

# Columbus and the Spirit of Enterprise



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Published by The Rockford Institute

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Adapted from an address given in New York City  
on October 12, 1992.



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I just returned from Italy, where I spent a few days in Genoa. I devoted a quiet Sunday to walking all over the old parts of the city—not a wise idea for unaccompanied women, by the way—and by accident the house of Columbus was open. All good things in Italy, I have found, happen more or less by accident, by chance, by hook or crook.

It is or was not much of a house, and there is more than a little reason to believe that the present structure is built on the foundations of an earlier house in which Columbus actually lived as a boy. Do not, by the way, try to tell the Genovesi that Columbus was a Spaniard or a Morisco or a Catalan or Portuguese, because—as a sign in his house instructs you—it has been proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the discoverer of the New World came from Genoa. In fact, they are right; we have ample documentation on the Colombo family, to say nothing of the explorer's own explicit testimony. But we modern Americans are fond of doubting and debunking everything and everybody that we ought to hold in reverence, and if Christopher Columbus and George Washington and Thomas Jefferson used to be revered as the fathers of our country, then we are like spoiled children who blame all our problems on wicked parents or, as we now say, on our dysfunctional family. More on this point later.

The basic facts of Columbus' life are well-known. He came from a family of weavers, but instead of following his father's profession the young Christoforo took to the sea. In the 15th century, Genoa was one of the last great maritime powers in Italy. For several hundred years the great Italian city-states—Pisa, Florence, Venice, Milan, and Genoa—had been developing their own economic and cultural identities. It was a period in which each speck on the map seemed to produce painters, architects, and writers of world-historical significance. Each region had its own language, and each city its own dialect. Indeed, down to the 1940's an uneducated Genovese or Sicilian or Comasco needed a translator if



he wanted to communicate with speakers of the Tuscan dialect we call Italian.

In the 14th and 15th centuries Italy's maritime republics were the richest cities on earth and home to the most brilliant civilization the world had seen since the days of ancient Athens. Their wealth depended on trade with the Far East, and the sea was the path to adventure and success for young Italian sailors and merchants, just as the American frontier was to be the outlet for America's most creative energies. But two years after the birth of Columbus (in 1451), the Turks succeeded in blowing their way through the great walls of Constantinople. In giving the death blow to the Roman Empire in the East, the Turks also began cutting Genoa and Venice off from trade with the Orient. One proposed solution to the Turkish blockade was to discover an alternate route to the East by way of Africa, and more than one expedition of Genoese sailors made the attempt and was never heard from again.

At the same time, Genoa la Superba tried to maintain her footing in the Eastern Mediterranean. One of Columbus' earliest voyages was probably to the Greek island of Chios, a trading colony of Genoa that was being taken over by the Turks. A few years later, Columbus found himself sailing with a fleet carrying merchandise from Chios. In a battle with a French and Portuguese fleet, Columbus' ship went down, and he made his way to Lisbon. Although his first contact with Portugal was the result of an accident, it was no accident at all that many brave and enterprising sailors from Genoa made their way to the first Atlantic power willing to explore the vast ocean that stretched out to the west.

He made other voyages, probably going as far as Iceland, but an impossible plan began to form in his mind. Why make the long and dangerous trip around Cape Horn, when you could reach the East by sailing west. If Marco Polo's wild stories were to be believed, China extended much farther than the ancient geographers had supposed. What if . . . what if . . .

He pitched his scheme to various royal courts but only managed to kindle an interest in the Queen of Castille, whose dominions—unlike those of her husband—included an Atlantic coastline. But Isabella and Ferdinand were engaged in one of the great epic struggles of European man—they were fighting year after year to free every inch of Spanish soil from the Moorish invaders.



But—and this too is no accident—in the same year that the Moors were driven out of Granada, Columbus was given the resources for an expedition to the Indies.

On the face of it, the idea was insane, and—as we all know—Columbus was simply wrong and the theologians were right. The globe is much too vast, and no ship could pack enough food and water to make the trip to the East. Even half the distance was beyond the capacity of any 15th-century ship. But most great discoveries are the result of persistence combined with dumb luck. Anyone can be right, but it takes a peculiar kind of genius to be so monumentally wrong that he discovers penicillin or a new world.

