

WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

By Dona De Sanctis

Every October a group of dedicated Italian Americans in Denver holds their annual Columbus Day parade....or tries to.

Participants in the parade must contend with Native American activists, who claim Columbus Day is a reminder of their persecution at the hands of white people who came from Europe. They block the parade and hurl insults as the marchers, justifying their behavior because the parade “is a form of hate speech” and constitutes “ethnic intimidation.”

TWO WRONGS

No one would argue that Native Americans suffered greatly at the hands of the American government in the 19th century or that the 16th century Aztecs and Mayans of Central and South America paid dearly when the Spanish conquistadores arrived on their shores.

At the same time, it is untenable to conclude that because of these long-past injustices, 21st century Americans who honor Columbus should be denied their First Amendment right to free speech. Two wrongs do not make a right. Never have. Never will.

But let’s take a step back to see how Columbus became the poster child for man’s inhumanity to man.

THE QUINCENTENARY DEBACLE

“For America to live Europe must die,” proclaimed Russell Means, a founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM). He made this statement before several thousand people who had come from all over the world to attend the Black Hills International Survival Gathering in South Dakota in 1980.

In his speech, Means urges the rejection of all things European, including writing, which he sees as “one of the white world’s ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples” who transmit their history orally. He also warns young college-bound Native Americans to be wary of having “a red skin but a white mind.”

Means’ speech helped set the agenda that AIM and other minority activist groups would carry out a decade later in 1992 as the country prepared to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the New World.

AIM took a leadership role in turning the Columbus Quincentenary celebration into an opportunity to broadcast the race-based political and social agenda of the nation’s minorities, helped by a sympathetic news media, willing to give them ink and airtime to recount the many wrongs their people had suffered at the hands of the white man.

As a result, instead of a celebration marking the permanent opening of communication between two great continents, the 1992 Columbus Centenary became a battleground. And Columbus lost.

Since then, the textbooks used in American schools and colleges have revised the traditional portrayal of him as a skilled sea captain and deeply religious man, who fearlessly crossed a huge ocean to prove there was a westward route to the Orient.

Instead, Columbus is portrayed as a blood-thirsty, gold-hungry slave-trader who destroyed the Garden of Eden civilizations he found on the islands he discovered “by chance.”

At roughly the same time, school systems throughout the United States introduced “multi-culturalism” into their curricula. Students began learning about Native American, Hispanic American and African American history. They started reading books and writing reports about the contributions many other non-white minorities made to America.

These efforts to instill in children an appreciation and tolerance for people of different cultures are commendable. More’s the pity then that they were introduced to *replace* rather than enhance what had been traditionally taught about the contributions of Europeans to America.

WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

The current fascination with multi-culturalism makes Columbus and his holiday more necessary than ever before in our history.

Columbus matters because after him came millions of other Europeans who brought their art, music, science, medicine, philosophy and religious principles to America.

Columbus matters because Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the tenet that all men are created equal are all European contributions that have made the United States what it is today.

Columbus matters because his holiday recognizes not only the achievements of a great Renaissance explorer, but the success of the millions of immigrants from all over the world, including Europe, who followed him, seeking religious freedom, political stability and the chance to give their children a better tomorrow.

COLUMBUS AS INSPIRATION

Columbus Day is a reminder that from its earliest beginnings, the struggling American republic found its inspiration in the figure of Columbus. In fact, October 12th is one of America’s oldest holidays, first celebrated in 1792 on the 300th anniversary of his first voyage.

In the early years of the American republic, Columbus was an American icon, admired as much as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The nation’s capital was named for him and his image is captured in paintings and statues throughout the Capitol Building, the very seat of American government.

By the 19th century, Columbus had become a symbol of American patriotism. The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 in honor of the 400th anniversary of his first voyage. Also that year, President Benjamin Harrison declared Columbus Day a legal holiday and Columbus was hailed as the symbol of America’s achievements and progress and even as a saint, led by God to the New World. [*See “St. Christopher Columbus?” on page 4.*]

COLUMBUS AS ICON

Columbus is an icon to most Italian Americans for another reason. His holiday commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 million of their ancestors more than a century ago. Today, their children and grandchildren constitute the nation's fifth largest ethnic group, but despite their numbers and sterling record of achievement, Italian Americans are routinely stereotyped in this nation as goons and/or buffoons.

Columbus Day is the only holiday on which the nation officially recognizes the presence if not the contributions of an estimated 16 to 26 million Italian Americans. For that reasons, organizations like the Sons of Italy, lobbied for years to make it a federal holiday. They succeeded in 1971 when Congress passed a law declaring the second Monday in October Columbus Day in all 50 states.

THE FUTURE OF COLUMBUS DAY

Now that law is being challenged in a number of states, including Colorado. As a result of the disruption of the 2004 parade and the subsequent exoneration of the eight activists who had been arrested, the mayor of Denver decided to bar the 2005 parade.

A state legislator introduced a measure to repeal the holiday in the entire state and local activists lobbied to replace Columbus Day in Colorado with a "multicultural celebration" that would surely exclude European culture.

So far, these measures have been successfully thwarted. Alerted by its Colorado state chapter, the Sons of Italy launched a national letter-writing campaign to the mayor and the legislator. Local Italian American leaders, including the Sons of Italy's Colorado chapter president Pam Ciancio-Wright and the local Italian consul, contacted the mayor and other decision-makers and changed their minds...at least for the time being.

They also convinced the city council to pass an ordinance making it an offense to "knowingly interfere with a permitted parade." Such a law would enable anyone who blocked the parade this year to be prosecuted.

WHAT'S NEXT?

But despite these efforts, Columbus Day is in danger of being eliminated. What's next?

Do we ban St. Patrick's Day celebrations because of the long and bloody struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland? Do we abolish Thanksgiving because the Pilgrims invaded Indian territory? And what are we going to do about the Fourth of July? See why Columbus matters?

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SAINT CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS?

In 1882, ten years before the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the New World, a group of Irish Catholics in New Haven, Connecticut, founded a Catholic men's fraternal organization they called the Knights of Columbus.

Its mission was to assist the needy and to boost Catholics' pride in their religion, which was frequently challenged in the anti-Catholic climate of late 19th century America. They named their organization after Christopher Columbus because he was Catholic and discovered the Americas.

Shortly after the Knights of Columbus was formed, Italian Americans launched a campaign to have Columbus canonized as a saint of the Roman Catholic Church because his writings reveal that he saw bringing Christianity to the Indians as part of his mission in the New World.

After a sufficient number of signatures was obtained, Pope Leo XIII opened an inquest into the life of Columbus to determine whether his behavior was worthy of imitation as a saintly person. The Knights of Columbus supported this initiative.

The papal investigation, however, rejected his candidacy for sainthood because Columbus had had a 20-year affair with Beatriz Enriquez de Harana, who bore him an illegitimate son, named Ferdinand, in 1488.

Despite the fact that Columbus remained faithful to Beatriz and even provided for her in his last will, the inquest concluded that a person living in an open and notorious unmarried relationship was not a candidate for sainthood.



Christopher Columbus-Discovery by Constantino Brumidi (1859). The fresco is one of a dozen images of the great Italian explorer that adorn the U.S. Capitol building.