

WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

By Dona De Sanctis

Last April, the faculty of Brown University in Providence, RI bowed to pressure from a small group of Native American activists and voted not to celebrate Columbus Day. Instead, from now on, the university will hold a “Fall Weekend” during the traditional three-day Columbus Day week-end in October.

In a letter explaining the university’s position, **President Ruth Simmons** said the vote “was the culmination of an extensive campus debate” that involved students, faculty and the university board. Understandably, her letter failed to mention that Brown University is named for a family that made its fortune as slave traders – and gave a hefty endowment to the school in 1804. Meanwhile, Columbus never owned any slaves and nor brought any to the New World.

GOOD-BYE COLUMBUS

Unfortunately, Brown University is not alone in seeking to cancel any celebration that commemorates the achievements of this remarkable Italian explorer, who was the first to open permanent relations between Europe and the Americas.

Alaska and Berkeley, California have renamed Columbus Day “Indigenous People’s Day” to celebrate American Indian cultures. Hawaii calls it “Discoverer’s Day” to honor “the Polynesian discoverers of the islands” and South Dakota calls it “Native American Day.”

In Colorado, the first state to make Columbus Day an official holiday, the Denver Columbus Day parade has been interrupted by alleged Native American protesters for nearly two decades. They claim that 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 denies that American Indians suffered greatly at the hands of the U.S. 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 urged rejecting 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 warned 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 lay mortally wounded.

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."

WHY COLUMBUS MATTERS

Although surrounded by controversy, the holiday dedicated to Columbus deserves to be celebrated in America. Columbus matters. He matters because Greek democracy, Roman law, Judeo-Christian ethics and the tenet, "all men are created equal" are European contributions that have made the United States what it is today.

He matters because after him came millions of other Europeans who brought their art, music, science and medicine to America. They also brought their muscle. They worked on its railroads and in its mines. They paved its city streets and farmed its land. They built bridges and

skyscrapers, highways and subways. They helped make America the wealthiest, most powerful and freedom-loving nation in the world.

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 U.S. Capitol Building, the 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.

As a result, America has more monuments to Columbus than any other nation in the world. Generations of American school children studied his life and accomplishments. Teachers held him up as an example of a person of character, who overcame strong opposition and great disappointment but never gave up trying to prove what he believed to be true.

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 17 to 27 million Italian Americans. For that reason, 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.

WHAT'S NEXT?

If we begin banning our traditional holidays based on revisionist history, why stop with Columbus Day? Should we ban St. Patrick's Day 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 do we do about the most patriotic holiday of all that celebrates our founding: the Fourth of July? See why Columbus matters? So *Viva Cristoforo Columbo! Evviva la sua festa!*

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PHOTOS NEXT PAGE....

Photos:

1. *The traditional Columbus Day celebration in Washington, DC in front of the Columbus monument at Union Station.*
2. *For years, Columbus was admired as much as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Here he is third from the left with American presidents and military leaders.*
3. *The Departure of Columbus by Emmanuel Leutze (1855)*
4. *An image of Columbus by Constantino Brumidi in the U.S. Capitol.*
5. *A map from the Renaissance of the “New World”*
6. *Protestors like this one mar Columbus Day celebrations in many U.S. cities. [Photo: Walter Santi]*