. In fact, it was Lincoln, not Calhoun, who made the remarks I have quoted, in an 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debate.

When it comes to playing race gotcha with figures of the past, then, the line cannot stop until, at least, the game reaches as far as Sainted Abe. It goes without saying that those who owned slaves, such as Washington and Jefferson, not to mention those who trafficked in them, such as Yale’s founder and namesake Elihu Yale, can hardly be immune from charges of bringing up disquieting facts from the nation’s past. Once we go down this road, it goes for a very long way, much further than most of us really want to travel.

This is why historical correctness is such a folly: Racial crimes, and bigoted thinking, are so deeply embedded in the

foundation of history that they cannot be removed without toppling the whole structure. We will just have to learn to live with the fact that people we admire in some respects said and did indefensible things about race. In other words, we will just have to learn to live the way we have been living until the day before yesterday, with the full knowledge that even our most revered figures made sizable moral, intellectual, and political errors.

So what good does it do for Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Clemson, Vanderbilt, the University of North Carolina, Georgetown, and other institutions of higher learning to embark upon a frenzy of [erasing inconvenient names](#)? History is history. It isn't subject to a heckler's veto, and we shouldn't allow angry mobs to undertake a Stalin-style campaign to censor disfavored figures from the past according to whatever subject happens to be most salient at any given moment.

It was less than a year ago that Salovey himself [said](#) the Calhoun name would remain affixed to a college on campus, in the course of making the even more absurd, craven, and surreal announcement that Yale's masters would henceforth be known as "heads" because student activists couldn't hear the word "master" without being triggered to think of slavery.

What pertinent facts changed in the past ten months? Does Calhoun's record include more inflammatory statements about slavery today than it did in 2016? No, all that has changed vis-a-vis Calhoun was that student activists continued to excoriate Salovey, and he didn't like it. Laundering his decision through a committee whose writ was evident the moment he named it "the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming," Salovey lacked even the ability to assert ownership of his own decision to cave in.

As one of the world's most storied redoubts of learning, education, and rational discourse, Yale ought to seize every opportunity it can to disassociate itself from the barbarous

impulse to destroy. Instead, Yale is doing the opposite, to such an absurd degree that it [dropped](#) criminal charges against, and even restored employment to, a Calhoun College dishwasher who broke a stained-glass window on the grounds of historical incorrectness (the window depicted slaves carrying cotton in the antebellum South).

As an institution, Yale is supposed to acknowledge, learn from, and build upon the past, not tear it apart. Alumni who favor it with their donations may well have cause to wonder whether the university should continue to be rewarded for so publicly rejecting its bedrock values. And they should be very worried that historical correctness, which has so far proven to be a wildly successful campus phenomenon, will soon spread into American culture more broadly.

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