

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Remarks on Signing the Columbus Day Proclamation

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In proclaiming Columbus Day 1988, during his last year in office, President Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) comments on the significance of Columbus and Columbus Day and looks forward to the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to America. What does he mean by suggesting that "Columbus was the inventor of the American dream"? For what does Reagan celebrate immigrants to America? What, for Reagan, makes Columbus Day "an American holiday"? Assuming that the old story he tells at the end is not just a piece of throw-away entertainment but has some connection with the themes of the American dream and the American experiment, what might be its point? Is there something that we Americans must keep doing until we get it right?

I hope that welcome was for Christopher Columbus. Secretary Carlucci, Secretary Verity, and distinguished international guests: We are here today for the signing of the Columbus Day proclamation. It's on this day we revisit the enduring lessons of his courage and leadership. Columbus, of course, has always held a proud place in our history not only for his voyage of exploration but for the spirit that he exemplified. He was a dreamer, a man of vision and courage, a man filled with hope for the future and with the determination to cast off for the unknown and sail into uncharted seas for the joy of finding whatever was there. Put it all together and you might say that Columbus was the inventor of the American dream.

Of course, we recognize others besides Columbus today. For just as Columbus, a son of Italy, inaugurated the age of European exploration in this hemisphere, so too, have millions of Americans of Italian descent contributed to the building of this nation of aspirations on this continent of hope. Over the years, millions have left that country for these shores, often carrying scarcely more than the prayers in their hearts and the determination in their souls. And as they've come, they have brought with them the richness of the heritage of their homeland, and given its richness and strength to our land.

Spain also claims Columbus and his achievements. And millions of Americans of Spanish heritage have also followed in his wake. Like immigrants from all over the world, they have lived the American dream and made it a reality for themselves and their children and the generations that followed.

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Yes, Columbus Day is an American holiday, a day to celebrate not only an intrepid searcher but the dreams and opportunities that brought so many here after him and all that they and all immigrants have given to this land.

In the next few years Columbus' voyage will take on a heightened significance. The year 1992 will mark the 500th anniversary of his sailing. It is called the Quincentenary, and it may take another 500 years before I can say that easily. But it will be a time when Americans from all backgrounds look back on all that that voyage has meant to mankind over the past half millennium. We're already getting ready for the big celebration. Three years ago, I appointed a commission, the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, to recommend ways for the Nation to mark this milestone. The Commission has submitted its report, which I have sent to Congress. Recommendations include educational programs to enhance the knowledge of history, geography, foreign languages, and international affairs among our young people. The Commission will be raising money from the private sector in order to plan and coordinate projects for the anniversary. The members of the Commission are with us today, so let me recognize them and say thank you to all of them for their efforts to make sure that the Quincentenary is a success.

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Now, before I sign the proclamation, with all the celebrations we've been having over the last decade or so—the Revolution, the Constitution, now Columbus' voyage—I can't help being reminded of an old story. That's what happens when you reach my age. You can't ever help being reminded of old stories. And if you've heard me tell this one before, well, you're just going to have to hear me tell it again.

It's about a man who wanted to become an opera singer in the worst sort of way. And he became an actor in Hollywood. And he was an actor only until he could put together enough money to travel to Milan to study. And he studied in Italy for two years and then finally was rewarded with being invited to sing at La Scala, the very spiritual fountainhead of opera. They were doing *Pagliacci*. And he sang the beautiful aria "*Vesti la giubba*."^{*}

^{*} *The tenor aria, "Vesti la giubba" ("Put on the costume"), from the 1892 opera by Ruggero Leoncavallo is sung (at the end of Act One) by the clown Pagliacci, who, despite having just learned of his wife's infidelity, must don his costume and play the clown, because the show must go on. You might wish to consider whether Reagan's choice of this aria has any significance for the theme of the American dream and American hopefulness in the face of tragedy.*

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And when he had finished singing, the applause from the orchestra seats and the galleries was so sustained and so strong that he had to repeat the aria as an encore. And again, the same sustained, loud applause; and again, he sang “*Vesti la giubba*.” And this went on until finally he motioned for quiet. And he tried to tell them what this welcome meant to him on this, his first appearance in opera. But he said, “I’ve sung ‘*Vesti la giubba*’ now nine times. My voice is gone. I cannot do it again.” And a voice from the balcony said, “You’ll do it till you get it right.”

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And now it’s time for signing.