

Republican Perspective

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by John Littig

Banishing George Washington

There is a George Washington High School in San Francisco---for now.

School Board head Matt Haney (who takes inspiration from Colin Kaepernick's antics) has proposed renaming of San Francisco schools, beginning with Washington High. Second on the list is Francis Scott Key Elementary, perhaps because Key wrote the words to the Anthem that Kaepernick disrespects.

Haney objects on the grounds that schools should not be "named after people who bought and owned human beings." He proposes that schools named after historical figures with "questionable human rights legacies" should be renamed for people of color, LGBT figures, and women.

Haney points out that "we now have a school district that is overwhelmingly children of color." He explains "there might be a more appropriate, meaningful name" and he suggests Maya Angelou, a Washington grad. This would be more meaningful, apparently, to Washington High's population---which is overwhelmingly Asian, eight percent white, and five percent black.

It is sad, even tragic, that any American would advocate erasing the name of any of our founding fathers---let alone "the father of our country." But the foregoing is all prologue. The real issue here is the intellectual fallacy of judging yesteryear's figures by today's standards.

In his essay "Holier than Them," Anthony Esolen describes how "the inestimable Robert George likes to ask his college students how many of them, if they lived in the South before the Civil War, would have opposed slavery." They all raise their hands.

Then Professor George advises his students "what their opposition would have cost them: ridicule from the most visible political and intellectual leaders of their society, slander of their motives, incomprehension at best from their families, loss of employment, loneliness..." He also says that it is unclear how members of the slave-holding society "...could form a moral position running athwart so much of what they must have taken for granted from the time they were born."

The professor goes on to tell his students that, if they had lived in Nazi Germany, it is unlikely they would have become Oskar Schindler, going "...against what everybody knows, what everybody says, what everybody does." Similarly, he tells them that, had they lived in communist Russia, it would be extremely doubtful that they would have chosen the gulag by opposing the government of the workers' paradise.

Of course Professor George does not support slavery or totalitarian regimes. He uses them to illustrate how unlikely it is that individuals will turn against the societal norms and institutions with which they grew up and which are accepted by all (or nearly all) of their contemporaries.

In addition to slavery, societies have embraced polygamy, public executions, even cannibalism. The Romans fed Christians to the lions. During the age of exploration, Europeans colonized and subjugated much of the non-white world, which previously had subjugated each other. Against what standard could members of those societies be judged, except for the standards of *their* own time and location?

Who is so morally pure and so clairvoyant as to be willing to be judged by standards which will emerge decades or even centuries in the future?

Consider consumption of meat, game hunting, sport fishing, capital punishment, abortion, the keeping of pets, the confinement of zoo animals, etc. Might future generations view these things with revulsion? We can speculate, but none of us can accurately predict the moral standards of the future. And we should not evaluate our predecessors against standards of *their* future.

Here is historian and classicist Professor Sir Ronald Syme: "It is presumptuous to hold judgement over the dead at all, improper to adduce any standards other than those of a man's time, class, and station."