The real importance of Columbus lies in his character. At the very time when the Mediterranean world was closing up and Italy was beginning to turn into a commercial and political backwater, this great Italian adventurer staked his whole life on one impossible risk and became the first American. He was followed by other adventurers, like Cortez, who with a handful of men took on the vast and powerful empire of the Aztecs.

Closer to home, I could talk about the first real North American, the adventurer Captain John Smith, the mercenary soldier-turned-explorer who single-handedly saved the Jamestown colony. I am sure you all know the story, but let me give one or two details. The businessmen who funded the settlement were obviously strange birds. Making their own money through investments and competition, they thought the settlers would only thrive under a system of communism in which all things were shared equally. They were not the only businessmen in our history to subsidize communism, but they were the first.

You can imagine what happened. Why would anyone lift a finger, if he could live without working? The men ate up all the supplies and spent their time looking for gold that wasn't there. At their rope's end, they turned to John Smith who immediately put an end to the noble experiment. Within a short time, there was a food surplus, peace with the Indians, and productive labor going on all over the little colony. Not that this satisfied the malcontents, who attempted to blow up and then drown the man who had rescued them from communism and certain death—if there is a difference.

From our earliest days, this has been the American character: the spirit of enterprise, a passion for risk, and the willingness of each



man to accept responsibility for himself and his family. The frontier is the great theme of our history—beginning with the first settlers who struggled to acquire a beachhead on the Atlantic littoral and spreading up the backcountry and over mountains into the lush valleys of the Ohio and the Mississippi, out across the vast and desolate plains all the way to the other ocean that does, in fact, face the Orient.

Many stories are told, almost all of them false, about the wild and violent frontier. But the Wild West is the invention of dime-novelists and moviemakers. The truth is that without law and without police or soldiers, American settlers in the wilderness were able to lead peaceful lives, settle their own disputes, and maintain order. Why? Because they were free to rediscover the most important facts of human social life: marriage and family, individual responsibility, and a sense of belonging to a community. Every farmer and rancher, peddler and shopkeeper was, in fact, an entrepreneur, working for the success of himself and his family.

Radical historians like to dwell upon the few incidents of violent confrontation in the West or the unfortunate Indian wars that were the inevitable results of two very different cultures in collision. In the new history, it is European-Americans who are uniquely guilty in the history of the world; Columbus and Cortez destroyed great Native American civilizations, we are told; the settlement of the West was a genocidal holocaust; and even more guilty than the settlers and soldiers who spent all their time massacring the innocent savages were the robber-baron businessmen back East who made their fortunes by stealing and pillaging.

There are just enough facts to make this sort of history plausible. Columbus was decisive to the point of ruthlessness in his treatment of the Native American tribes he encountered, but we ought to bear in mind that one of those tribes—the Caribs—was engaged in a war of extermination against another. The Caribs were also known as Canibs or Cannibales, and it is no accident that their name became synonymous with eating human flesh. Columbus' sailors found young Arawak men whom the Caribs had caponized and fattened for the table. They also found captured Arawak women who were compelled to produce babies, which were a gourmet item on the Carib menu.

It is true that Cortez and the other Spanish conquistadors did



overthrow native civilizations—although we are not told that these civilizations were based on conquest, oppression, and cannibalism. The Aztecs regularly raided their subjects to find tender children for their sacred barbecues. Cortez was not a kindhearted gentleman, but he was a Christian, and the sight of slaughtered and half-eaten children gave him a queasy feeling about the high Aztec civilization we hear so much about today.

In our own history, there is enough blame to go around. If we massacred Indians, as we did on occasion, they gave as good as they got, and many of the worst atrocities committed by Americans were acts of retaliation. The truth is, we exterminated the native population mostly by accident; it was the diseases, not the bullets, that killed off the tribes on the Eastern seaboard.

In the new anti-American mythology, the genocidal frontiersman was replaced by the robber-baron in the course of the last century. Once again, there is an element of truth in the indictment of American capitalism in the late 19th century. Some businessmen after the Civil War—Jay Gould and Jim Fisk, for example—were stock manipulators who bribed politicians in order to fleece the public, but for every Jim Fisk, there is a John D. Rockefeller, the brilliant and dedicated businessman who drove the Russians out of the oil market and insured American dominance in an industry that would become perhaps the most important business in the world.

