

# And Then They Came for the Left's Sacred Symbols

All throughout history, winners have destroyed the creations of losers. And yet that same history tells us that the wheel has a way of turning, as losers sometimes become winners. And so perhaps those who would destroy someone else's stuff should stop and reflect on the possibility that the next stuff to be destroyed could well be their own. Less destruction, more preservation – as a matter of enlightened self-interest, that should be the goal of all who wish to see heritage preserved.

A case in point is the planned destruction of murals at George Washington High School in San Francisco. Ironically, "The Life of George Washington" was painted in the 1930s by an avowed communist, Victor Arnautoff (that's not red-baiting: after he retired in the '60s, Arnautoff returned to the Soviet Union to live out his days as a contented commie).

Yet 80 years later, Arnautoff's left-slanted depiction of scenes from American history – including dead bodies – is judged by newer leftists to be retrograde, even offensive.

We can observe that the old Marxist Left, steeped in the tragic militance of the *Manifesto*, actively celebrated death and martyrdom. For instance, the famous anthem "The Red Flag" begins with these vivid lines: "The people's flag is deepest red/ It shrouded oft our martyred dead/ And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold/ Their hearts' blood dyed to every fold." The goal of the lyric, of course, is to inspire: all serious movements, secular as well as sacred, celebrate martyrdom; it's the sacrament of sacrifice that proves that the cause is worthy.

By contrast, today's new trendy Left lacks such stern courage. Instead of tragic militancy, it suffers from helpless

dependency. By its own admission, it fears being “triggered,” that is, made sad. If so, then the prospects for this new kind of Left—more pampered and brittle than hardened and proletarian—ever winning outside of a few cities, campuses, and courtrooms are nil. The world is a tough place full of tough people, and events can be even tougher.

The old Left knew that to be true, and so comrades were willing to die for their beliefs—that’s why the men who manned the “barricades of freedom” are remembered in legend and [song](#) to this day. (By contrast, today’s Antifa losers are hardly strong warriors. Like the klansmen they resemble, they hide their identities and prey on the weak.)

Speaking for that older, tougher leftist tradition, [Peter Dreier](#) wrote recently in *Common Dreams* (emphasis added):

*The Arnautoff murals are a remarkable teaching tool, providing educators with opportunities to help students consider how the country was founded on the backs of slaves and native Americans. They give students—and the general public—a different view of George Washington than the one typically portrayed in textbooks. **Shielding students from these images is stupid. It reflects the school board’s political cowardice and a failure of imagination.***

Fortunately, too, *The New York Times* has weighed in. The *Times* has done more than its share of pandering to snowflakes in recent years, yet the Grey Lady (let’s hope that doesn’t trigger anyone) still has enough rigor to rise to the defense of venerable objects and the unconquerable spirit of expression. In the words of art critic [Roberta Smith](#):

*In a democracy, destroying a work of art is never a solution to any offense it may give. Once art has been made and released into the often choppy flow of life, it should stay there. It will live on anyway. To dictate its elimination is an implicitly autocratic move, similar in spirit, if not*

*scale, to the deliberate demolition of ancient art and artifacts by the Taliban and the Islamic State.*

In the face of such criticism, the San Francisco snowflakes seem to be melting. Whereas early reports had suggested that the the murals would be painted over (that is, destroyed) or somehow moved (that is, partially destroyed), it now seems that they will simply be obscured by shrouds or perhaps a wall. That's been the solution for other murals and memorials that are still standing, for example, at [Notre Dame University](#) and [Washington and Lee University](#).

Such an outcome is hardly satisfactory for those who believe in art, history, and free expression. But it's still better than destruction – including vandalism and arson.

Yet even if the murals survive – hopefully to be unveiled, once again, in some more open-minded era – the PC Left should be happy. Why? Because if they can tear down the Right's creations, then the Right can tear down the Left's.

To be sure, for the last half-century or so, it's mostly been a one-way street. Progressives had the energy to plow under conservative symbols, and conservatives were mostly too bewitched, bothered, or bewildered to stop them.

