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Schools Growing Harsher In Scrutiny of Columbus

By SAM DILLON

Even at Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, where the choir still sings the Italian national anthem at gatherings, the Great Navigator is under revisionist siege.  

Though Columbus's bust still gazes proudly from a school pedestal, in its classrooms he is a tarnished figure who blundered into the New World and made a hash of its exploration. Compared with that at many schools, though, the treatment is fairly generous.

On the 500th anniversary of his landfall in the New World, students across New York and the nation are learning everything from skepticism to contempt for the explorer's exploits. At a Brooklyn high school last week, a 17-year-old debater pilloried Columbus as a pitiful fraud who cheated his sailors and lied about his discoveries. A Mock Trial

Fourth-grade students at a private school in Greenwich Village rehearsed a play mocking Columbus as a bewildered fool obsessed by gold. In Scarsdale, N.Y., a jury of seventh-grade students voted 4-1 to declare Columbus a villain after a mock trial.

One history book popular this year in some area high schools portrays Columbus as a Renaissance Darth Vader who ushered in five centuries of imperialism by enslaving, raping and butchering the native Caribs who greeted his 1492 voyage.

"With Columbus, revisionism has carried the day," said Gilbert Sewall, director of the American Textbook Council, a New York-based group that reviews educational curricula. "Columbus has undergone what is perhaps the most dramatic reworking of any major historical figure in memory."

The assault on Columbus began in the 1970's, Mr. Sewall said, with new scholarship partly motivated by mounting interest in multicultural thinking. The debate both inside and outside schools has accelerated in the years leading up to the quincentenary; on Friday, a major revisionist Columbus film, "1492: Conquest of Paradise," opened in New York.

Today, all of America's leading high school history texts give the explorer's many failings equal billing with his accomplishments, Mr. Sewall said.
The quincentenary attacks have ignited a reaction from some indignant Columbian loyalists. One of the most vocal is William E. Simon, the former Treasury Secretary, who is scheduled to deliver a speech today at Adelphi University on Long Island. The speech is billed as a counter to the "Columbus bashing in the news today." What is the purpose of Mr. Simon's speech?

"The arrival of this glorious anniversary in the greatest democracy in the history of the world finds Columbus under siege and America divided," Mr. Simon said in an advance text of the speech.

According to the revisionists, Columbus "was a villain, a kind of seagoing Genghis Khan," Mr. Simon said in the speech. But "Columbus was above all a man of deep faith. . . . He changed the fate of the whole world forever. And he changed it for the better." How does Mr. Simon's view differ from others?

Adelphi's president, Peter Diamandopoulos, who invited Mr. Simon to deliver the address, said that Columbus remains "the hero of all heroes," despite his failings.

The loyalists appear to be losing ground, however. Tonya Frichner, an Onandaga Indian lawyer who addressed 750 elementary and high school students on Friday at Aaron Davis Hall in Harlem about Columbus's often brutal treatment of Indians, said she had been encouraged by the acceptance she found for her critical views during months of lecturing. Why would Tonya Frichner be interested in Columbus's brutality?

Textbooks have played an important role in the changing perceptions. Daniel Boorstin's 1986 "History of the United States" -- one of the more traditional of the mass market high school texts, Mr. Sewall said -- refers to Columbus as a "true leader," but also notes that Native Americans suffered after Columbus's landfall. Atrocities Recounted

"For some it meant the end of their Native American civilization," the book says. "For some it meant slavery. For nearly all of them Europeans brought shock, disease and change."

At the other end of the spectrum is "Columbus: His Enterprise -- Exploding the Myth," by Hans Koning, a Dutch-born novelist. The book, which has been assigned to students at several schools in the New York region, calls Columbus's first Atlantic crossing a "drama of the murderer coming ever closer to his victims."

Columbus and his men seized Caribbean women as "sex slaves," sent attack dogs to maul naked Indians, and disemboweled other natives who resisted conquest, the book says. During Columbus's second voyage, the book reports, Columbus rounded up 1,500 Arawak Indians and shipped 500 to Spain, where 300 were sold into slavery. The other 200 died along the way, according to the book, which is published by the Monthly Review Press. Do some of Columbus's exploits surprise you?

The Koning book was assigned to students participating in the Native American Education Program, a federally financed agency that offers supplementary classes to American Indians attending the city's public schools.

Stephanie Betancourt, a Seneca Indian who is a coordinator of the program, said: "For Native Americans, every Columbus Day is like salt in our wounds. These are days of mourning."
The Koning text was also required reading at Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn. Teachers, hoping to force students into developing their critical skills by analyzing a controversial text, urged students to read the book with a skeptical eye. But its lurid passages provided seniors with plenty of ammunition for anti-Columbus barrages during a debate on Friday. **Why does Ms. Betancourt believe the reading of controversial text is important?**

"Columbus the great navigator wanted to go to India, landed near Cuba and mistook it for Japan," jeered Larkham Guttikonda, a 17-year-old senior. Later Stephane Clare, the captain of the school's debate team, assumed Columbus's ticklish defense to the hoots of a rowdy crowd.

