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### **Abolishing Columbus Day will advance division and faulty history**

By Eugene F. Rivers, III \*

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Baltimore has spent the last year trying to heal from the wounds of division. But now a divisive proposal threatens to create more disunity. Councilman Brandon Scott's proposal to eliminate Columbus Day is just what Baltimore doesn't need: more division, less healing. Worse, the proposal itself is based on the kind of stereotypes that should never be the cause for legislative action.

Scholars like Professor Carol Delaney, formerly of Brown and Stanford universities, argue that Columbus is the subject of terrible and unfair slander. Professor Delaney writes in her authoritative biography of the explorer: "...he is blamed for all the calamities that befell [the New] World. The 'presentist' perspective that dominates the contemporary view, even among some academics, holds him responsible for consequences he did not intend, expect, or endorse."

Delaney also noted in a 2014 interview: "Columbus has become a symbol for everything that went wrong. But the more I read of his own writings and that of his contemporaries, my understanding of him totally changed. His relations with the natives tended to be benign."

"Columbus strictly told the crew not to do things like maraud or rape, and instead to treat the native people with respect. There are many examples in his writings where he gave instructions to this effect. Most of the time when injustices occurred, Columbus wasn't even there," she notes. Columbus was not perfect. None of us are. But he was hardly the monstrous caricature being used to assassinate his holiday.

None of this denies the fact that the consequences of colonization of what is now North America had deplorable consequences for Native Americans. Nor does it compensate for their treatment by Europeans, which was often reprehensible.

However, attacks on Columbus and Columbus Day were originated by the very group that has historically led racist attacks on blacks. These attacks were created in the 1920s by the Ku Klux Klan as part of a targeted assault on Italians, Catholics, and the Catholic charitable group the Knights of Columbus.

We must not forget that, in addition to African Americans, the Klan hated Catholics and Jews as well. And they had a particular hatred for the Knights of Columbus. Not only was this a Catholic group, but it was a group that stood publicly – at its highest levels – with the African American community. During World War I, it was the only charitable group to run centers serving the troops at home and in Europe that had as its policy not to draw the color line.

Long before advocacy for African Americans was popular, back in 1924, the Knights of Columbus commissioned and published NAACP co-founder W.E.B. DuBois' book *The Gift of Black Folk*. It published this book because African Americans had been excluded from American history, and the Knights of Columbus wanted to correct that injustice – four decades before the Civil Rights Movement!

In 1924, the same year the Knights of Columbus published the DuBois book, the Klan disrupted their Columbus Day party in Pennsylvania by burning a fiery cross. The same year, the Klan magazine ran an article entitled: "Columbus Day, a Papal Fraud." In the 1920s, the Klan also tried to suppress celebration of the holiday at the state level.

When, a decade later, Columbus Day became a federal holiday, it was Catholics – Italian Americans and groups like the Knights of Columbus – who pushed for it. Why? Because – as they had done for African Americans with DuBois – they wanted to ensure a place of honor for immigrants and Catholics in the history of the United States.

Baltimore needs unity. It needs healing. It needs honest dialogue. There is a long list of problems to solve in Baltimore: high crime, high poverty rates, unemployment, fatherless children, mistrust of police, failing schools, drug abuse, etc. The city's politicians should devote their time to addressing these issues in innovative and effective ways rather than to initiatives that can only be divisive.

It is inspiring that the students of City Neighbors High School suggested celebrating Indigenous Peoples Day, as the Baltimore Sun reports. It is fitting that, just as the culture of Italians, Catholics and African Americans is celebrated nationally, the culture of Native Americans should be also. But, to celebrate one cultural group does not require that we denigrate another. We should not disrespect the cultural heroes of another ethnic group. Rather than renaming Columbus Day, why not add another holiday, Indigenous Peoples Day, to the City of Baltimore's calendar in honor of Native Americans?

Baltimore is the country's first Catholic diocese. It has a thriving Little Italy and strong immigrant community. It is the place where the founder of the Knights of Columbus was ordained a priest nearly a century and a half ago. The city should not follow a path blazed by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s to insult and marginalize Catholics. Instead the city can celebrate the legacy of marginalized people such as African Americans and Native Americans, just as it celebrates those who have defended them.

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