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NIAF Challenges Notre Dame to Reconsider Its Action to Conceal Historic Christopher Columbus Murals

- The Foundation Urges University President to Reverse Action to “Erase History” -

(Washington, D.C. – January 23, 2019) – The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) today asked the University of Notre Dame to reconsider its decision to cover the historic Christopher Columbus murals on its campus.

On Sunday, University of Notre Dame President John I. Jenkins announced in a written statement that the series of Christopher Columbus murals located on the second floor of the Main Building on the university campus would be “covered by a woven material.”

Jenkins wrote, “Painted in 1882-84... [the murals] reflect the attitudes of the time and were intended as a didactic presentation, responding to cultural challenges for the school’s largely immigrant, Catholic population... In recent years, however, many have come to see the murals as at best blind to the consequences of Columbus’s voyage for the indigenous peoples who inhabited this ‘new’ world and at worst demeaning toward them.”

In a letter to Jenkins, NIAF CEO Lawrence J. Purpuro wrote, “...it is both unfair and totally unrealistic to apply today’s political norms to a historical figure from 500 years ago. If the practice of applying today’s standards to historical figures made sense, there would be a strong argument to remove memorials and monuments to individuals from Thomas Jefferson to George Washington—both of whom were supporters of the abhorrent practice of slavery.”

Purpuro added, “...while there remain serious scholarly debates about certain attitudes and actions of Columbus, he alone should not be burdened with the entire fate of Native Americans... We do not believe the University of Notre Dame should take this unilateral action—and seek to erase history—simply to appease a small number of vocal Columbus detractors.”

Please see the NIAF letter to the University of Notre Dame President attached.

The National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to preserving, promoting and protecting the Italian American heritage and culture. To learn more about the Foundation and become a member, please visit www.niaf.org.



THE NATIONAL ITALIAN AMERICAN FOUNDATION

Amb. Peter F. Secchia Building
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23 January 2019

Rev. John I. Jenkins C.S.C.
Office of the President
University of Notre Dame
400 Main Building
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556

Dear President Jenkins:

On behalf of the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and the more than 20 million Americans of Italian ancestry, we write to express our extreme disappointment in the University's decision to conceal its historic and artistic Christopher Columbus murals in the Main Building. For countless members in the Italian American community, including Italian American Notre Dame alumni, Christopher Columbus is a symbol of our collective contributions to this country.

We believe that this decision is wrong for several reasons:

First, it is both unfair and totally unrealistic to apply today's political norms to a historical figure from 500 years ago. If the practice of applying today's standards to historical figures made sense, there would be a strong argument to remove memorials and monuments to individuals from Thomas Jefferson to George Washington—both of whom were supporters of the abhorrent practice of slavery. All such art represents just a snapshot of history, now often mistakenly measured against 21st-century sensibilities.

Second, Notre Dame's decision to conceal the murals of Columbus ignores the fact that Columbus' exploration of the New World has positively contributed to modern civilization. Columbus' courageous voyage was the catalyst that initiated more than 500 years of immigration to the Americas by people from every corner of the earth who were seeking a better life for their families.

Third, while there remain serious scholarly debates about certain attitudes and actions of Columbus, he alone should not be burdened with the entire fate of Native Americans. Our Foundation does not seek to blindly uphold any single figure in the name of his or her Italian heritage as we recognize all individuals are flawed. As Carol Delaney, an emerita professor of

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Stanford University and author of "Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem," has opined, the popular current narrative around Columbus is tarred by bad history. Delaney has noted that

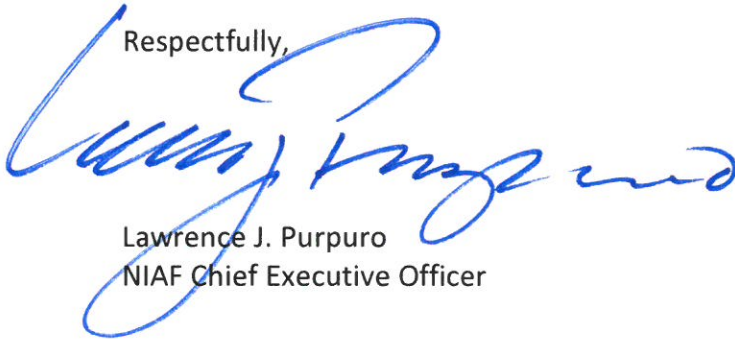
Columbus had a favorable impression of many of the Native Americans he met and instructed the men under his command not to abuse them but to trade with them; he also punished some of his own men who committed crimes against the natives. Delaney acknowledged that some Native Americans were sent to Spain as slaves or conscripted into hard labor at the time Columbus had responsibility for the region, but she attributed this to prevalent views and practices of the time. It is unequivocally clear that Columbus' historic actions had an enormous positive impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of individuals.

We do not believe the University of Notre Dame should take this unilateral action—and seek to erase history—simply to appease a small number of vocal Columbus detractors.

NIAF strongly encourages Notre Dame to reconsider its decision to cover the murals so that the Columbus murals can be displayed proudly once again on the second floor of the Main Building. By doing so, the University can make a positive statement recognizing the overriding value of New World exploration and the contribution Columbus and those immigrants who followed in his path have in fact made to this country.

With best wishes.

Respectfully,



Lawrence J. Purpuro
NIAF Chief Executive Officer

LJP: njw
Enclosure