

San Francisco School Board votes to destroy left-wing murals they claim are “racist” and “white supremacist”

By Toby Reese
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On Tuesday evening, the San Francisco Unified School Board voted unanimously to destroy or cover over the historic 1936 “Life of George Washington Murals” at a district high school. The vote is a reactionary decision that marks a new stage in the censorship drive that began last December.

The 13 murals created by left-wing artist Victor Arnautoff were products of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal arts program for unemployed artists during the Great Depression. The murals at George Washington High School (GWHS) depict the contradictory character of early American history, portraying many of the progressive aspects of the American Revolution and also depicting slave labor and the genocide of Native Americans.

At the crowded meeting, supporters and opponents of the murals were each allocated 30 minutes, one minute maximum per person, to state their reasons for or against the preservation of the murals. Speakers from the George Washington High School Alumni Association, California College of the Arts, San Francisco Art Institute, United Public Workers for Action and many others offered statements in support of the murals.

Carol, a former art teacher at GWHS, explained to the crowd, “I taught there for many years and I always took my students to the murals for class—[Addressing students in attendance at the meeting] Do you know about the WPA? The murals are important art and history, they display our high points and low points.”

Robert, a Native American elder, explained, “The murals are a visual history that there was a genocide. If they are destroyed, you are taking a visual record away. I’m a First Nation too, I get angry but not at the

murals, I get angry about how to overcome oppression.”

One supporter of the mural stated that he was “shocked that district funds were being considered for whitewashing when they could be used for tutoring, teacher salaries, or a Native American resource center.” Jack, a retired member of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), began to speak on the 1934 general strike that took place in San Francisco to provide a historical context for the murals’ creation, but he was cut off after his one minute ran out. Jeff Powers, a railroad worker, said, “The murals are not racist, they don’t glorify racism. You don’t have to like them, but you can’t take them down, that’s censorship and that’s a slippery slope.”

This WWSW reporter told the meeting, “This is no better than book-burning and other reactionary forms of repression and censorship. Ultimately, it is aimed at blocking the population from understanding American society’s contradictory social development—something which has been and continues to be nuanced and complex. The past must be studied, critically thought about and understood in order to improve the present.”

Opponents of the murals included students from the school district, various parents in the community, members of Native American tribes and members of the Reflection and Action Group appointed by the district to make a recommendation on the murals.

In response to the argument that painting over the murals was censorship, one opponent responded that this was “not erasing history but doing the right thing,” while another stated, “It’s not about censorship, it’s about reparations.” Amy Anderson, a registered American Indian stated, “Reparations means to me that

we can recognize great harm is done—white walls can be a fresh start.”

Another speaker, Loretta Torez, said, “I’ve developed one question of how to determine if someone is a racist. Simply ask them: should our nation pay reparations to black, indigenous, etc., people? If they answer no, they are a racist. We live in a white supremacist culture here in San Francisco.”

Michelle Chan from Coleman Advocates declared, “If you don’t understand that these murals institutionalize racism, then you don’t understand what racism is.”

Once the school board closed the discussion, they immediately proceeded to a recommendation, clearly having already made up their minds. The commissioners primarily discussed *how* the murals should be destroyed, either with panels that would hide them from view or with paint that would permanently erase the murals from the walls. Employees from the district were asked questions about what legal and practical measures would be required for each method.

Although multiple board officials stated that their preferred method of removal would be painting over the murals—a response favored by many opponents in the audience as they repeatedly held up signs or shouted out “Paint it down!”—it became clear that this option would require an extensive Environmental Impact Report and potentially more money or time, due to legal challenges. All the officials agreed they wanted to cover the murals as soon as possible. The officials ultimately voted unanimously to paint over the murals, but if it takes undue time, apparently more than three years, the murals will instead be covered over with panels.

Other aspects of the discussion among board members were revealing. When the question of costs required to cover the murals came up, with the projected price tag of \$625,000-\$825,000 or more, board member Alison Collins agreed with comments from opponents of the murals and stated, “This is about reparations. It’s about time we stood up and paid for it.”

Superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District Vincent Matthews referenced Oprah Winfrey, asserting, “Oprah defines racism as ‘the everyday wearing down of the soul.’ When I saw the murals, I lost a whole chunk of my soul.”

Commissioner Gabriela Lopez claimed that supporters of the murals were only “showing up” because the board was attacking “white supremacist values.”

The comments on Tuesday from the various board members and their supporters, as well as the board’s decision, expose this campaign’s true, extremely right-wing colors. This is a viciously reactionary social element, which doesn’t represent any “community” except the well-fed, well-heeled upper middle class. The reference to Oprah Winfrey, the billionaire, is revealing: she is the role model for this social layer, people consumed with self-interest and self-pity. They see nothing aside from what will open a career path and greater incomes and privileges for themselves. It is not inappropriate to compare them to Nazi book-burners.

Lope Yap Jr., vice president of the GWHS Alumni Association, was in attendance at the meeting and spoke in support of the murals. He stated that the organization is considering all available options to preserve the murals, including legal ones. The California Art Preservation Act passed in 1979 protects art “of recognized quality” for 50 years after the date of the death of an artist. This or other state or federal legislation may come to bear in this case over the coming months.

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