

Washington D.C. proposes to remove the names of Jefferson, Franklin and others from public places

By Dominic Gustavo
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A Washington D.C. committee reporting to Democratic Mayor Muriel E. Bowser earlier this month put forward a proposal for the renaming of dozens of public schools, parks and government buildings in the US capital, removing the names of historical figures, who, the committee states, do not “reflect contemporary D.C. values.”

The task force, the District of Columbia Facilities and Commemorative Expressions Working Group (DCFACES), cited 49 D.C. sites named after a wide array of historical figures, including founding fathers Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and the abolitionist James Birney; presidents, including Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson; the composer of the American national anthem, Francis Scott Key; inventor Alexander Graham Bell; and a number of lesser known figures connected to the history of Washington D.C.

The initial report also called for the adding of additional context, in the form of plaques, to eight federal locales, including the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial. The suggestion was withdrawn from the report after right-wing criticism from the Trump White House, which poses as the defender of the legacy of the American Revolution.

In what must be taken as a warning to Washington’s working class, these public buildings and spaces are referred to throughout the report as “assets.” The name choice is not incidental. Today Bowser aims to liquidate the names of places. Tomorrow she may liquidate the places themselves.

Those individuals slated for erasure stand accused by DCFACES of engaging in at least one of several “disqualifying histories,” including “participation in slavery, systemic racism, mistreatment of, or actions that suppressed equality for, persons of color, women and LGBTQ communities and violation of the DC Human Right [sic] Act.”

The report does not concern itself with the patently anti-historical character of these “charges.” Slavery existed as an institution going back to the ancient world, millennia before the American Revolution placed a question mark over it and the Civil War ultimately destroyed it. Concepts such as “systemic racism” and euphemisms for contemporary identity groups such as “persons of color” and “LGBTQ” have

emerged only in very recent times. As a factual matter, none of these historical figures could be “in violation” of the DC Human Rights Act, as the report claims, as that code went on the books only in 1977.

The *Washington Post* interviewed a Seton Hall University philosopher, Travis Timmerman, who summed up the anachronistic moralizing behind this campaign.

“They’re going after historical figures that by and large have gotten a pass previously for their moral transgressions,” Timmerman said. “Thomas Jefferson, for instance, was a vicious slaveholder. But most people think of him as the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. ... If people become more aware of his moral shortcomings, and that’s what they think of when they see Jefferson’s statue or a school named after him, well, then it becomes harmful.”

Professor Timmerman’s own high moral standing includes recent publication of a philosophy paper titled “Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child drown.”

The moral bona fides of the DCFACES committee fare little better. It is headed by millionaire Beverly Perry, formerly a corporate lobbyist for the utilities giant Pepco, which in 2011 was named the “most hated company in America” owing to poor reliability, power outages and overcharging. During Perry’s tenure with the corporation, Pepco was responsible for thousands of utility shutoffs.

The committee’s work, much like the attack on historical monuments that came in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd, is based on a crude historical amalgam, equating revolutionary figures such as Jefferson and Franklin with reactionary figures such as the demagogue Andrew Jackson and the imperialist Woodrow Wilson. While the removal of Jackson’s or Wilson’s names from schools will do nothing to improve living conditions for those in Washington D.C., one of the nation’s poorest big cities—much less do anything to clarify the historical significance of these figures—the ongoing attack on Jefferson, the American Revolution and the Civil War is of a far more sinister character.

Jefferson was the main author of the Declaration of Independence, arguably the most famous revolutionary

document in history. Written in an age dominated by kings and feudal lords, when the minds of the people were subjugated by superstition, the Declaration made the case for human equality and enshrined the right of the people to overthrow their government by force if necessary.

Despite being a slave owner, Jefferson publicly opposed slavery and took steps in the years following the Revolution to undermine the institution. The 1787 Northwest Ordinance, inspired by Jefferson, banned slavery in what is now the Midwest. As president he moved to abolish the international slave trade, making it a crime to import or export slaves from abroad. However, exemplifying the contradictions of his time Jefferson was never able to separate himself from the institution despite his personal abhorrence of slavery.

Even more astonishing is the inclusion of names of Franklin and Birney for liquidation.

Franklin was a founder of the anti-slavery movement in the United States that emerged out of the American Revolution, first known as the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery in 1774, which he formed with Benjamin Rush. He referred to slavery as “a source of serious evils” and in the years following the Revolution, Franklin wrote a number of essays calling for the abolition of slavery and the integration of blacks into society.

Like Jefferson, Franklin was a major American figure of the Enlightenment and was arguably one of the most brilliant individuals of his time. He was renowned not just for his political and philosophical work, but also for his pioneering contributions in the field of science. Yet even though Franklin became the Revolution’s most famous critic of slavery, he also owned slaves—perhaps seven in the course of his long life. For this his name is to be removed from a school.

Birney was a southerner who courageously opposed slavery—and at great personal risk. Originally a member of the American Colonization Society—which called for a solution to the problem of slavery by sending freed blacks to Africa—Birney repudiated their tenets and in 1834 freed his remaining slaves, declaring himself an abolitionist.

In 1836 the printing press for his abolitionist newspaper, which was distributed in Kentucky, was destroyed by pro-slavery rioters. Birney ran in 1840 as the presidential candidate for the Liberty Party, a political formation that played a crucial role in bringing anti-slavery politics to a mass audience. However, because Birney allegedly did not conform to modern day standards of gender equality his name is to be removed from an elementary school.

Ultimately, the “disqualifying history” that draws all of these figures together is that they are all, as the report notes, “white men.” The committee complains that its “research revealed that more than 70 percent of assets named in the District of Columbia are named for white men, many of whom were not District residents.” It explains that in replacing these names, “Priority should be placed on ensuring future assets, especially

and including those recommended for renaming by this Working Group, include more women, people of color and LGBTQ Washingtonians.”

Remarkably, while Mayor Bowser targets for liquidation from public remembrance Jefferson, Franklin and Birney, she has set about memorializing the disgraced late mayor Marion Barry, who was black. In 2018, Bowser unveiled a statue of Barry outside the Washington City Council building. In April 2020, Bowser signed and designated 441 4th Street NW—also known as One Judiciary Square—as the Marion S. Barry Building.

Barry served as mayor from 1979 to 1991, and again from 1995 to 1999. As a proponent of “black political power,” Barry followed a generation of black civic leaders—including Coleman Young in Detroit, Harold Washington in Chicago and Carl Stokes in Cleveland—who were associated with diverting explosive class tensions and redirecting them behind the race-based bourgeois politics of the Democratic Party. In doing so, these “path-breaking” figures made many individuals rich, even as they oversaw unprecedented poverty, industrial collapse and police brutality.

In 2012, revealing his own personal backwardness, Barry publicly made racist remarks against Asian-Americans, saying “We’ve got to do something about these Asians coming in, opening up businesses, those dirty shops.” He went on to suggest that they be replaced with black-owned businesses.

But Barry, unlike Jefferson or Franklin, actually did “reflect contemporary D.C. values.” He was a part of and helped to cultivate the corrupt social layer to which Bowser and her ilk belong. In honoring him and whitewashing his thoroughly crooked history, Bowser is promoting the material interests of her circle, who seek to continue the same plundering, albeit in a less flamboyant manner.

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