I am not saying that the first Rockefeller was a public-spirited saint who never cut a deal or bribed a politician. Like Columbus and John Smith, he was a man who took risks and helped to create an empire. Were these men the cruel and ruthless exploiters that are portrayed in the new history books? Cruel, no. Ruthless, perhaps. They all played to win and were willing to play by whatever rules were established at the time. If they were hard and ruthless, they were also immensely creative as they opened up continents and markets that have given useful employment and a chance for a decent life to hundreds of millions of people.

Boldness, vision, initiative are qualities that have marked the American character since Columbus first snookered Queen Isabella into supporting his fantastic project. But we should recall that risk-taking is not limited to Americans; at bottom it has been a part of the Western character since the days of the ancient Greeks and



Romans.

I thought of this as I visited the Palazzo Ducale—the Doge's palace—in Genoa. Started in the 16th century, the palazzo was expanded and elaborated in the succeeding centuries—almost as a metaphor for Italy, more and more ornate but less and less powerful, until it was allowed to slip into neglect and virtual ruin. About 100 billion lira—\$80 million—in grants allowed the Genovesi to restore the palazzo in time for the celebration of Columbus this year, and I was given a tour there of a special exhibit entitled “Two Worlds Confront Each Other.”

Our world, the world of the West, was represented by a roomful of elaborate 15th-century costumes, but the rest of the exhibit was devoted to the brilliant culture, the joyous folkways, and the advanced technology of the Native Americans who were butchered by Europeans. As a journalist, I got the full tour for free, plus headphones, brochures, pep talk. I walked into a room filled with what looked like instruments of death and torture—poison-tipped arrows and a rock shaped like a skull being split open. “The implements in this room,” went the narrative in a flawless BBC accent, “all refute the arrogance of European man who thinks that only he has created technology. Notice the exquisite workmanship on the skull-ax in the display case illustrating religious implements. . .” I hurried on to the next room celebrating the deep spiritual qualities of Native Americans who, unlike us, knew how to enjoy life by playing games with balls.

Now, setting aside all the lies and historical distortions, what is this all about? Throughout 1992 we have been subjected to a series of books that question the Europeans' right to be here. From the old SDS'er Kirkpatrick Sale's dishonest book on Columbus to the most recent American Holocaust, the radicals would like us to be ashamed of who we are and what our ancestors did.

The worst crime of which we stand accused is that we imported our religion. Just a stone's throw from the Ducal Palace and the Banco di San Giorgio is the great Duomo of Genoa. We would entirely miss the significance of Columbus if we ignored the powerful religious culture that shaped his personality and the missionary objective of his voyage. He begins his famous journal of the First Voyage with a preamble linking the conquest of Granada with his mission to bring Christianity to the Orient. During the



storm that overtook them on their return, Columbus and his men vowed to make a pilgrimage, if the Lord should in his mercy spare them. Columbus and the Spaniards who followed him were by no means perfect Christians, and time after time they failed in exercising charity toward the Indians they encountered, but second only to their desire for gold was their zeal to convert the natives, and within a century, there were missions all over what we now call Latin America. That is what the intellectuals cannot forgive.

G.K. Chesterton in his book *The Everlasting Man* describes ancient history as a struggle between the relatively benign paganism of the Greeks and Romans, on the one hand, and the human sacrifice practiced by the Carthaginians, and he compares this to the struggle between Catholic Spain and the child-eating Caribs and Aztecs. Is it an accident, I wonder, that the same people who deplore the arrival of European Christianity in the New World are also in favor of killing unborn Americans?

Even if everything the radicals say about Columbus is true—and believe me it is not—what conclusion are we to draw? Fifty years ago Samuel Eliot Morrison, a great sailor and historian who wrote what is still the best book on Columbus, comments on the fate of the Arawak Indians of the Caribbean: “The fate of this gentle and almost defenseless people offers a terrible example to Americans who fancy they will be allowed to live in peace by people overseas who covet what they have.”

