



*Society of American Indian
Government Employees*

**Society of American Indian Government Employees' Statement
Concerning Murals in Ariel Rios Building
December 2005**

Background

In January of 2004, the Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) contacted the General Services Administration (GSA) regarding the display of a mural in the Ariel Rios Building in Washington, DC. The mural and its companion piece are offensive to many employees of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the federal agency that leases the office space in the building from the GSA, as well as visitors and other government officials who do business at the EPA. Employees of the EPA approached SAIGE in 2003 for assistance in finding a solution to this problem. These murals are displayed directly in front of centrally located elevator banks, and thus are unavoidable to those who use the elevators to go to the EPA offices on that floor.

Issues

In the initial letter to the GSA, SAIGE indicated that the murals are highly inappropriate for the federal workplace and constitute a hostile work environment for EPA employees, pursuant to provisions of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, and in particular to American Indian employees. SAIGE's position is that removal of the murals is the only acceptable form of mitigation.

However, because they are housed in a building that has Historic Landmark protection and the murals represent 1930's era Works Progress Administration efforts, they continue to remain in place, despite negotiations between the GSA and EPA. In addition, SAIGE has had three meetings with GSA officials regarding this issue in the past year, discussing a potential resolution.

According to an announcement published on March 17, 2005, GSA initiated consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic preservation Act and its implementing regulations (36 CFR Part 800) in order to consider the possible removal of the offensive murals. It appears then that GSA has determined that this action is the type of undertaking that has the potential to cause effect to historic properties. We applaud this decision because Section 106 consultation will provide an effective vehicle through which the views of SAIGE and others, including Indian tribes and other organizations of indigenous people, can be expressed.

Following are the reasons that SAIGE believes that the mural "The Dangers of the Mail" and its companion piece, "Pony Express" by Frank Mechau should be permanently removed from the Ariel Rios Building:

- ***The murals are profane and extremely offensive to many people; especially American Indians***
The American Indians in the paintings are depicted as faceless savages, overpowering hapless settlers with brutal violence. Indian people today are disturbed by the messages conveyed, that broadly imply an inherent evil nature within Indian people. There is no indication as to what tribal group these horsemen represent, so the implication is that all native people, no matter where or what group, have and can be expected to behave as those painted in the mural. The very lurid imagery of sexually violent acts and murderous activities displayed on such a large scale in an entrance way disgusts many visitors to the building, and is a highly distracting backdrop that can interfere with business they are there to conduct. Women have repeatedly voiced their concerns that the pictures promote an acceptability of rape and battery, and reinforce beliefs that women are weak and inferior.
- ***No group of people should be forced to work in an environment hostile to them, per the 1964 Civil Rights Act, as amended in 1991 and 1999.***
According to the Equal Opportunity Commission, the Civil Rights Act "Title VII's broad prohibitions against sex discrimination specifically cover: Sexual Harassment - This includes practices ranging from direct requests for sexual favors to workplace conditions that create a hostile environment for persons of either gender, including same sex harassment. (The "hostile environment" standard also applies to harassment on the bases of race, color, national origin, religion, age, and disability.)"¹
- ***The murals depict negative stereotypical images of Native men as violent and perverted.***
- ***This kind of defamatory and violent imagery has no place in Federal office buildings.***
- ***The continued display constitutes an assent, reinforcement and perpetuation of institutionalized racism.***
Institutional racism or systemic racism describes forms of racism which are structured into political and social institutions. It occurs when organizations, institutions or governments discriminate, either deliberately or indirectly, against certain groups of people to limit their rights.²

(Here) we define racism as power plus racial prejudice. Cultural racism is when power of the majority group plus their racial prejudice results in the exclusion of cultural contributions of historically oppressed groups from textbooks, art, language, and music. Institutional racism is when personal and cultural racism is formalized within the institution; that is, it is supported by the institutions' formal and informal policies and practices for the benefit of a particular group and at the expense of another group.³ Institutional racism refers to a system of laws, policies, and other political/economic arrangements that