Yet there are no final victories, and the dialectic trap can still snap shut on anyone.

Indeed, the 'round-the-world political triumphs of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Boris Johnson prove that rightists can win, too. And by Right, we don't mean conservative in the Burkean sense of channeling the tides of change through the canals of custom. Instead we mean *right-wing*, in the sense of happily smashing all that the left holds dear.

Trump seems determined to stomp on just about every liberal piety. It's even possible that he'll cancel Barack Obama's

plan and keep Andrew Jackson, the Indian fighter, on the \$20 bill, rather than see him replaced by Harriet Tubman. Meanwhile, Orbán proudly preaches illiberalism and expels a George Soros-funded university. And Johnson seems really to mean it on Brexit, aiming to prove that every statist ratchet can be un-ratcheted.

Want more iconoclastic right-wingers? Okay: India's Narendra Modi, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. All of these figures seek to do to the Left what the Left once did to the Right. If such mindsets are turned loose, what icon of the Left – what statue, what monument, what street name—will be safe?

So what to do? How to stop this sort of eye-for-an-eye cycle that could leave the world blind – and bereft of cultural inheritance? Perhaps the best thing would be simply to call a truce, at least insofar as cultural creations are concerned. That is, as a matter of enlightened, golden-ruled self-interest, the Left and the Right could agree simply to stop trying to destroy each other's stuff.

If we had such a ceasefire, then perhaps a new understanding of the value of the past would come to the fore. That is, we could focus on preservation as an end in itself without regard to *au courant* ideology. We could even build on that past, restore its meaning and its beauty – and perhaps make it even more meaningful and beautiful.

We all, wherever we are and wherever we stand, have our own ideas about what deserves to be not only preserved but also renewed. And here's the creation that's been on this author's mind of late: the [Eisenhower Executive Office Building](#), next to the White House. That building, a fabulous exemplar of the 19th-century Second Empire style, has officed innumerable vice presidents, cabinet secretaries, big shots, worker bees, and even the occasional president – Richard Nixon preferred it to the Oval Office.

Way back when, in the early '80s, it was also the workplace of a low-level drone, namely, yours truly. Yet even a peon can partake in greatness, however vicariously. One day, I was sitting at my desk – in a little cubicle, nothing more – and some architectural types wandered in, carrying clipboards and blueprints. They looked around for a while, then said matter-of-factly, “The walls are different, but this was once Douglas MacArthur’s office.” That offhand pronouncement might have been casual to them, but it sure was a big deal to me.

In those days, the Old EOB, as we called it, was a drab place; the filigreed craftsmanship had been painted and repainted so many times that it had all but disappeared. Notably, the building’s once-spectacular skylights over the stairwells had been covered during World War II – blackouts, for fear of air-raids – and then never restored.

And yet restoration did finally happen, thanks in large part to a man named John F.W. Rogers, then a special assistant to Ronald Reagan, who started the long process of restoring the building to glory.

Over the four decades since, the Old EOB has been fully rehabilitated. In fact, the building might even be better today, since there’s neither the tobacco smoke nor spittle that used to discolor even the grandest edifice.

These results can be seen in a spectacular new book, [\*Palace of State: The Eisenhower Executive Office Building\*](#), edited by Thomas E. Luebke, secretary to the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts. One could say that *Palace* is a coffee-table book, insofar as it has lots of pretty pictures. Yet that label is unfair to its meticulous scholarship, which recalls, for example, the genius of Richard von Ezdorf and his team of draftsmen – to cite just a few of those upon whom it cascades luster.

Amazingly, back in the 1950s, an official commission actually

called for tearing the building down to make room for something more “modern.” Happily, former president Harry Truman came to its defense: the building was, he quipped, “the greatest monstrosity in America,” and so it was saved.

We can all think of edifices and other treasures worth saving and restoring. Perhaps these are the special places where Right can meet Left in harmony – at least it’s a start.

And maybe, who knows, a shared respect for the importance of the past – including the warty, even bloody, history of our Founding Father as depicted by an angry communist – will yield common bonds for the present.

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*[Image Credit: YouTube]*