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## **The National Archives is declared racist**

Stephen L. Bakke  October 2, 2021



It's a sign of the times. Our government, institutions, history, national pride, and even the motivations for our founding are being questioned. What started as well-intentioned evaluation with plans for improvement, has too often ended in condemnation without practical solutions.

I reject any inclinations to ignore elements of our history that don't reflect our ideals. The fight against racism and unfairness in any institution is important. Unfortunately, I'm disappointed in some recommendations by a task force reviewing our National Archives.

The group's conclusions are presented in a 105 page report titled "The Archivist's Task Force on Racism." Some of the language employed, e.g. equity and antracism, is similar to what's used for recent controversial programs in schools, government, and corporations. However, confusion may arise because subtle definitional differences are introduced because in these times, even language is crafted for each situation, personality, and purpose.

### *Mallard Millmore by Bruce Tinsley*



"Charters of Freedom" refers collectively to our founding documents: the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. They are on display in the "National Archives' Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom." One task force presenter suggested: "We should retire the term 'charters of freedom' and remove it from our web pages, publications and exhibits because.....these documents did not result in freedom for everyone."

That recommendation wasn't followed, but the group apparently was influenced by it. It decided a "trigger warning" for our founding documents was necessary. Tragically, a "harmful content" warning will be posted on these documents. The task force concluded that our U.S. Constitution, and the other documents, may be "harmful or difficult to view"...because some users believe they depict "outdated, biased, offensive, and possibly violent views and opinions." In a sheepish attempt to soften the blow for some Americans, it explains that this warning applies to all documents and depictions in their website, not just the founding documents.

The Archives has a responsibility to celebrate the ways America and its founding were exceptional. Conversely, credibility demands that the presentations also shine a light on ways we've failed to live up to our nation's ideals – slavery and racism are examples. I agree with suggestions to add artwork, expanded presentations of valid oral and recorded history, and cultural presentations. I'd be proud to support that, but fear the end result will still be disappointing.

For example, the Rotunda's works of art are true to actual events being depicted. They were White men and that fact is on full display. Anything else would be fiction. Unfortunately, the task force skipped over merely acknowledging that fact. The report calls for a less celebratory presentation of many of our Founders, a group of "White, wealthy men."

### *Mallard Millmore by Bruce Tinsley*



Ideally, the Archives should proudly depict America's wonderful accomplishments, interwoven with accurate accounts of ways we've fallen short of our ideals. Additionally, I think it should provide context that creates well deserved feelings of pride. That's what I feel when I reflect on the wonderfully idealistic Declaration of Independence. Following closely thereafter came the U.S. Constitution that was the tool to carry out those ideals. That tool is brilliantly constructed, and we have used it wisely in some ways and have come up dismally short in others. But it remains standing tall.

The National Archives' attitude toward our Founding Fathers and Documents will telegraph to Americans, especially our youth, a harmful message. The dismissive language of apology

and relativism in the Task Force report will be interpreted as recommending caution about taking America's founding too seriously.

As recent events have shown, too many knee-jerk reactions to problems display only a process of subtraction, i.e. eliminate or disparage the institution, or parts thereof, rather than adding desirable narratives and impressions. Some call that "cancellation." We've been seeing too much of it, and it must be stopped.

If depictions and representations in the Archives are unbalanced or unfair, we should fix it. The perfect solutions are additive i.e., provide more complete information and create accurate and objective impressions. And that's what we must deliver.

Through it all, one message should be clearly and permanently understood: Our Constitution's inherent value remains, and we need it now as much as we ever have.