

Albert L. Michaels

Two weeks ago, my daughter called from college. She was disturbed by a lecture on the Discovery delivered to her class in Latin American history. Perhaps in an effort to stimulate discussion - or perhaps, for the more devious reason of undermining the students' faith in basic American values - the professor began by denouncing Christopher Columbus as a villain more heinous than Hitler, an environmental criminal more flagrant than Captain Hazelwood of the Exxon Valdez, a greedy, capitalistic creature as repellent as Ivan Boesky.

I would like to set the record straight.

My daughter's experience is only one example of the recent bizarre attacks on our celebration of the founding of our culture. In December of 1991, the Student Association at the University of Illinois at Champaigne proclaimed that October 12 would now be known as "People of Color Genocide Remembrance Day." Their manifesto claimed that **"Columbus' discovery of America for the European world marked the beginning of slavery, colonialism and other manifestations of White Supremacy."** Not to be outdone, the City Council of The People's Republic of Berkeley in California passed a resolution replacing Columbus Day with "Indigenous Peoples' Day." The leftist National Council of Churches regards 1492 as the initiation of a **"great historical crime."** The radical environmental activist Kirkpatrick Sale has written a widely discussed book on the Discovery titled *The Conquest of Paradise*. Sale claims that the native Americans were peaceful, loving and environmentally protective before the Discovery and he recommends that we should discard our entire civilization and return to the culture of the pre-Columbian indigenous people. He writes that **"There is only one way to live in America, and there can be only one way, and that is as Americans - the original Americans - for that is what the earth of the Americas demands."** Native American activist Russell Means has recently said that **"Columbus makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent"** - maybe that's where my daughter's professor got his inspiration. Fidel Castro has named himself **"an honorary Native American..."**

Wait a minute.

It may, indeed, be true that the native American peoples, who have made many important contributions to our American culture, deserve to be honored with a day of their own. However, it is ridiculous and unjust to usurp for them the celebration of Columbus Day, honoring the man who was responsible for the establishment of our American culture.

The politically correct are having a proverbial field day. Progressive author Hans Konig has called this 500th anniversary of the Discovery **"the best opportunity for radicals since the Vietnam war."** The result has been an unrelenting attack on the Discovery and Christopher Columbus as the beginning of a process characterized by oppression, slavery, genocide and ecocide.

These attacks are unfair, unhistorical and motivated by a deep contempt for American society. These critics know that most Americans are ignorant of the history of pre-Columbian indigenous societies and that, therefore, they can make outrageous claims concerning the pristine innocence of the indigenous peoples. These attacks are an insult to the United States' 20 million Italian Americans who rightfully see Columbus as a precursor and hero. These attacks also demean the United States' 20 million Hispanics who are portrayed as the descendents of the perpetrators of this great historical crime. The enthusiasts of this slander ask the 60 million Catholics of the United States to view the Spanish introduction of Roman

Catholicism as an unmitigated disaster. Jewish Americans are told to equate Adolph Hitler's deliberate murder of 6 million Jews with the tragic but morally neutral death of millions of native Americans from smallpox and other diseases brought from Europe. This is not only a terrible * insult but a trivialization of the memory of the victims of what was a deliberate policy of Germany's National Socialists.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus forged the links between 2 worlds, both already old. Christopher Columbus came seeking opportunities for trade. He did not come to exterminate or enslave but, rather, to fulfill what he believed to be his duty to convert the native Americans and save their souls. Columbus himself was a deeply religious man, inspired by a deeply Christian vision. He sought to spread Christianity more than he sought wealth or personal advantage. During his first voyage, he wrote to the Spanish monarchs concerning the native Americans. **"They learn very quickly any prayer we tell them to say and they make the sign of the cross. Therefore, your highness must resolve to make them Christians."** The harshest critic of Spanish colonialism, the Dominican friar Bartolome Las Casas, wrote **"Truly I would not blame the Admiral's intentions, for I know him well and I know his intentions were good."**

The Spanish conquest, although sometimes exploitative, cruel and wasteful, came for many native peoples as a liberation from tyranny. The Aztecs of Mexico, the Incas of Peru and the Mayas of Central America were all either totalitarian or authoritarian governments. They were expansionist and routinely used force to subdue reluctant subjects. Their rule was cruel, commonly engaging in torture, human sacrifice and cannibalism. Even the peaceful Taino Indians of the Caribbean, who greeted Columbus and his men, had invaded, overcome and shoved aside an earlier Indian group. The Tainos themselves greeted Columbus as a deliverer as they were being threatened by the cannibalistic, more-warlike neighboring Caribes who raided the Taino villages, seeking women as concubines and men as sacrificial victims for their cannibalistic rites. The Aztecs practiced monstrous cruelty. Relying on native records, historian Robert Padden has described the Aztec celebration of the inauguration of a new temple in 1487. **"All was in readiness; the lines of victims were strung out for miles. Thousands of trapped human beings, milling about like cattle, awaiting their turn in the line that was about to move ... Great snakeskin drums began to throb, announcing that the lines could now begin to move. The sacrificial victims were slaughtered with machine-like precision; as the knife-wielders fell exhausted, they were replaced by fresh priests who lifted the heavy blade and let it fall in a precise and measured stroke until their arms grew weary ... It took but seconds to dispatch each victim. Rivulets of blood became bright red streams, washing over darkening plots like boulders in a stream. The holocaust went on unabated for 4 days and nights, with tens of thousands perishing on the slabs. Most of the sources claimed that over 80,000 were sacrificed during those incredible 96 hours."**