¹ **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** webpage:
<http://www.eeoc.gov/facts/qanda.html>

² **Racism, No way!** is an Australian anti-racism education initiative managed by the Department of Education and Training on behalf of education systems nationally. Conference of Education Systems Chief Executive Officers 2000
<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/classroom/Factsheet/32.html>

³ **Beyond Diversity: Dismantling Barriers in Education**, [Journal of Instructional Psychology](#), [March, 1999](#) by [Catherine A. Hansman](#), [Leon Spencer](#), [Dale Grant](#), [Mary Jackson](#)
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FCG/is_1_26/ai_62980765

perpetuate and maintain subordinate and dominant group positions in society according to race or ethnicity.⁴

These murals, then, promote the idea that those who came to take over American lands were justified, and that those who opposed them in trying to maintain their homelands were vile, evil savages. The institutional racism concept applies to all peoples of color who were subjected to domination and exploitation by European settlers. The sustained lack of equitable treatment of minority populations by the majority society in America today is a clear indication of the continuing stream of historical inaccuracy that has glorified the colonizers and has vilified American Indians and other peoples of color in this country, demeaning or ignoring their sacrifices, struggles, contributions, and accomplishments.

- ***All federal agencies' policies should be consistently within the law. Policies that result in aberrations of the EEOA should be revised to comply.***

Recommendations for Mitigation

The Ariel Rios building is protected under the National Historic Preservation Act, however, the original National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form did not specifically include any discussion of the artwork in question. The only discussion of artwork appears in the general description of the “Mellon Board Buildings”. Indeed, the Ariel Rios Building is one of several within the common nomination known as the Federal Triangle. As quoted from the form, continuation sheet page 1, “The Post Office and Justice Departments contain numerous murals depicting the history of the United States in relation to their Departments.” It is clear from the survey and description of the district in which the building was included that the individual works of art within the buildings did not bear any special significance to the consideration of the structures’ National Register eligibility and subsequent placement onto the National Register of Historic Places.

These particular murals in question were not painted directly on the plaster of the walls, but on canvas, and had been removed previously for cleaning and conservation processes without harm to the artwork. Our recommendation is to provide them to a museum where they could be interpreted properly within the context in which they were created, and most importantly, viewed on a voluntary basis. SAIGE has not engaged in discussions about artistic or historical merit, as those arguments have no relevance in this case. Removal of the murals would not alter the Historic Landmark status of the Ariel Rios building itself, nor endanger the physical integrity or safety of the murals.

SAIGE strongly supports efforts within the GSA to promote equal treatment of the diverse populations that it serves in federal government agencies and programs. We are confident that the GSA is committed to ensuring that the federal office buildings it oversees do not contain elements that result in violations of the Civil Rights Act. We encourage the GSA to actively strive for proper implementation of 29 CFR Part 1614, Federal Sector Equal Employment Opportunity, as amended November 9, 1999. This provides instruction and guidance to assure that each Federal agency maintains a continuing affirmative program to promote equal employment opportunity and to identify and eliminate discriminatory practices and policies. Any GSA policies that allow for the circumstances that currently exist with the Ariel Rios Building murals should be reviewed and amended appropriately to come into compliance with this guidance.

⁴ **University of California at Davis**, Principles of Community, Glossary
<http://principles.ucdavis.edu/glossary.html#l>

Comments on additional murals:

French Explorers and Indians by Karl Free

This mural is objectionable due to the subservient positions of the people of color, and the exaggerated naked breasts of the women.

Opening of the Southwest by Ward Lockwood

This mural is objectionable due to the defeated posture of the Indian in the lower left-hand corner, and because a Hopi snake dance depicted, which is a sacred ritual.

Consolidation of the West by Ward Lockwood

This mural is considered objectionable due to the subordinate posture of the Indian in the lower right-hand corner, and the implication of surrender.

Covered Wagons Attacked by Indians by William Palmer

This mural is objectionable due to the stereotyping of the marauding Indians surrounding the wagon train.