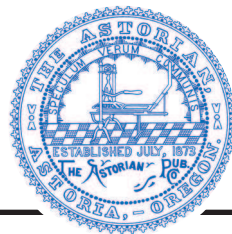


OPINION



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PRO-CON

Was Notre Dame right to shield Columbus paintings from student eyes?



Robert Franklin/South Bend Tribune

A student walks by a mural of Christopher Columbus at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind.

PRO: Telling truth about Columbus helps us navigate today's progressive waters

TAMPA, Fla. — Millions upon millions of Americans grew up believing that the reasons Christopher Columbus became the first European explorer to cross the Atlantic were pretty much inherent — that he was extremely intelligent, boldly courageous and uncommonly persevering.

Now the forces of political correctness are insisting it's high time that the crueler side of Columbus be prominently displayed throughout our educational system — from expensive preschool courses through K-12 and even in our elite private and public universities.

Their demands are being met widely, even at the highest level. Ivy League leaders Yale, Harvard and Princeton, among others, have gone out of their way to emphasize to their students that Columbus treated the natives he encountered in the Caribbean and South America as backward savages.

Foremost among their claims is that the Genoan native enslaved, tortured and slaughtered the Arawaks and their companion tribes when they refused to be subjugated and bend their knees to the Catholic faith.

The University of Notre Dame, arguably the nation's finest Catholic school of higher education, gave further publicity to the progressives' claims recently when it publicly announced a decision to cover a dozen historic murals depicting Christopher Columbus as a kindly friend of native races.

Father John Jenkins, Notre Dame's president, noted the paintings, which were painted inside the university's Main Administration Building from 1882 to 1884, "hide from view the darker side of this story."

There can be little doubt the Arawaks were virtually wiped out by their encounter with Columbus and his crew,

although it's a fair point that their deaths were caused mainly because they had no immunity to the old world diseases transmitted by the Europeans.

When one considers the disdain and viciousness that Columbus and other European explorers displayed toward the original inhabitants of North and South America, Jenkins and others are surely right in demanding our students be taught the whole story, even if it means shrouding paintings that have historical significance.

While the actions of the early explorers are deplorable by today's loftier standards, it's well to remember that similar British tactics against hapless natives were common through the end of the 19th century.

The British, who once liked to consider the Victorian era as a showcase of high morality, now are beginning to see that their much-touted conquests of Africa and India are shameful at best and utterly despicable at worst.

One should never forget the underlying racism exposed by Kipling's poetry in "Gunga Din" and "The Road to Mandalay." And especially not, the last line of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" as he considers the shame of Belgium's colonization of the natives of the Congo: "The horror, the horror."

No American should discount courses that accurately inform us about our heritage by the derogatory term "political correctness."

After all, the more we know about the shortcomings of our own historical heroes, the better chance we have of survival in a rapidly changing world.

Wayne Madsen is a journalist whose opinion pieces have appeared in European and American newspapers.



Wayne Madsen

CON: Covering up paintings of Columbus imprisons history

ASHLAND, Ohio — The University of Notre Dame plans to cover murals depicting Columbus as benevolent toward Native Americans because they offend some people. Is this a silly example of political correctness? Yes, and it's harmful too.

A Christian school should be concerned not to offend others, of course. But to paraphrase Thomas Aquinas, the patron saint of academics and universities, there is something more important than not offending others, and that's honoring the truth. If we do not honor the truth above all, then we build on falsehood, and nothing good, not even enduring concern for others, will come of that.

It is true that in failing to depict the whole truth about Columbus the murals themselves help hide the truth. But how does hiding the murals uncover the truth?

If truth is the objective, as it should be, especially at a university, would it not be better to leave the murals where they have been for over 100 years and hold a debate each Columbus Day over the legacy of Columbus and what he stands for?

Instead of free and open debate, Notre Dame plans to create a permanent, less public display, where replicas of the offending murals may receive "informed and careful consideration."

Can "informed" and "careful" mean anything but managed and censored consideration?

Certainly, those offended by the murals will insist on determining who is "informed" and "careful" enough to talk about them. Having given in to them before, will the university fight them over this?

And when the university backs down again, will the offended allow anyone to mention the slavery and human sacrifice carried out by Native Americans before Columbus arrived?

Will they allow mention of the land seized violently by Native Americans from other Native Americans, again before Columbus arrived? Will they allow mention of the Native Americans who cooperated with the Spanish to subjugate other Native Americans?

Will they allow mention of Columbus' seamanship, courage and religious zeal? Will they allow mention of the Spanish missionaries and officials who tried to protect the Native Americans? In brief, will we get anything like the complex truth of the events the murals depict?

Notre Dame's president, Reverend John I. Jenkins, suggested that the murals falsely portrayed Columbus because they reflected "the attitudes of the time" when they were painted in the early 1880s.

It would have been better, of course, if Father Jenkins' predecessor at that time had questioned those attitudes. And it would have been better if Father Jenkins had questioned the attitude of his time — political correctness — that led to the murals being hidden away, rather than giving in to it. Giving in to those who want only certain opinions expressed publicly is dangerous.

Over the past years, surveys have found declining support on U.S. college campuses for free speech, if it offends someone. Father Jenkins' decision only encourages this baleful trend — and beyond Notre Dame as well. It would have been much better if he had stood against it.

He should have followed the courageous example of President Harry Truman.

At the height of the anti-communist fear that swept America in the early 1950s, Truman vetoed a new security law.

Truman acknowledged the danger posed by Soviet espionage and subversion, but wrote in his veto message that "we would betray our finest traditions if we attempted, as this bill would attempt, to curb the simple expression of opinion."

This we should never do, no matter how distasteful the opinion may be to the vast majority of our people."

Truman agreed with the great Italian philosopher and friar Saint Thomas Aquinas. Truth is more important than not Aquinas. And when Harry Truman and Thomas Aquinas agree on something, we should follow their advice.

David Tucker is the director of teacher programs at the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University in Ohio.



David Tucker