This, Mr. Russell Means, was a real holocaust.

Many in Spain, such as the Dominican friar Las Casas, openly and effectively fought the mistreatment of the native Americans by early Spanish colonists. The Catholic reformers convinced Ferdinand and Isabella to outlaw Indian slavery in 1500. In 1542, the Spanish crown abolished the repressive encomienda system. Indians flocked to be converted. The Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes has commented: **"One can only imagine the astonishment of the hundreds of thousands of Indians who asked for baptism as they came to realize that they were being asked to adore a god who sacrificed himself for man instead of asking men to sacrifice themselves to gods."**

It is undeniable that the Discovery resulted in a demographic disaster which took the lives of up to 90% of the indigenous peoples. Although some died in battle or from merciless treatment by the Spaniards, most of the fatalities resulted from the native Americans lacking inherited biological immunities to diseases like smallpox, typhoid fever, mumps, measles and whooping cough. 85% died without seeing a

Spaniard. This was a public health calamity. It was also an accident. The Spanish wanted to convert the native Americans and appropriate their labor, not destroy them. Even if the Americas had been discovered by a boatload of politically correct college professors or guitar toting hippies, the demographic results would have been equally disastrous.

The charges of environmental insensitivity are equally wrong headed. Most of the Indian civilizations were no more environmentally conscious than their European contemporaries. Many primitive, nomadic peoples, like the North-eastern woodland tribes, practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, destroying wildlife and trees. They often had to move every 8 to 10 years because their technology had created barren landscapes. The Aztecs and Incas built huge cities and a vast network of roads and canals, leaving great and enduring scars in the terrain. They relied on backbreaking human labor, carried out by serfs or slaves, to accomplish all the necessary tasks in these constructions.

The charges against Columbus are a grievance against history. It is ridiculous to apply modern moral standards to actions which occurred 5 centuries ago. Columbus, himself was a great navigator and courageous explorer. He showed unshakable determination and perseverance in persuading the Spanish monarchs to finance his expedition. Although a man of his time, he was compassionate and decent. **After his first voyage, Columbus urged those he had left behind to "care for the Indians and let no hurt or harm be done to them."** Later, as governor, he begged the Spanish crown to send farmers and artisans, not rapacious adventurers, as colonists. Unfortunately, his advice was not heeded.

Recently, a presidential candidate, addressing the National Italian American Foundation in Washington, praised Christopher Columbus as a role model and as an exemplar of the American dream. He told the audience that, in the future, **"we will need the same courage ... of a young Italian, the son of weavers, a middle-class entrepreneur with a dream - He persevered, and because he did ... we will celebrate his day."** I believe these sentiments are accurate, appropriate and morally correct.

Columbus' voyage was a great moment of integration between two worlds. The interaction between these two worlds was extremely complex. Most important, the struggle of the Spanish reformers against colonial injustice exemplifies the strong sense of civic freedom which has characterized Western civilization. According to Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, **"these Spanish reformers fought against their fellow men and against the policies of their own country in the name of the moral principle that to them was higher than any principle of nation or state. This self-determination could not have been possible among the Incas or any of the other pre-Hispanic cultures. In these cultures, as in the other great civilizations of history foreign to the West, the individual could not morally question the social organism of which he was a part, because he existed only as an integral atom of that organism and because, for him, the dictates of the state could not be separated from morality."** Vargas Llosa maintains that Columbus' voyage was the initial step in what has been called **"the first culture to interrogate and question itself, the first to break up the masses into individual beings who, with time, have gained the right to think and act for themselves. It was to become thanks to that hitherto unknown exercise freedom the most powerful civilization of our world."**

No one would claim that our civilization is perfect. No one would deny the existence of injustice, the reality of poverty, the need for environmental sensitivity. But armed with Columbus' legacy of a vision of possibility, in a free society which values individual worth, we can recognize its flaws and work to eliminate them.

Columbus' quest is, for all of us, an ongoing voyage worth celebrating, supporting and commemorating with pride in our past and optimism for our future.