

REWRITING A NATIONAL MYTH

How does Ben Jennings use a heroic image of the American Revolution to criticise the political forces surrounding the 250th anniversary?



Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851



Ben Jennings, 3 July 2026

1 Describe

The original painting

Leutze's painting shows George Washington standing upright in a crowded rowboat as soldiers cross an icy and turbulent Delaware River at night. Washington occupies the highest and most prominent position. He looks ahead while the other men row, steer or struggle against the water. A large American flag rises behind him, and a bright area of sky illuminates the central group. The diagonal oars, waves and crowded boat create movement, while Washington's stable posture makes him appear calm and determined.

The cartoon

Jennings reproduces the general structure of the painting: a crowded boat crosses dark water and one central group rises above the others. The scene has been moved to Washington, DC. The Washington Monument and the Capitol appear in the background, while fireworks fill the sky. The boat bears a "250" emblem, linking the image to the anniversary celebrations.

Donald Trump replaces Washington. Unlike the standing revolutionary leader, he is being carried in the arms of a younger bearded man, who also holds a golf bag marked "TRUMP". Around them are caricatured political allies or supporters, bags of money, dollar bills, armed or masked figures and an officer labelled "ICE". One muscular figure lies passively across the money bags while another armed figure faces away from the viewer. Several passengers are not rowing at all, and the mood is grotesque rather than solemn.

When a secondary figure cannot be identified with certainty, it is better to describe what is visible and explain its function than to guess a name. The clearly legible labels and objects provide sufficient evidence for interpretation.

Key substitutions

Leutze's heroic image	Jennings's rewriting
George Washington stands and leads.	Trump is carried and appears dependent, privileged and self-satisfied.
Soldiers row together through danger.	Allies, armed figures and an ICE officer crowd the boat; several do not contribute to the crossing.
The flag represents a collective cause.	The "TRUMP" golf bag and money bags foreground a personal brand and private interests.
The crossing takes place in wartime.	Fireworks, Washington landmarks and the "250" emblem place the scene in the 2026 commemoration.

2 Analyse

Jennings creates a pastiche: the cartoon is recognisable because it borrows Leutze's composition, but it replaces the painting's heroic values with their political opposites. The visual quotation therefore encourages the viewer to compare two versions of national leadership.

From leadership to entitlement

Washington's upright posture embodies courage, command and personal exposure to danger. Trump, by contrast, is transported by someone else. This substitution makes him appear less like a leader guiding a collective effort than a privileged beneficiary surrounded by attendants. The golf clubs intensify the contrast: a symbol of leisure and the Trump brand replaces the revolutionary flag as a prominent object.

From collective sacrifice to private interest

In Leutze's painting, the passengers cooperate to reach a shared objective. Jennings fills the boat with money bags and cash. The dollar signs suggest wealth, patronage or personal enrichment, while the crowded composition evokes a coalition held together by power and advantage rather than sacrifice. The passengers seem to be carrying Trump and his interests across the national landscape.

From revolutionary liberty to coercive power

The visible ICE label and the presence of masked or armed figures introduce state coercion, intimidation and nativist enforcement. These elements invert the original association with resistance to oppression. Jennings suggests that the rhetoric of the Revolution can be mobilised to legitimise policies that restrict liberty for others.

From commemoration to appropriation

The fireworks, monuments and "250" emblem explicitly connect the parody to the anniversary. The cartoon does not reject the American Revolution as a reference; it asks who is claiming its legacy and for what purpose. By placing contemporary power brokers inside an iconic founding image, Jennings shows a national myth being appropriated as political spectacle.

Tone and target

The exaggerated bodies, strained expressions and disorderly passengers create a satirical, even grotesque tone. The target is a political coalition that presents itself as the heir to the founders while combining personal branding, wealth, coercive enforcement and armed power. The cartoon exposes the distance between the ideals celebrated in 1776 and the forces displayed during the 250th anniversary.

3 Answer the final question

Ben Jennings uses Leutze's Washington Crossing the Delaware as a visual template so that viewers immediately associate the cartoon with revolutionary courage, collective sacrifice and national leadership. He then reverses those values. Washington's commanding figure is replaced by a grinning Trump who is carried rather than leading, while the flag and the soldiers' shared effort give way to Trump-branded golf clubs, money bags, political allies, armed men and an ICE officer. The Washington skyline, fireworks and "250" emblem connect this grotesque crossing to the semiquincentennial celebrations. Through these substitutions, the cartoon suggests that the founding myth is being appropriated by a coalition driven by personal loyalty, wealth, coercion and spectacle. The parody therefore challenges the attempt to present contemporary Trumpism as the natural heir to the American Revolution: instead of defending collective liberty, the passengers appear to use patriotic memory to carry private interests and repressive power into the nation's anniversary.

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