

Teach the Truth About Columbus

by Hans Koning

As the 500th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 landfall approaches, controversy has been growing over how it should be commemorated. This may seem to some to be a petty quarrel, but it is not. It is in fact closely linked (as it should be) to a question of lasting importance: How will we teach history to our children—how will we teach the very way they look at America?

So far, much of what has been said shows a misreading of history or is irrelevant to what is at stake. A year ago *The New York Times* published an article by me, "Don't Celebrate 1492 – Mourn It," in which I listed in the briefest of forms the historical record of the governorship of Columbus and his two brothers over the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). This record is not one with "a number of unfortunate actions" or "bad deeds," as letters I since received phrased it. It is, sadly, a story of unmitigated horror.

Columbus had promised "mountains of gold" to his backers, and his effort to squeeze this wealth out of the simple native society of the island caused the death of half its population between 1492 and 1500; the estimated number varies from 125,000 to a half-million. Within two generations the entire nation was wiped out. None of its people was converted to Christianity. In those eight years there is not one recorded moment of awe, of joy, of love, of a smile. There is only anger, cruelty, gold, terror and death.

That is the record. Nothing else, I hold, is relevant when we discuss our commemoration of its 500th anniversary. It is not relevant that the Aztecs, whose turn came later, practiced human sacrifice. It is not relevant that Spanish became the language of a great Latin American literature. It is not relevant that Columbus's policies were of the same ilk as those of later Western conquerors (although most historians agree that the early Spanish record in the Americas is unique in its entire absence of conscience). We either use that anniversary to rethink our history, or we ignore the record and we celebrate.

From this issue, it is not but a step to the matter of school curricula and the diversity of our culture. Some simply cannot countenance the loss of the Columbus myth—the story of the weaver's son who, alone, did not think the world was flat and whose derring-do made him so to speak the first Yankee, after which an ungrateful and superstitious king and queen had him shipped back in chains. To discredit that story deprives many people of a dear bit of lore that went into the shaping of them as Americans. A man prominent in Italian-American organizations told me that if Columbus were toppled from his pedestal, it would saddle him with a basic sense of insecurity. I received letters from others with Italian or Hispanic roots along the same line. Whether the Columbus story was true or false, it was part of their lives, and they could not bear giving it up.

But the great emotional impact of this myth from our past, and other similar ones as well, does not make an argument for leaving them untouched. Rather, it is an argument for the urgency of rethinking and rewriting them. In our diverse society, the traditional Columbus story underwrites the superiority of one race over another. It is poisonous.

A number of historians and educators have told us in recent months that if each minority here gets to study its own culture and we take away the theme of a superior, all-encompassing "American culture," we may destroy the unity of the United States.

I pose the precise opposite. By humanizing and relativizing historical myths, we only destroy the false unity of an ahistorical ideology. At issue is not whether our white, Eurocentric civilization is "better" than the civilizations from which the many minorities here stem. The white civilization is the dominant one in the world at this time because it is the foundation of modern technology and economics, whether it will steer us into a viable future or not. At issue is whether our educators will continue pouring an ideological sauce over this civilization when serving it to our children, an ideology that tells them that it has a God- or nature-given authority over all others. It is this sauce that leads to a smug jingoism, to racism of whites and to bitterness and alienation of all others. Its ingredients are such items as the blue-eyed weaver's son (Columbus has blue eyes in most schoolbooks), the more than human wisdom of the Founding Fathers, the statement (also in most schoolbooks) that the United States has never waged an unjust war.

History education is not there to present blank checks for our present. It must explain why and how we are where we are. History aiming for a world view is history written not only by the winners, as has been the rule, but also by the losers. Such history gives a sense of belonging to every child, down to the most disenfranchised. When we tell our children that the prosperity of Charleston, as of Liverpool, was built on the slave trade and that the Industrial Revolution was largely financed with the blood and sweat of slave plantations, we give both black and white children a new sense of self-knowledge and integrity. We then work toward a diversity within a real unity, built on respect for each other and for the truth.

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