

October 20, 2006

The Honorable Arnold Schwarzenegger  
Governor, State of California  
State Capitol  
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Governor Schwarzenegger:

National Statuary Hall was created in our nation's Capitol in 1864 to permit each state to donate two statues, honoring citizens who served as civic, religious, or social justice leaders within the state or were otherwise notable in state history. The collection contains 100 statues donated by all 50 states, and the statues are displayed throughout the Capitol and concentrated in National Statuary Hall. Since 1931, California has been represented by statues of Unitarian Minister and anti-slavery leader Thomas Starr King and Father Junipero Serra, founder of nine California missions.

On August 31st, the Legislature approved Senate Joint Resolution (SJR) 3, authorizing the removal of Reverend Starr King's statue from National Statuary Hall and replacing it with a statue of former President Ronald Reagan, and on September 15, you wrote to the Architect of the Capitol, urging him to carry out the intent of SJR 3.

I would like to take this opportunity to urge you to withdraw that request until such time that you've established a public process that will involve and engage Californians in a discussion over whether the statue of Reverend Starr King should be replaced.

As former State Librarian and noted California historian Kevin Starr said on a Los Angeles radio program recently, people should have the right to decide whether to change the historical figures they want to represent California in National Statuary Hall. However, there should be a public discussion before any decision is made, and there should be an official process for ensuring the public has a chance to participate in the decision-making process. The manner in which SJR 3 was handled in the Legislature precluded the public, your administration, and members of the Legislature from having the opportunity to discuss the merits of replacing the statue of the man credited with keeping California in the Union during the Civil War with the statue of a more recent political leader. While I realize you bear no responsibility for the Legislature's decision to rush this measure through with no prior public notice, I'm hoping that your commitment to engaging the public on issues whenever possible will encourage you to withdraw the letter you sent to the Architect of the Capitol and the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress last month and to instead establish a public forum where this type of discussion about which historical figures should represent the great state of California in National Statuary Hall can take place.

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As you know, Reverend Thomas Starr King was an influential Unitarian minister, orator and advocate for preserving the Union and ending slavery during the Civil War. He campaigned for the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and launched a pro-Union lecture campaign in 1861, pushing to elect a Republican governor and a pro-Union coalition to the Legislature. Later, President Abraham Lincoln credited Reverend Starr King with keeping California in the Union in the early days of the Civil War. Reverend Starr King also wrote extensively on the need to preserve California's natural treasures for future generations, and he is known as the father of Yosemite.

Taking away the statue of Reverend Starr King would also remove the work of one California's and the country's most prominent Armenian Americans from National Statuary Hall. Sculptor Haig Patigian was born in Van, Armenia, while the state was under Turkish rule. His family fled political persecution in Armenia in 1891 and settled in Fresno, California, where Patigian worked as a day laborer until he secured a job painting signs. In 1899, he moved to San Francisco to study at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art and went on to Paris to study sculpture. Patigian returned to San Francisco to open his own studio and became one of the most prominent sculptors on the West Coast. He exhibited at the Panama-Pacific and Golden Gate International Expositions and was named to the International Jury of Awards for sculpture at the Tenth Olympiad in Los Angeles. Among his other major works are monuments to President McKinley (Arcata, California), Abraham Lincoln (San Francisco), and the Volunteer Firemen (San Francisco). Patigian is best remembered for his ability to capture the ideas of the time in the allegorical figures of his work.

Californians certainly have the right to choose to honor someone else other than Reverend Thomas Starr King or Father Junipero Serra with a statue in National Statuary Hall, but it's also their right to participate in the process to ensure that any decision that is made is an informed decision. I wish a more public process had taken place in the Legislature, but it did not. That is why I am asking you to establish a public process now to ensure that this decision, and future decisions about the statues representing California in National Statuary Hall, are more carefully considered.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this request. Please feel free to call me at 651-4028 if you'd like to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,

Debra Bowen  
Senator, 28th District

DB:pb/elg