

Save Columbus Day Speech

Thank you Mr. Chair and thank you to the committee for this opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Gina Franciamore-Knaack, and I am the president of Sons of Italy Lodge 2870 Colorado Springs.

If you would have asked me five years ago if I thought Columbus Day should be abolished, my answer would probably have been yes. Today, my answer to that question is unequivocally "no"! And tomorrow, my answer will be no. And next year, my answer will be no. Until the day I die, my answer will be no, we should never abolish the Columbus Day holiday. So, why the change of heart? The answer is simple, I stopped listening to the Columbus fiction, and started conducting my own research using credible sources to discover the Columbus facts.

Today I will present some of those Columbus facts citing the two credible sources I used in my quest for the truth. The first is Dr. Carol Delaney's book *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem* published in 2011. Dr. Delaney has a PhD in social anthropologist, an MTS from Harvard Divinity School and was a professor at Stanford University. Her book draws from sources previously ignored by others, including some of Columbus's own writings. In her book, Dr. Delaney makes it clear that Columbus's quest was primarily a spiritual one. His plan was to find gold and bring it back to Spain. It would be used to fund a crusade to take back the city of Jerusalem from the Muslims. According to Dr. Delaney's research, Columbus believed that in order for the second coming of Christ to occur, he would need to convert all the peoples he had found and that all lands must embrace Christianity. He took his inspiration from Isaiah chapter 66 verse 19. "And I will set a sign among them... to the islands afar off, to them that have not heard of me and have not seen my glory." (Delaney, p. 270)

My second source is John Boyd Thacher's book *Christopher Columbus: His Life, His Work, His Remains*, which was published in 1904. Mr. Thacher was an historian, a NY State Senator in the 1880's, former mayor of Albany. Mr. Thacher's book contains three volumes, each over 800 pages dedicated to Christopher Columbus. Over 350 of those pages are the translated works of Columbus's letters, diaries, journals written in Columbus's own hand.

According to Professor Edward G. Bourne of the American Historical Review, "This is the most voluminous and sumptuous work devoted to Columbus in the United States...its contents are based on a more conscientious study of the original sources than has been the case with any life of Columbus published in this country ...Mr. Thacher has rendered to American Students of Columbian questions a great service, which will be appreciated by those who have occasion to prosecute such studies. This I can say from actual use of his first and second volumes."

And so, on to the fact which changed my mind.

According to Mr. Thacher's Vol. I, page 632. "Columbus was, after all, a mariner and not trained to be a colonial administrator. Bad things began to happen as early as 1493 when men were left behind after the Santa Maria went aground. They had gone against his explicit orders to do no harm to the Indians, to respect the cacique to whom they owed so much, not to scatter themselves but stay together, and to avoid doing violence against the women; in short to set a good example (see Thacher, I: 632).

And from Dr. Delaney's footnote from page 267: Instead, their behavior was outrageous: they raped the women and tried to force the natives to work for them. All of them were murdered before Columbus returned on the second voyage. The colonists he brought with him on the second voyage also assumed they could live a life of ease using the natives as servants. In Columbus's words, 'they were a greedy lot.' Las Casas (in later years a critic of Columbus) always spoke with respect and admiration of Columbus even as he criticized some of his expedient policies. We should not forget that Las Casas was himself a slaveholder before being converted to their defense several years after hearing a 1511 sermon by Antonio de Montesinos. Columbus never had the opportunity to hear that sermon since by then he had been dead for five years. Yet even as a defender of the Indians, Las Casas cannot be exonerated since he proposed importing slaves from Africa and is, in large part, responsible for that tragedy."

Dr. Delaney p 279: "But if we are to understand Columbus (or anyone else), we must attempt insofar as is possible to reconstruct the world in which he lived.

While some historians writing about Columbus appear to do this, they still, in my reading, project a modern consciousness onto him, leaving the impression that the time and place are merely "transient fashions."

I, and scholars who have reviewed Dr. Delaney's book pose this question, Should we hold our historical figures to 21st century morals and standards? If that's the case, then let's introduce a bill next year to abolish Presidents' Day. Twelve of our US presidents owned slaves, 8 of them while serving as president. Would any of us suggest we abolish Presidents' Day? I think not. Forty-one signers of the Declaration of Independence owned slaves. Shall we introduce a bill next year to abolish the Fourth of July as a national holiday? Never going to happen. Some have suggested that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a philanderer. Do we introduce a bill next year to abolish MLK Day ignoring all the work he did for the civil rights movement? No way. So, when we circle back to Columbus, we realize this: some things that occurred in the past are incongruous with our modern day morals and standards because as Dr. Delaney said in regards to Columbus, many who write about Columbus "project a modern consciousness onto him." So, unless we are willing to hold ALL historical figures we celebrate with federal holidays to 21st century standards of morality and social consciousness, we MUST NOT hold Columbus to this standard; therefore, we must NOT repeal Columbus Day.

And my final citation from Dr. Delaney's book p. 287: "Why should we care about the thoughts and actions of a man who lived over 500 years ago? What, if anything, might it contribute to contemporary society? Situating Columbus and the encounter within a Christian apocalyptic scenario helps to relocate some of the responsibility for the consequences of the encounter. Many of us may find the scenario disturbing, even reprehensible, but we can hardly blame Columbus personally for holding it. Not only were there no viable alternatives available to him, as there are for today's fundamentalists, but he had been dead for more than six years by the time his friend Las Casas changed his views about the Indians. In no way is this meant to excuse the devastation that occurred, but it broadens the terrain of the debate. To criticize and excoriate Columbus as so

many have done and continue to do, ignores the cultural context in which he moved and the religious ideas that informed it.”

So, why should we still celebrate Columbus Day? He was a brave explorer, a navigator, a reminder that pushing beyond our limits is who we are as Americans/ He is a symbol of innovation, ingenuity, and bravery. That’s why 500+ years later, we are still explorers, as both President Obama and President Trump express their committed to send an expedition to Mars by 2030. Thank you for your time.