

Gadfly works toward taking a position on the Columbus monument issue

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 25, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument* 

Gadfly is a slow man. Long-time followers can testify to that. Some of you have even complained. Dilatory Gadfly — how could he ever be an administrator?

But when faced with a question or a problem, Gadfly likes to take his time (if conditions permit). He likes to research. He likes to consider all perspectives. He likes to listen. When he comes to conclusion, he likes to be able to justify it. And even when he comes to conclusion, he is open to new argument, new data — open to change.

And as a card-carrying gadfly, he likes to give his followers the information and the time to form their own opinions.

Gadfly has now posted over a dozen times on the Columbus monument issue, inviting you to think along with him, inviting you to see that though it may seem a trivial issue, that this issue is related to the painful national reckoning with race we are once again undergoing as a result of the murder of George Floyd.

The Mayor's Task Force on the Columbus monument issue has not reached conclusion, is still doing its work. Gadfly wishes he were privy to the discussion there. He hopes it is a good one.

But it's time for Gadfly to move toward taking a position on the Columbus monument.

Think along with him, wouldya?

In his **last post** on this topic, Gadfly tried to frame the pros and cons of the request to remove the monument, and he floated several options for the Task Force recommendation to the Mayor (did he miss an option?):

- deny the request, allow the monument to stand.

- issue a formal statement agreeing with the negative view of Columbus, disavowing his actions relative the Native Americans, but letting the monument stand as is.
- add additional “educational” information about Columbus and his legacy at the monument site.
- add a monument celebrating Indigenous people to the monument site as balance of perspective on 1492.
- replace the monument with a new one representing the complex nature of Columbus’s legacy.
- replace the monument with a monument to an Italian of less ambiguous heroic stature.
- move the monument to private property.
- remove the monument.

Gadfly does not feel the Mayor can simply deny the request for removal, allowing the monument to stand as is:

- to say that Columbus had “flaws” or was an “imperfect” man like many of our “heroes” is to fail to recognize the level of horrors in which he was personally involved (e.g., ordering arms cut off on Natives who didn’t bring in enough gold) or the scale of devastation that he initiated and unleashed (whole cultures wiped out/hundreds of thousands, millions dead).
- to compare him to cultural icons like Jefferson, for instance, is to fail to recognize that Jefferson self-consciously agonized over the race question, unsuccessfully trying to find a solution, and that the tenders of his legacy — e.g., at **Monticello** — have evolved (unlike the the Italian American organization UNICO which sponsored the monument) to embrace the need to include slavery and even Jefferson’s long-time relation with concubine **Sally Hemings** in their representation of the man.
- to say as the UNICO sponsors of the monument did in 1992 that “we can thank people like Columbus and the people who followed him for giving us the opportunity to voice our opinions” is patently absurd, for no dots can be drawn from Columbus to our First Amendment, and City Councilors in 1992 should have known that.

- to say as the current **UNICO** organization does — to pick just one claim on its web site — that Columbus is “emblematic of the millions of immigrants and their pursuit of economic opportunity, religious freedom, and hope for a better life” is, if true, to falsely wrap Columbus in American Dream and Statue of Liberty rhetoric that has no relation to Columbus’s own motives, and, if true, would sanction personal greed and uncontrolled exploitation of those less powerful than you as motives for immigration.
- to focus on Columbus’s skill as a navigator to the exclusion of or as a balance to the magnitude of the negativity surrounding Columbus is a herculean task of mental and moral compartmentalization that Gadfly is simply not capable of.
- to say that removing or revising the monument would be an offense to our Italian Americans and divide our community is to fail to recognize that the presence of the monument might be seen as an offense to people of color in our community, for instance the nearly 30% of our community who are Latinx (“Porto Rico” was one of the islands quickly devastated by the Spanish).
- to say that the monument should quietly remain or remain as is because it is in an innocuous location makes Gadfly wonder, then, if it has any value for the Italian American community.
- to focus on the dangers and rigors of the Columbus voyage and to celebrate its successful, triumphant conclusion is to enshadow the “Middle Passage” where two to four million Africans died on their forced voyages to America.
- to focus on Columbus as navigator is to forego the opportunity to learn from history, to learn lessons from the botched “first contact” situation that might be important in our desire to achieve racial harmony.

Gadfly could go on and on. Bottom line: Gadfly does not feel that the Mayor can simply deny the request for removal of the Columbus monument, the Mayor can not allow the monument to remain as is. But what to do? Let’s think about that next. Gadfly the slow man.

Any response to Gadfly so far?