

Large turnout to view George Washington murals slated for destruction by San Francisco school board

By Toby Reese
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The San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) reluctantly opened George Washington High School for two brief hours last Thursday for a viewing of the historic 13-panel mural by left-wing Depression era muralist Victor Arnautoff depicting the “Life of Washington.”

The murals have been targeted by a right-wing censorship campaign involving SFUSD officials and local activists, who are using racist politics to claim that the murals are “traumatizing” students because of their historical depiction of slavery and the genocide of American Indians. On June 25, the school board voted unanimously to whitewash the murals as soon as possible, using \$600,000 or more of school district funds.

Crowds lined up for the viewing on Thursday afternoon, including the grandson and great-grandson of the muralist. According to local news outlets ABC 7, the *Mercury News* and KPIX 5, the vast majority of those in attendance were against the destruction of the murals. They have been kept behind closed doors for months despite broad interest among the public to view them. The event Thursday was kept virtually secret by the SFUSD until a leak in the press by the *San Francisco Chronicle* shortly beforehand.

According to Tatiana Sanchez and Erin Allday of the *Chronicle*, only a limited group of individuals was informed of the viewing—ostensibly those who had previously requested to see them. This writer had requested to view the murals multiple times and was notified he was on a list for future viewings, yet he received no notification from the SFUSD prior to the viewing.

The SFUSD responded later that this was due to an email “labeling error.” Journalist Charles Desmarais from the *Chronicle* mentioned in his article that the SFUSD had sent out an unsigned email stating, “Security will allow visitors entry starting at 1 p.m. and close promptly at 3 p.m.” Desmarais commented that the *Chronicle* had requested public access as early as June 2018.

News outlets that did attend the event estimated that hundreds of people crowded the doors waiting for the opening to the school. Several video clips that have circulated show a rapt, diverse public eagerly viewing the murals and signing a poster with the slogan “Educate Do Not Eradicate.” There were grandparents, parents, children, teachers, artists and historical preservationists, many seeing the murals for the first time.

At the event, Peter Arnautoff told CBS news that his grandfather intended to be subversive in painting the murals. “He was trying to go against the grain of the common narrative of history that was being probably portrayed in schools at the time,” he said. Arnautoff added

that in light of the limited public knowledge of the event, he was “blown away” by the turnout.

On the Facebook page of the George Washington High School Alumni Association there was an outpouring of support for the murals. Lope Yap, Jr., vice president of the association, has been a vocal defender of the murals in recent months and attended the event on Thursday. The organization has been posting articles and engaging former students and families in discussion about the murals.

In one recent comment, Ray Carr stated: “I was a student at GWHS more than 60 years ago. The murals were an essential part of my education. By examining them closely ... I learned about injustice, truth, oppression, prejudice, and how American history (particularly the concept of ‘Manifest Destiny’) was being depicted in our textbooks and classes by the ‘victors’ and not the victims. We had many discussions both in and out of class (and home room) about the murals.”

The outpouring of support for the murals at the open house, despite the “surprise” character of the showing, exposes the fraud and bad faith of the censorship campaign. The demand to destroy the murals is not concession to popular sentiment, but rather a campaign launched by privileged, right-wing petty-bourgeois elements.

Amy Anderson, the mother of a student at the school and vocal supporter of the censorship campaign, told the press on Thursday, “Reparations need to happen so the kids know, even though this has been here for 80 years, your voice matters, you can stand up for change and change is the one constant.” Anderson and others pushed for school board officials to create a “Reflection and Action Group” to provide a recommendation on what should be done with the murals.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in May:

The campaign against the art work is censorious and deeply misguided, bound up with contemporary identity politics, and has nothing progressive about it ... The claim by made Stevon Cook, president of the San Francisco Board of Education, that Arnautoff’s honest and dynamic murals are ‘offensive to certain communities’ (*New York Times*) simply doesn’t hold water. It largely ‘offends’ middle-class elements who do not want students to encounter complex and challenging art work. In the end, well-heeled African Americans and other prosperous minorities fear the radicalizing influence of such efforts.