The real objects of the attack on Columbus are the culture, the political and economic systems of the United States. If Columbus and Cortez and John Smith and George Washington and Davy Crocket and John D. Rockefeller and Charles A. Lindbergh and Douglas MacArthur were all evil exploiters, then it is necessary to change the entire system that produced them. Fundamentally, the radicals want to change the American character. If the old American heroes were frontiersmen and entrepreneurs, individualists and risk-takers, the new Americans will be soft-hearted team players—somewhat like the Hopi Indians who regard competition as immoral. You can't have a spelling bee, I am told, in a Hopi school, because each child deliberately tries to lose for fear of making others feel bad.

What kind of country will America become, once our children have become thoroughly indoctrinated into hatred of the



West and all it stands for? The world is becoming an increasingly dangerous place, and our economic competitors, whatever political nonsense they might talk about in their parliaments and newspapers, understand that their success depends on a few old-fashioned principles: hard work, aggressive competition, and a commitment to high standards in education.

In their attack on the American character, the radicals are not motivated by love of Native Americans. No, they are motivated solely by hate: hatred of America, hatred of Christianity, hatred of Western civilization. That is why no good whatsoever can come of their efforts. The great discoverers and the great creators are also great lovers. They may destroy those who get in their way, but they discover lands or create business empires out of love and faith, both in their enterprises and in their own people. As the philosopher of enterprise has written in *Wealth and Poverty*, "Love appears blind to outside observers, but lovers know that it is guided by a more exalted vision and opens new realms of knowledge. . . . To the man who dares not love, the entire world seems barren and dull, the future pregnant with doom. It is love and faith that infuse ideas with life and fire."

The Germans, who have cause to view some periods of their history with regret, are not wasting a great deal of time deploring the legacy of Bismarck and Luther. They are too busy taking over world markets. To see what could be our own future, a nation sinking into debt and despair, take a walk along the great port of Genoa. Here and there a few ships are off-loading cargo, but the greatest harbor facilities in Italy are practically deserted. Why? The obvious answer is the union of cargo-handlers whose high wages make the port of Genoa five times more costly than its competitors. There is no competition, because the central government in Rome has granted an exclusive monopoly to the union. The result of this little bit of corruption is that to send goods to Milan, two hours away from Genoa by train, many shippers prefer to unload in the Netherlands and send their goods by train all the way across Europe.

The global nature of the world's economy was brought home to me in a small way when I could not find a decent hotel in Genoa, because all rooms had been taken by an international convention of stamp collectors and dealers. Can there be that many philatelists in the world, enough to take over a city of a million people?



Apparently. As a result, I found myself in a one-star hotel out in Sturla, and from my balcony I could look out at the harbor where Garibaldi launched his expedition of a thousand. Garibaldi's conquest of Naples and Sicily is one of the great heroic exploits of modern Italian history, but today more and more Italians in the North and South will say openly that Garibaldi ruined Italy.

What they mean is this. When the new kingdom of Italy was being established, many of the most thoughtful statesmen believed that a federal system—like Switzerland or the United States—would be the only arrangement that could unify the nation without sacrificing the unique qualities of the different regions. Instead, the statesmen who created the Kingdom of Italy preferred to imitate France and Prussia, and they created a highly centralized state in which all decisions are either made in Rome or referred to Rome. For many years, the system was able to function, to some extent, because of its inefficiencies. Many people didn't pay their taxes and succeeded in ignoring the growing mountain of regulatory red tape.

That is no longer possible today—the IRS sent advisors over to help the Italian government squeeze taxes more efficiently—but taxes are only one source of a politician's income. In the past few months, evidence has accumulated that the two major parties—Christian Democrats and Socialists—are up to their necks in bribery and that in Southern Italy the Democristiani work hand in glove with organized crime, the Mafia, the Camorra, the 'ndrangheta.

The most publicized crisis in Italy is the collapse of the lira. The government, after spending massive amounts of money in an effort to stabilize the currency, went ahead and devalued the lira, forfeiting what little confidence Italian businessmen had in the current regime. If we were to continue our tour of Genoa we would walk by the beautiful Banco di San Giorgio, the creative financial institution that invented credit. But credit, as practiced by the old commercial banks, was a financial instrument based on the trust of both parties in commercial transaction. Governments had little or nothing to do with it, and if a bank issued notes that it could not back or extended too much credit, the bank went out of business.

