

Hijacking History: The Columbus Day “Delete”

Steve Acunto (July 05, 2017)



Are we capable of knowing the full story of Christopher Columbus and its implications, and yet continue to revere him? Are we to trust our ability and that of our fellow citizens and students to study history and draw fair conclusions? Or must it be cleansed for consumption to erase the uglier aspects? As cities and school districts such as New Paltz in New York and others move to undo Columbus Day from the calendar, to rename it or to use it to express lessons of injustice and oppression, in the Guest Editorial that follows Steve Acunto, a business and cultural leader, calls for a reckoning from the vantage point not just of Italian Americans who are offended by the symbolic slap in the face this “delete” causes, but from the wider vantage point of all free people who read and study history and should be trusted to use their judgement freely – with the result that Columbus, on balance, would rightly deserve his heroic place in history... and on the calendar and in curricula.

Increasingly, some school districts and municipalities across the country have continued adopting the politically correct, sadly distortive revisionist history that places Cristoforo Colombo in the false light of oppressor and exploiter rather than in the fittingly bright light that his contemporaries and most of ours rightly lavish upon him. This most courageous, daring, brilliant navigator and discoverer, the prototype for deSoto, Caboto, da Gama, Hudson, Giovanni da Verazzano and the hundreds of others of brave men and women right up through Neil Armstrong, who dared to set forth



where others feared to tread, must not fall victim to editors whose view of the past is imbalanced, partial and ultimately false. Columbus needs advocates whose rationale will draw from a broad context and from careful, objective reflection, recalling always that the father of history, Herodotus, coined the word “history” from the Greek word for “inquiry” that leads to understanding.

History – inquiry, in this sense --demonstrates that context is critical in assessing the greatness and the follies of the past; in fact, most political and human rights advances have been accompanied by dire human loss, and with extremely harmful consequences for whole peoples and large groups of individuals, from ancient times to the US Civil War and right up to the recent “[Arab Spring](#) [2]”.

And so it was with the discovery of the New World: there were bad by products, possibly unavoidable, that befell the native islanders of the Caribbean and others as Europeans claimed their conquest in the manner of so many throughout history.

That a courageous, heroic Italian, supported in his discovery of Hispaniola and more of the New World by the Spanish monarchy, would be revisited as an oppressor and have one of history’s bravest, most important voyages obscured or imbalanced by an emphasis on the unfortunate casualties of his discovery, is to mischaracterize the life, character and achievement of Columbus and to lay to waste the [Renaissance](#) [3]’s spirit of discovery for which Columbus was nearly sainted in his own time and for which he is remembered on this holiday. Columbus is an inspiration; his Day must be sustained as it is as a model to generations.

No one, no people, no country deserves to have his history stolen or diminished with a neutralizing mis-emphasis or dumbing down of great achievement with the distortive underlining of some of its largely unintended consequences. Columbus merits his own day and his proper recognition.

Moreover, in addition to the homage merited by the discoverer per se, Italian Americans have held fast to this date as a symbol of their presence and of their contributions to the growth of the very country mapped by [Amerigo Vespucci](#) [4], explored and defined by Giovanni Caboto and by [Giovanni da Verrazzano](#) [5] and so many other Italians whose footprints historians are still discovering. Suggesting that the name of that most Italian American of holidays be neutralized or shared is plainly offensive to Italian Americans, as it would be to African Americans if [Martin Luther King Day](#) [6] were renamed Civil Rights Leaders’ Day or if it were shared with the opponents of civil rights who died innocently in the wake of the violence that attended the civil rights demonstrations and battles in US cities. In each case, the main point of the Day is lost and a little history is being “stolen” by an imbalanced emphasis that blurs the very lessons and examples these Days were set to express.

May I respectfully suggest that we meet any proposal to change or neutralize Columbus Day with a staunch, unremitting advocacy, allowing for reference to the native Americans whose lives were lost from the 1600’s through the Mexican conflicts in the 1820’s and through the Western land settlements later in the 19th century, distinct from Columbus or Columbus Day. History’s unfortunate victims deserve recognition, but the great advances of civilization and of humankind deserve to have their heroes and their symbols stand tall and untarnished by mindless retouching. The facts – great, good and not good – must all stand if we are to have a history worthy of the name the father of history gave it.

No individual’s history – no people’s history -- or proportionate place in it should be hijacked by revisionist cleansing, passing social fads or politically correct rewrites.

This was the method of Lenin, Hitler, Mao and the other book burning revisionists of the 20th and the preceding centuries.

Let’s set this right as democratic citizens who do not need others to edit our free and full understanding or to limit the facts to limit our judgement or proscribe our understanding.

Perhaps that will become an added value for Columbus Day.



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