

New-York Historical Society Sinks to a New Low with a Black-Tie Gala for Henry Kissinger

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The Right's "Long March Through the Institutions" now includes a takeover of the New-York Historical Society. Richard Gilder, who is founder of the reactionary Manhattan Institute think tank (it's time that we eschewed the legitimizing term "conservative"), is now chair of N-YHS's board of trustees, and for good measure the city has renamed the stretch of 77th Street at the north end of the building "Richard Gilder Way." It almost requires a Charles Beard, or an E.L. Doctorow, to convey the nakedness of all this: along with fellow Yalie Lewis Lehrman (chair of a Greenwich investment partnership), Gilder (head of a New York brokerage firm), is founder and co-chair of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, a successful front group with an advisory board which includes some liberals (and even one famous leftist) who function as what is known in the gay world as "beards," i.e. respectable covers.

In operations of this sort (including, in the past, the Communist Party), there is always the question of whether the prime movers should be covert or overt. If there was ever any doubt on this front in regard to G-L and the N-YHS, it's been resolved. In 2004, G-L staged a paean to George W. Bush in the form of a hagiographic five million dollar N-YHS exhibit on Alexander Hamilton (I reviewed it in a piece titled "Are Gilder and Lehrman Tilting American History to the Right? A Case in Point" back in 2004). The exhibit was a multimedia celebration of triumphalist capitalism. Now, in a stunning move, any hint of a codpiece covering up the functional parts of the organization has been removed: on November 7, N-YHS will honor the unbelievably evil Henry Kissinger in a "History Maker's Gala" at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. For \$50,000, attendees at this black-tie event, where Kissinger will be one of two recipients of the 2011 History Makers Award, can sit at Kissinger's table. Gilder is program committee co-chair.

This will not pass without protest. On November 7, from 5:30 to 7:45 pm, a number of organizations will demonstrate outside the Waldorf on Park Avenue between 49th and 50th Streets (although the customary conduct of Bloomberg's riotous New York Police Department suggests that demonstrators may be exiled to some location like the middle of the East River). As of now (and I hope the list will grow) participating organizations include: the War Resisters League, Code Pink, War Criminals Watch, the East Timor and Indonesian Action Network, World Can't Wait, and Brooklyn for Peace. The organizers have sent me this summary of Kissinger's crimes (excerpts from preliminary draft):

"While this list can be considerably lengthened, the conclusion is inescapable that Dr. Kissinger is one of the worst war criminals of the twentieth century. It is difficult to understand how the New-York Historical Society can consider honoring such a man . . .

- "Direction and approval of mass bombing campaigns targeted at civilians in both North and South Vietnam, and the mass civilian targeted assassination campaigns known as the Phoenix Program

- "Overthrow of the legitimate government of Cambodia, military invasion, direction and approval of mass bombing campaigns targeted at civilians, providing diplomatic support to the Khmer Rouge regime
- "Direction and approval of mass bombing campaigns in Laos, reducing areas like the Plain of Jars to a veritable moonscape
- "Directing the overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile, and providing unqualified support for brutal military dictatorships throughout the hemisphere
- "Providing unwavering diplomatic and intelligence support to the apartheid regime in South Africa, providing military support to the apartheid government's military intervention in Angola—and then lying to the U.S. Congress about this
- "Colluding with the mass murder and rape campaign of the "West" Pakistan military in Bangladesh
- "Authorizing the Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor, and providing U.S. military aid to enable an occupation that killed between 25-33 percent of the population of that island

"Henry Kissinger is wanted for questioning in England, France, Spain, Chile and Argentina. Our culture is being poisoned by the failure to remember Kissinger's and other's crimes and to hold them to account. It is a terrible thing to participate in this process of enforced forgetting."

History and, hopefully, an appropriate court, will judge these charges. Meantime, while the New-York Historical Society has a right to its politics, there's no doubt that it has politics, and that they are vile. Certainly, this is a shameful moment in the politicization of a major historical institution.

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