Today, however, credit and the financial markets are instruments of the Italian government and ambitious politicians, and what is the result? A currency and a financial system that no one trusts—and trust or faith, remember, is the real meaning of the word



credittum. The federalist party of Northern Italy, the Lega Nord, in a deliberately provocative gesture, has coined its own money to show its contempt for the increasingly worthless scrip issued by the government. Conservatives in California might be tempted to follow this example.

The Italian economy is in ruins; none of the major parties inspires confidence even in loyal members; the Mafia is murdering every judge and prosecutor who stand in its way. In the midst of this crisis, the labor unions—pampered and coddled by the government—are once again threatening strikes that will shut down the entire country, just like in the good old days of the 1970's. I got up early to catch a train. When I asked the clerk to call a cab, I heard the most dreaded word in the Italian vocabulary—*sciopero* (strike). Fortunately, I knew a lawyer, a member of the Lega Nord, who was kind enough to drive me to the station.

The only political movement that offers a way out is the Lega Nord, a coalition of localist movements in Northern Italy that preach a doctrine of economic liberty and political decentralization. The Lega has increased its share of the vote in every recent election and is now the dominant party in the rich industrial North. The ruling coalition is terrified. Opinion polls in Monza and Varese, two wealthy cities in Lombardia, give the Lega 65 percent in the next mayoral elections—really unprecedented figures in a country with dozens of parties. A few weeks ago, the central government decreed that the elections in Monza and Varese were being postponed indefinitely.

In October the local elections were held in Mantova—well outside the center of the Lega's strength—and for the first time in years the Socialists openly campaigned with the former Communist Party leader, Achille Occhetto, for the sole purpose of defeating the Lega, but when the votes were counted the Lega Nord polled 34 percent, roughly double what the second-place CD received.

Why should Americans care? Without knowing it, the leaders of the Lega Lombarda and the Lega Nord have rediscovered the ancient principles that Columbus and John Smith brought to the New World, the ideas that inspired the founders of our own United States: individual liberty, free competition, decentralized government, and an appreciation of local and regional diversity. Over the past three years I have spoken with many of the party's



leaders and activists, and most of them sound like Thomas Jefferson. Like Jefferson, they distrust government and put their faith in the creative capacity of individuals and communities.

When the Italians were the greatest people in the world, they lived in fiercely competitive city-states, and when America was in the process of becoming the world's leader, we were a nation of small towns and provincial attitudes. But as the frontier was settled, we lost some of our courage and turned more and more to the national government for help. Like the Italians, we are learning the error of our ways from the skyrocketing national debt, and in the future we shall have to look closer to home for solutions to our problems.

The Europeans are ahead of us in this respect, and while it might sound like a paradox, the world of the future, a world of global markets and international cooperation, will also be a world of revived provincialism and localism. We see the ugly side of this in Yugoslavia—which ought to serve as a warning to the imbeciles who a few short years ago were talking about the end of history. What a nightmare that would be, a world without change or growth or competition. We were not made to live in such a world, as the wars in Yugoslavia and Somalia reveal.

But on the positive side, what I see among the Italians and among many Europeans and Americans is the rediscovery of localism, a realization that we can only make the world a better place if we clean up our own backyards and our own neighborhoods. When the Italians were a great world power, cities like Genoa and Pisa and Florence were sovereign states and the neighborhoods of those cities had more self-government than most American cities today.

The little city in which I live has a population equal to that of Athens and Florence in their great days. The difference is that the Athenians and Florentines passionately loved their cities and were determined to make them the greatest and most beautiful cities on earth. There used to be New Yorkers who bragged of living in Brooklyn—which always got a cheer on television. Both Rockford and New York are plagued by problems: crime and crumbling infrastructures, terrible schools, and declining economies. The solutions to these problems will not come from national or even city governments, nor from committees of industrialists or schoolboards, and certainly not from the so-called experts we bring in under the



delusion that they can help us. If the people of Rockford and Brooklyn ever learn to love their cities and their neighborhoods as much as the people of Genoa and Athens loved theirs, then Brooklyn and Rockford—or Indianapolis and the Bronx—would become as great as Genoa or Athens or Florence.

Columbus followed his star and discovered a new world and a new frontier, but for us there are no new continents to conquer, and the real frontier is right here in New York and in every other city and town of the United States. To accept that challenge would be worthy of Columbus and of the spirit of enterprise that is his legacy to us.