

Gadfly a step closer toward taking a position on the Columbus monument issue

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 26, 2020

 Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument 

Gadfly enjoys role playing. And enjoys encouraging you to do so.

He thinks we learn a lot. Standing in the other person's shoes.

So Gadfly cannot imagine the Mayor doing nothing in response to the request from 120+ residents to remove the Columbus monument from city space, the Rose Garden.

Rather, more specifically, he can't imagine the Mayor *justifying* doing nothing.

He can't imagine himself — role playing as Mayor — sitting across the table from a deputation from those residents (some, no doubt, people of color), can't imagine stepping up to a microphone, can't imagine looking into a tv camera and *justifying* doing nothing.

Can you? Try it. Get a mirror, and take your best shot.

Though Gadfly must admit that, looking back on the reasons he gave in yesterday's post, the one bullet he's wavering on is the one about the location. The monument is truly unobtrusive, small in scale, and little regarded. Perhaps a case for leaving it alone could be made on that basis. Perhaps.

In any event, let's take that first option for mayoral action off the table:

- ~~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.

What to do? What next? What are the other options?

Let's go to the bottom of the list and consider the polar option of removing the monument.

This, of course, is literally what the **petitioners request**:

“This letter written in solidarity with protests across the country calls for removal of the Christopher Columbus monument located in the Bethlehem Rose Garden. The monument was installed in 1992 by the now-defunct Bethlehem chapter of Unico, an Italian-American service organization. It was commissioned, as stated on the inscription, ‘to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America’.”

(This is a good spot to bring in — as follower John has been nudging Gadfly — the fact that Leif Erikson is credited as the first European to touch down on North America, a full 500 years before Columbus, There you go, John!)

While recognizing Italian American reverence for Columbus, the petitioner letter essentially gives three reasons for removal: the monument conveys misinformation about the discovery of America, Columbus is not a hero, and the monument is incompatible with a city that celebrates diversity.

Should the Mayor, without adieu, accede to the petitioner argument and remove the monument from city property? If you were Mayor, would you agree with the petitioners and remove the monument?

Still have that mirror? Imagine denying those three reasons.

Gadfly couldn't, wouldn't.

While agreeing substantially with the petitioners, however, Gadfly would look for an option short of that we might call the “nuclear option” of removal.

Gadfly is not a fan of “cancel culture” (see Bud Hackett's **comment** on yesterday's post). News images of crowds tearing down statues of Confederate figures in the South distresses him greatly. Too much like book burnings. Gives him the shivers.

Gadfly is an historian.

History is history. The good and bad. The beautiful and the ugly. What you agree with and what you don't.

Gadfly is an educator.

History is an endless collection of teachable moments.

That America needed a hero in the 1870s, that Italian Americans were discriminated against and needed a hero at the turn of the 20th century, that Italians in Easton needed self-affirmation and pooled their hard-earned money to erect a monument in the 1930s, that Italians in Bethlehem did the same in the 1990s are indelible *facts* of history and need to be understood.

And if there is something wrong, something to be criticized, something to be rued, knowledge is the antidote. Except in circumstances extraordinarily extreme.

Idealistic Gadfly would hope that with proper knowledge a monument to Columbus that does not tell the full story, that portrays only a half-truth would not have been built in the first place.

But it is important that we recognize (not forget, not deny the very existence of) *the fact* that at a certain time in our cultural development the curators of the public history of our beginnings as a nation tended to render indigenous peoples invisible, tended to render the injustices “we” committed against them as invisible.

Of course, Gadfly would hope you would agree that many of those actions would now be deemed injustices.

So history should not be erased. History is not a palimpsest,

Gadfly can sit on the bench next to the Columbus monument in the Rose Garden, recognize its intention, and, most importantly, recognize its shortcomings, and reflect on how as a culture we have progressed in our understanding of the past that is crucial to our understanding of the present.

He can bring his knowledge to bear on the monument.

Here's what comes to Gadfly's mind when he thinks of removing the monument.

Gadfly has read the bad books, the banned books.

He has read *Mein Kampf*. He has read Mao Tse-Tung's *Little Red Book*. He has read Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. He has read the Marquis de Sade.

Gadfly has read the bad books, the banned books.

And would have it no other way.

For next to these books on his library shelves were other books to provide balance and perspective. And he read them too.

He understands the world better for having everything available.

For this reason Gadfly is not a fan of "cancel culture," would not favor a bare removal of that fairly secluded Columbus monument in the Rose Garden.

Now that's a pretty elite view. Many people will not have Gadfly's "library" advantage.

And it's a "white" view.

So, still the question is what to do.

Let's continue to think about the other options. Gadfly the slow man.

The Bethlehem Gadfly