



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 5, 2019

## Effort to Paint Over George Washington Mural Demonstrates Contradictions of the Left

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First there were the attacks on statues, street names, symbols, and the like associated with the Confederate States of America such as the Confederate flag and General Robert E. Lee. The attacks were then broadened to include some of the more prominent of America's Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson, and patriotic songs and symbols such as the Star Spangled Banner and the 13-star American flag. Over time, it has become increasingly clear that an essential part of the Left's agitation efforts is to destroy America's historical symbols and heroes and rewrite history.



Now, as has happened in leftist movements such as the French Revolution, when Maximilian Robespierre turned on his fellow Jacobin Georges Danton, and the Bolshevik Revolution, when Joseph Stalin turned on fellow Communist Leon Trotsky, the Left has decided that a mural painted by one of its own — Russian Communist, Victor Arnautoff — just might not live up to the fluid standards of the Left.

The mural in question is entitled "Life of Washington." It is a 13-panel, 1,600-square foot mural at George Washington High School in San Francisco. Arnautoff was commissioned to paint the mural by the Federal Arts Projects as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program, designed to give jobs to the unemployed during the depths of the 1930s Great Depression.

When Arnautoff was one of a group of artists to paint murals at Coit Tower in 1930s San Francisco, it touched off protests by local anti-communists (I know, it seems oxymoronic to say "San Francisco anti-communists"). The mural entitled "City Life" depicted workers around a newsstand filled with socialist newspapers and magazines. The then-conservative *San Francisco Chronicle* was not included in the mural.

Today it would not be all that surprising for a mural in San Francisco to include very negative images, and associate those images with the revered George Washington. However, at the time, it was quite shocking that Arnautoff's "Life of Washington," while including positive portrayals of Washington in his roles as a surveyor, as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, and as first president of the United States, also included images with white pioneers standing over the body of an American Indian and of



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slaves working at Washington's Mount Vernon plantation in Virginia.

"Victor Arnautoff was far ahead of his time, and we have to catch up with him in terms of making school curriculum more inclusive and historically accurate," said Harvey Smith, who is the president of the National New Deal Preservation Association. Perhaps Smith has not been in a public school classroom lately, but it is a good bet that the public schools in San Francisco already include many negatives about American history, which is probably what he means by "historically accurate."

But Smith is no doubt correct that Arnautoff *was* ahead of his time in his negative portrayal of the most revered of the Founding Fathers. The problem is that the politically correct police of the Left have criteria that are very fluid. Now, a mural that was once seen as educational and innovative is considered racist and degrading for its portrayal of African Americans and Native Americans.

In short, rather than focusing on history that is more "accurate" in the words of Mr. Smith, some history needs to be sent into the Orwellian memory hole. Perhaps they could seek technical advice from the Taliban in Afghanistan on how best to erase images they dislike.

To carry out this Taliban-like purpose, the school board is prepared to spend up to \$600,000 to paint over the mural. The money is necessary for a required environmental review (this is California), as well as to cover expected lawsuits to stop the district from destroying the mural.

Some on the Left are not pleased with the plan to paint over the mural. Richard Walker, who is a professor emeritus of geography at the University of California in nearby Berkeley, is one of them. He is director of the history project known as the Living New Deal, and he actually likes the mural. He argues that it shows the "uncomfortable facts" about Washington.

"We on the Left ought to welcome the honest portrayal," Walker said.

But Mark Sanchez, vice president of the school board, expressed concern about the students who have to walk by the mural during the school day, and see unpleasant images such as slaves on Washington's plantation. (The majority of the 2,000 students are African-American). "Painting over it represents not only a symbolic fresh start, but a real fresh start," Sanchez contended.

Walker, on the other hand, noted, "It's been the Right that has always attacked the New Deal with its social programs," explaining that the mural was done during "one of the few periods in American history where you had the federal government supporting public art, public spheres, public goods."

Walker said that rather than destroying the Washington mural, school officials should require students to take a course on slavery.

Really? A course on slavery? Slavery is already covered — and is undoubtedly very well covered — in high-school courses on American history up through the period of the Civil War. It is highly likely that students at George Washington High School in San Francisco are told that Washington was a slave owner, along with Thomas Jefferson and other Founders. On the other hand, the achievements of the Founding Fathers are very likely largely passed over in favor of ways to trash the Founders and the Founding.

What is fascinating about this controversy is that both sides are arguing from a left-wing worldview. Again, it is sort of like a progressive intramural contest, such as Robespierre versus Danton, or Stalin versus Trotsky. The views of those Americans who actually revere Washington, and believe his accomplishments should be included along with any negative aspects of his legacy, are not considered worthy of mention, much less depicted in a 1,600-square foot mural.



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*Photo: section of "Life of Washington" mural at George Washington High School in San Francisco*

Steve Byas is a college history instructor, and author of *History's Greatest Libels*. One chapter of his book covers the libel that Washington was a deist, rather than a Christian. Other chapters cover liberal libels leveled against historical personalities such as Christopher Columbus and Joseph McCarthy. He can be contacted at [byassteve@yahoo.com](mailto:byassteve@yahoo.com)



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