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THE HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL

A nasty thing may be happening in San Francisco.

An art connoisseur once said that "if a piece of public art is not controversial, it's not worth a damn." And there have been a hundred hot controversies in San Francisco about this or that piece of public art.

Therefore there would normally be nothing unusual or sinister about the fact that a controversy of some sort is developing about the artistic merits of the George Segal sculpture, The Holocaust, which will be the center of San Francisco's holocaust memorial.

However, an edge is peeping out of this controversy which must be immediately blunted. At its most extreme, it can be seen in the leaflet just sent to a number of local public officials, headed: "Jewish Fascism, San Francisco Style." Its main point is that "The Holocaust sculpture is forced upon the public in secret without debate."

The leaflet is put out by the Institute for Historical Review, out of Torrance; and the Christian Defence League, out of Arabi, Louisiana. This is the handiwork of Washington's Willis Carto, perhaps the best-known professional entrepreneur of anti-semitism in the country. His current enterprise is built around the theme -- as it is indeed expressed in this very leaflet -- that "the Holocaust is a Jewish fabrication."

He has been trying to peddle that theme for several years now. He has failed because he's fighting heavily documented history, the presence of survivors, not to mention the presence of many American soldiers who actually saw the death camps. Maybe, in a generation or two, Carto would be able to more widely get away with such a gross lie. But, then, that's the very purpose of a Holocaust memorial: to continue to remind newer generations that such a thing can happen if we turn our heads. Hitler defined the ultimate in the human potential for evil: not just random, criminal mass murder, but the deliberate extinction of a whole human group. That definition of the potential for evil is the universal human message in this particular Jewish experience. It is ironic that Carto's leaflet reminds us how important these holocaust memorials are.

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Carto by himself is not much of a threat today. However, it becomes disturbing that in his leaflet diatribe, he is picking up language used by ostensibly more responsible people in the community. His charge of secrecy and "Jewish Fascism" are based on intimations elsewhere that the selection of the sculpture and site for the memorial have been done "low-key" and without public scrutiny.

The facts are quite contrary. There have been two press conferences announcing the proposed venture and sculpture. The media were invited to both, and came. There have been a number of media stories. The Art Commission committee meetings and public meetings to discuss the matter had media attendance. The Park and Recreation Commission held at least three public meetings. The Mayor's Committee of 40 people met close to two dozen times, at open meetings with other people present.

You can't get much more open than that. It's hard to believe that anyone in the art world or the media world with a lick of interest didn't know what was happening or have a chance for comment. Why, then, this rhetoric about "secrecy"? That rhetorical excess just oozed out of the acrid debate about the artistic merit of George Segal's sculpture.

Now there is no way to objectively evaluate art. Some art people don't like George Segal's work. Others like his work, and this piece in particular. As Brian Wall, world-renowned abstract sculptor and professor of art at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote about The Holocaust: "Segal's international stature is outstanding and the monument he has produced is, in my opinion, of great esthetic merit as well as a moving statement."

Finally, of course, the overwhelming support of the San Francisco community, Jewish and otherwise, will continue for this memorial; and it will be a stunning contribution to the city. Any other piece of art work would have been at least as controversial. And any other reasonable piece of art work would probably have served the historic purpose of the Holocaust memorial. Artistic judgement is not the issue here. Some debate about artistic judgement will undoubtedly continue, as always -- and artistic and literary debate has a way of getting acrid and personal. But in this matter, all concerned must be careful not to let their legitimate artistic contentions be used for purposes with which they would not want to be associated.