"No one is saying that Columbus did not commit atrocities," Miss Clare answered. "It might be frightening, but he was an example of everything that is the American ideal. He was an adventurer, he was an explorer, he was a breaker of new ground." '1992 Moral Judgments' After the debate Miss Clare said, "We shouldn't be putting our 1992 moral judgments on Columbus. He should be taught as a great man who committed atrocities."

At the Middle School in Scarsdale, a retelling of those atrocities tipped the scales against Columbus during a "teach-in" last week. Some students argued that Columbus had shown courage in his explorations, said Len Tallevi, the head of the school's social studies department. But after "students brought out that some Indians were hanged and burned alive," a seventh-grade jury convicted the explorer as a villain, Mr. Tallevi said.

At the privately run Little Red Schoolhouse in Greenwich Village, 9-year-old Carlos Heim played Columbus in a class skit last week written by a parent. "We need gold!" Carlos shouted during a rehearsal. "Find us more gold! I have claimed this land for the profit and glory of Spain!"

Other fourth-grade actors, playing Indians, shouted back at Columbus: "We already had languages, ideas and religions. We did not ask for new ones."

Despite the revisionist wave, Columbus's heroism remains a central theme in some schools, and students like 11-year-old Simone Mazyack, who attends Public School 125 in Harlem and is of Jamaican and Puerto Rican descent, still speak with old-fashioned admiration for the explorer.

"If Columbus hadn't made the sail," she said, "there wouldn't be this many buildings, because the Indians wouldn't have this much technology and it would still be mostly grass." **Is there a logical fallacy in this statement?**

But Simone's sixth-grade teacher, Cathy Connors, urged her class to consider African contributions to the New World by having them read from a book, "They Came Before Columbus," written by a black scholar, Ivan Van Sertima. The book argues that African navigators sailed to the Caribbean before Columbus.

At Christopher Columbus High School, the re-evaluation of its namesake has been fueled by increased ethnic diversity in the student body. The school got its name at its 1939 inaugural, when
Fiorello H. La Guardia was Mayor and the school's Pelham Parkway neighborhood was overwhelmingly Italian and Jewish. Today its 3,604 students are 42 percent Hispanic, 22 percent black, and 10 percent Asian.

Howard Feldman, assistant principal for social studies, said the school's teaching had moved away from a "Eurocentric" view of its namesake, with increased emphasis on the cultures the 15th-century intruders smashed. What does the term Eurocentric mean? Why is it relevant?

Photo: In classrooms throughout the nation, students are now learning skepticism for the exploits of Christopher Columbus. Stephane Clare, the captain of the debate team at Polytechnic Preparatory Country Day School in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, argued for Columbus during a debate at the school on Friday. (Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times) (pg. B7) Chart: "Two Views of 1492" The way Columbus's story used to be told: "At last the rulers of Spain gave Columbus three small ships, and he sailed away to the west across the Atlantic Ocean. His sailors became frightened. They were sure the ships would come to the edge of the world and just fall off into space. The sailors were ready to throw their captain into the ocean and turn around and go back. Then, at least they all saw the land ahead. They saw low green shores with tall palm trees swaying in the wind. Columbus had found the New World. This happened on October 12, 1492. It was a great day for Christopher Columbus -- and for the whole world as well." From 'My Country," by Merlin M. Ames, elementary school textbook published by California State Department of Education elementary, 1947. Recent U.S. history texts broaden the account: "When Columbus stepped ashore on Guanahani Island in October 1492, he planted the Spanish flag in the sand and claimed the land as a possession of Ferdinand and Isabella. He did so despite the obvious fact that the island already belonged to someone else -- the 'Indians' who gathered on the beach to gaze with wonder at the strangers who had suddenly arrived in three great, white-winged canoes. He gave no thought to the rights of the local inhabitants. Nearly every later explorer -- French, English, Dutch and all the others as well as the Spanish -- thoughtlessly dismissed the people they encountered. What we like to think of as the discovery of America was actually the invasion and conquest of America." From 'The Story of America,' by John A. Garraty, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1991. (pg. B7)

It is really hard for you to form an opinion about Christopher Columbus's exploits because you may not have read a lot about him. What are the central arguments for and against Christopher Columbus? If you were forced to debate from one position, how would you prepare for that debate?
Columbus High School (CHS) is a public high school located in Columbus, Georgia, United States. It serves as one of the Muscogee County School District's liberal arts magnet schools. It opened in 1890. In 2018, the school ranked third in the state of Georgia, 105th in the nation, and 21st among magnet schools in the nation by U.S. News & World Report. Columbus High School began in 1890 at a building known as the Female Academy located at 10th Street and 2nd Avenue in downtown Columbus, Georgia. The picture grows even more complicated when you factor in teachers and schools, which often rely on textbooks, materials, and lesson plans inundated with Anglo-American, mono-cultural viewpoints. In Lies My Teacher Told Me, James W. Loewen, a history professor, reviews the common misstatements and misrepresentations in the retelling of American history from the first Thanksgiving and reconstruction to the mythology surrounding Columbus. The story of Columbus through Native eyes can be viewed as difficult but we do have some evidence that shows Columbus behaved in ways that certainly are not worthy of celebrating. Exposing students to this interpretation is crucial. Ryan’s teaching philosophy is bolstered by an unusual education law in his state.