

SEMPRE AVANTI

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ON DEFENDING COLUMBUS

By Dona De Sanctis

Are Americans finally waking up to the fact that the character of Columbus has been unfairly misrepresented by those who attack this 15th century Italian navigator to further their own social and political agendas?

Recently the Sons of Italy's national headquarters in Washington, D.C. received evidence that such a sea-change is actually taking place. But first, let's look at when and why Columbus's reputation began to suffer.

LET THE GAMES BEGIN

Columbus bashing began in earnest in 1992 as the United States prepared to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Italian navigator's first voyage to the Americas. At that time, a number of books were published that called into question the ethics and achievements of Columbus.

Most notable among these were *The Conquest of Paradise* by Kirkpatrick Sale; *Lies My Teacher Taught Me About Christopher Columbus* by James Loewen and *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn.

All three were written by revisionist "historians" who presented the European explorer as a greedy and violent man. According to them, Columbus murdered peaceful native people, stole their gold and corrupted the natural earthly paradise he found in the New World.

The authors were inspired by the then-fledgling "multi-cultural" movement which proposed that because American education and society was "Euro-centric," the art,

culture and contributions of non-Europeans, especially African Americans, Indians, Hispanic Americans, Pacific Islanders and Eskimos were being ignored.

In what many have come to regard as over-compensation, teachers, text-book publishers and special interest groups representing these racial and ethnic communities began attacking European culture to better glorify the lesser known non-European civilizations. Among the casualties of multi-culturalism were the reputations of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Christopher Columbus.

The media, always eager for a new “spin” on a familiar subject, picked up multi-culturalism, including the books by Zinn, Loewen and Sale, and helped spread the word about them.

Now these books are found on the required reading lists at many American schools and universities. Zinn’s book in particular is a textbook used in a number of high school and college history classes. As a result, a generation of American students regards Columbus as a racist who killed millions of Indians and brought slavery to the New World.

FIGHTING THE SLANDER

Italian Americans rallied against this false representation of Columbus and fought to honor his memory on the second Monday of October, which President Lyndon B. Johnson had declared a federal holiday back in 1968.

They vigorously opposed movements to change the name of Columbus Day to “Indigenous People’s Day” (California), “Discoverer’s Day” (Hawaii) and even “Leif Erikson Day” (Wisconsin).

Italian American parents objected when their school districts dropped Columbus Day as a holiday and Italian American organizations, including the Sons of Italy, organized and/or supported Columbus Day parades even in such hostile places as Denver, Colorado where alleged Indian activists sought for years to block them from obtaining

parade permits and when that failed, covered marchers with red paint, insults and threats of physical harm.

To defend Columbus, the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice (CSJ) researched and released *Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction* in 2005 and widely circulated it to the media and the general public. The report generated numerous newspaper and radio interviews coast to coast which helped give a more balanced picture of Columbus. [For a free copy of the report, see www.osia.org at “Studies in Culture”]

Now it appears such efforts are beginning to bear fruit.

COLUMBUS DAY 2006

As Italian Americans prepared to celebrate Columbus Day this year, the Sons of Italy CSJ received a letter from a concerned parent whose child is in a large New York City school district. The letter contained photocopies of a social studies curriculum for fourth-graders used throughout the school district.

Part of the lesson plan presented a fictitious re-creation of the first meeting of Columbus with the native tribes he found in the New World. Columbus and his crew were described as “hairy, dirty and smelly men with pale, white skin,” who talked “gibberish,” cheated the Indians and infected them with fatal diseases “brought to their world by Columbus and other Europeans.”

The Indians were described as tall, healthy and generous people, eager to make friends with the strangers and give them gifts. Not surprisingly, the lesson plan was based exclusively on Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States*.

The lesson plan then asked the students to write an essay on the following topic: *Is Columbus a hero? Be sure to give at least 3 reasons to support your opinion.*

The CSJ immediately contacted the school principal as well as the school district superintendent, charging that the presentation of Columbus and his men was both unbalanced and racist. We pointed out that the lesson plan did not mention that

Columbus was a deeply religious man who wanted to bring Christianity to the New World or that his letters reveal he ordered his men to trade fairly with the Tainos and protected them from the marauding Canibs who captured, enslaved and even ate the more gentle Tainos. Our letter included copies of the aforementioned CSJ report, *Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction*.

Three weeks later, the school district's assistant superintendent informed the CSJ that the district's curriculum committee agreed with our assessment of the curriculum. As a result, they eliminated the offensive sections and added more balanced information about the Italian explorer, including part of the CSJ report on Columbus's life and accomplishments.

"We are not out to bash anyone," the assistant superintendent said. "We want the children to see there are two sides to every story so they can discuss the pros and cons of progress and decide for themselves what is the truth."

That is a fair and reasonable goal. Italian Americans do not want to see Columbus glorified **or** vilified, but simply judged by the standards and ethics of his own time.

The swift response from that New York City school district would indicate that we are moving in the right direction to bring greater balance to the study of Columbus and his role in American history.

Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., is deputy executive director of the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA), the oldest and largest national organization in the U.S. for men and women of Italian heritage. To join the Sons of Italy Commission for Social Justice and fight defamation, contact her at ddesanctis@osia.org or call (202) 547-2900.