

The War on History Comes for George Washington

They finally came for George Washington.

The perpetual war on history now has the father of our country in its sights as the San Francisco Board of Education considers removing a mural of Washington from a local school.

If the board succeeds in politicizing Washington, whose legacy was once so secured and uniting that his home at Mount Vernon was considered [neutral ground](#) during the Civil War, then we have clearly crossed the Rubicon of social division.

Critics of the mural point out that, in addition to Washington, it also depicts slaves and Native Americans – and one of the Native Americans appears to be dead.

They have called the artwork offensive, and the school board says it “traumatizes students” and “glorifies slavery, genocide, colonization, manifest destiny, white supremacy, oppression, etc.,” [according](#) to *The Wall Street Journal*.

But the original intent of the mural was actually the exact opposite.

It was painted in 1936 by artist Victor Arnautoff, a man of the left in his own time who, according to historian Fergus M. Bordewich, wanted to depict Washington in a less glamorized way by including images of disturbing realities. Bordewich explained:

[Arnautoff] included those images not to glorify Washington, but rather to provoke a nuanced evaluation of his legacy. The scene with the dead Native American, for instance, calls attention to the price of ‘manifest destiny.’ Arnautoff’s murals also portray the slaves with humanity and the several

live Indians as vigorous and manly.

Those who condemn the murals have misunderstood it, seeing only what they sought to find. They've also got their history seriously wrong. Washington did own slaves—124 men, women and children—and oversaw many more who belonged to his wife's family. But by his later years he had evolved into a proto-abolitionist, a remarkable ethical journey for a man of his time, place, and class.

No matter to the modern iconoclasts. It's too much to expect one to think about what one is rushing to destroy. Obliterate now and ask questions, well, never.

This is just the latest example of attempts to purge American history of its historical figures. Not only is this trend wildly misguided – how destroying statues and paintings bring an end to racism and prejudice is never fully explained – but it also cheapens the debate over America's past by ignoring nuance.

From the beginning, it was clear that this movement had far less to do with genuinely criticizing past historical figures, but instead reflected the need of modern radicals to feel good about themselves and think they are “doing something” to stop oppression, be it real or imaginary.

Reflection and thoughtfulness are uncomfortable impediments to those who never dare question whether they are on the “right side of history.”

It makes sense that the same people who seek to de-platform individuals for wrongthink on social media and shut down controversial speakers at universities are the same people who want to erase artwork and monuments. The common thread is for their views to be constantly reinforced and never challenged from without.

The unthinking maxims of intersectionality and identity politics must be recited over and over again from all sectors of society. No alternate views can be tolerated. Such teachings soothe the minds of radicals who can easily ignore the moral complications of life from the safe comforts of their college campuses and public buildings. (Those, of course, are made possible by the wicked people they seek to extinguish.)

Doubt, skepticism, and the use of reason are uncomfortable and problematic.

It didn't take long for the iconoclasts to move from Jefferson Davis to Thomas Jefferson, and then from Jefferson to the most revered of our Founding Fathers, George Washington.

What's truly revealing about the empty, surface-level nature of these efforts is how little cost is involved for those doing the erasing.

Criticizing slavery and racism in 2019 can get one tenure, public office, and a six-figure salary as a corporate consultant. So brave.

It's easy to cover up or take down a painting, not so easy to sacrifice the immense benefits of living in the prosperous constitutional republic that problematic men like Washington created.

As David Marcus [wrote](#) for *The Federalist*, it was easy to get rid of Kate Smith's "God Bless America" recording at Yankee games due to her singing what are now considered offensive songs in the 1930s – but are Yankee fans willing to abolish the Yankees themselves because of their team's historical role in segregation?

For that matter, are Harvard University administrators and professors willing to give up their jobs at an institution founded in part by a man who owned slaves because its origin

was problematic?

Not likely.

It's far more satisfying to take the less costly step of tearing down a painting or a statue. And it's much easier to avoid the complicated fact that so many of these supposedly ignorant and prejudiced people built the very institutions they enjoy today.

In their simplistic thinking, surely those who founded a free republic based on consent, and truly "[broke the wheel](#)" of tyranny that had been the norm for virtually all of human history, couldn't be great if slavery was still a part of their heritage.

They failed to live up to their own ideals, so they best be erased.

But to follow this logic forward, we can't stop with the Founders.

The over half-million Americans who lost their lives and countless others who risked them to end slavery, the "original sin" of this country, also [weren't so great](#), you see.

Their skin was generally too fair, their motivations insufficiently pure, and most were undoubtedly homophobes who couldn't have conceived of modern concepts like gay marriage or a man literally becoming a woman.

How can men like President William McKinley, who could simply be attacked for other reasons, be celebrated?

They can't. They too must be obliterated.

Greatness, according to the history erasers, truly belongs to the [wokescolds](#) who wage hashtag campaigns to raise awareness about offensive art and ensure society conforms to their ever-evolving whims.

But the truth is, those who wage war on America's history are tacitly acknowledging the benefits of living in America, a free country that allows them to pursue their radical activism, even though it is antithetical to the founding ideals that enable free speech.

These movements are forcing politics to infect every corner of our existence, and that weakens this country. It makes us more hateful toward one another and trains us in the un-American notion that to win arguments, we must quash, liquidate, and erase from all memory those we disagree with.

The Washington mural may come down in San Francisco, but the real damage is not being done to the art. It's being done to the legacy of Washington, to ourselves.

The past is an easy target for iconoclast bullies, but if Americans don't want them to keep winning, they will have to begin standing up and speaking out against them.

If not, the destruction of our statues and artwork will merely be symbolic of the destruction done to our country at large.

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