

This Week in Cancel Culture

Dozens of names will disappear from San Francisco school buildings.

-Janes Freeman, Jan 27, 2021, WSJ

After a lengthy but not rigorous review, the intellectual wasteland that is public administration in San Francisco will begin a mass erasure of historical figures.

Jill Tucker of the San Francisco Chronicle reports:

The names of presidents, conquistadors, authors and even a current U.S. senator will be removed from 44 San Francisco school sites after the city's school board Tuesday deemed the iconic figures unworthy of the honor.

The 6-1 vote followed months of controversy, with officials, parents, students and alumni at odds over whether Abraham Lincoln and George Washington high schools, Dianne Feinstein Elementary and dozens of others needed new names with no connection to slavery, oppression, racism or similar criteria.

Critics called the process slapdash, with little to no input from historians and a lack of information on the basis for each recommendation. In one instance, the committee didn't know whether Roosevelt Middle School was named after Theodore or Franklin Delano.

Why would educators want to bother educating themselves when there's yet another opportunity to signal political virtue?

As for Sen Feinstein (D., Calif.) she was the city's first female mayor and later the first woman to head the U.S. Senate's Intelligence Committee. Her cancellation is happening now in part because as mayor in the 1980s she replaced a vandalized Confederate flag that was part of a historical collection of flags displayed at City Hall. Almost immediately, she had the replacement flag permanently removed on the advice of a fellow politician. But some 37 years—and six statewide election victories—later, she has now been judged and found wanting by the city school board.

Readers wondering whether this exercise in cultural vastation should rank among the city's top educational priorities are not alone. Reports Ms. Tucker:

Many San Francisco parents - as well as Mayor London Breed - argued the effort was ill-timed given the pandemic and the impact on children, especially students of color, and the fact that students are not even in the schools subject to renaming. Some criticized the board Tuesday for

focusing on symbolism rather than the urgent reality facing struggling students, who are approaching a year in distance learning, with many struggling academically, socially and emotionally...

Board member Kevine Boggess supported the resolution, but cautioned the district from naming schools after people.

The district “should not make heroes out of mortal folks,” he said. “I think we need to examine our naming policies across the district and really consider how the way we go about naming schools reflects our true values.”

This suggests a potential new marketing slogan for the city by the bay: San Francisco—the city without heroes.

Not every distinguished American was subject to the school board’s historical cleansing. Somehow inventor Thomas Edison managed to avoid cancellation even though there was intense discussion last year over an allegation that he had once euthanized an elephant named Topsy.

Topsy is sure to live on in civic memory, but dozens of others, from Washington to Jefferson to Lincoln to the abolitionist poet James R. Lowell to the naturalist John Muir are now to be erased from school buildings, along with a host of U.S. military heroes as well as a former city school board member named Claire Lilienthal.

James Lick, whose philanthropy included the observatory that bears his name near San Jose, is also going out with the bath water. But it’s not clear which of his 19th-century deeds proved least tolerable to 21st century ideological enforcers.

In a 2017 article for the San Jose Mercury News, Scott Herhold described Lick as an eccentric “piano-maker, horticulturalist and real estate investor.” Lick’s biography suggests a sort of Horatio Alger story that Americans used to celebrate—and many still do. Granted the tale was a bit naughtier than the typical Alger fare. According to Mr. Herhold:

Born... on Aug. 25, 1796, Lick was the son of a demanding carpenter and the grandson of a Revolutionary War veteran, William Lük (the family spelling then), who survived Valley Forge and imbued young Lick with a love of the pamphleteer Thomas Paine.

The incident that changed the trajectory of Lick’s life occurred when he was almost 21: He had fallen in love with Barbara Snavelly, the daughter of a local miller.

When Barbara became pregnant, the young Lick approached the miller, Henry Snavelly, and asked to marry his daughter. Snavelly scorned him, pointing out that he was only an apprentice.

“When you own a mill as large and costly as mine, you can have my daughter’s hand,” he said.

According to the book, “The Generous Miser,” by his great-grandniece, Rosemary Lick, Lick shot back, “Someday, I will own a mill that will make yours look like a pigsty!”

He sure did, and also constructed other buildings and gardens in California. Lick never was able to marry Barbara Snavely, but he did succeed in persuading his friend Domingo Ghirardelli to move to San Francisco where the latter started a chocolate business.

What have the wokesters on the San Francisco school board ever built?