In the wake of the decision by the school board in June to destroy the murals, opposition to the censorship has become more widespread. On July 2, an “Open Letter” was published on Nonsite.org declaring that the school board was taking a “wrong-headed approach to art and to history.” The letter stated:

Let’s set aside the question of the voices calling for the murals’ destruction and their authority to speak for the communities they claim as their own. What remains is a mistake in the way we react to historical works of art—ignoring their meaning in favor of our feelings about them—and a mistake in the way we treat historical works of art—using them as tools for managing feelings, rather than as objects of interpretation.

The letter, which was sent to the school board, was signed by over 400 academics, artists, authors, museum curators, journalists and others from around the world who are alarmed and angered by the censorship in San Francisco.

Dewey Crumpler, the African American artist who was commissioned with creating “response murals” entitled *Multi-Ethnic Heritage* when the initial debate over Arnautoff’s artwork occurred in the early 1970s, has emerged as a vocal defender of the original murals at George Washington, raising the obvious point: “Without Arnautoff’s murals my murals are irrelevant.” In an online video he explained, “History is full of discomfort, but that’s the very thing that human beings need to ensure change. ... Arnautoff attempted to give us the clarity of our history as all great works should do.”

On June 28, Bari Weiss wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times* in support of keeping the murals, titled “San Francisco Will Spend \$600,000 to Erase History.” In the article, she correctly makes the point that there are dangerous implications to censorship based on how words or images make people “feel.”

She poses two questions: “What happens when a student suggests that looking at photographs of the My Lai massacre in history class is too traumatic? Should newspapers avoid printing upsetting images that illuminate the crisis at the border, like the unforgettable one of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, facedown, drowned in the Rio Grande?”

In a letter to the editor in response to Weiss’ article, Stevon Cook and Mark Sanchez, president and vice president of the San Francisco Board of Education, state that the “heart of the issue” is not censorship but whether a “public school-located piece of art that for 80 years has traumatized students should be allowed to remain.” The officials say that comparing this issue to showing students photographs of the My Lai massacre is “malarkey” and a “false-equivalency argument.”

In fact, the references to My Lai and the Ramírez drowning are apt. The argument that Cook and Sanchez are putting forward has a logic that leads to the suppression of speech and artistic expression with the most authoritarian implications. Who are to be the arbiters of what is “traumatic”? Is the public to be kept in blissful ignorance of the contradictions, complexities and crimes of the past and present? Who benefits? Obviously, those in power.

Cook, who is also the CEO of the technology education company Mission Bit, has a website, stevoncook.com, that promotes on its “bookshelf” such works as *Beyond Good and Evil* by the reactionary irrationalist Friedrich Nietzsche, *Money: Master the Game* by

multimillionaire huckster The Tony ~~F~~Robbinshead Rand, *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama, *Extreme Ownership: How US Navy SEALs Lead and Win* by former Navy SEALs Jocko Willink and Lief Babin, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Donald Trump’s *The Art of the Deal*.

Former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown and Democratic Party strategists Mike Semler and Bob Schrum have responded belatedly to popular opposition to the murals’ destruction. The substance of their objections to the censorship campaign takes the form of a proposed ballot measure and concerns that the racist agitation will damage the Democrats’ chances in the 2020 elections.

This is both hypocritical and lacking any political principle. The Democratic Party has for many years based itself on right-wing racial and identity politics geared to well-off sections of the middle class—academics, administrators, politicians, executives, trade union bureaucrats—who seek to use the politics of race and gender to advance their own careers and carve out for themselves a bigger share of the wealth of the top 10 percent. These politics are designed to conceal the fundamental divisions in society, which are based on class, and foster divisions within the working class.

Expunging or falsifying history is the hallmark of despotic governments that are fearful of the population understanding history and drawing connections to contemporary problems. By voting to censor historic and artistic murals that expose the contradictory character of American social and political development, the SFUSD officials are setting a precedent with extremely right-wing implications. All workers and youth and all those who defend democratic rights and artistic freedom must oppose this criminal action, fighting to unite working people independently of the parties and politicians of the ruling class.

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