Hugo V. Malley. "Challenge To America"
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CHALLENGE TO AMERICA

There are many writings on Columbus following all the steps of his wonderful career from his father's work-shop to his triumphant discovery and his painful death in a lodging house.

We must look on him as one of the greatest of men when we remember the epoch in which he lived, his wonderful observation of the natural phenomena and sagacity in explaining them, the glorious plans which his genius conceived and his energy carried out.

Great men are, so to speak, the synthesis of the tendencies, the passions, the wants, and the desires, in a word, of the spirit of the times.

Whoever wants to comprehend the great Genoese must study the various complex causes which concurred in the foundation of what is less a man than a power incarnated in a man.

Therefore, any study of his life ought to be preceded by a profound study of the climate of the times which was more favorable than ever before to the natural tendencies of a mind like Columbus.

A life of Columbus would be incomplete which presents him alone in his grandeur with no mention of the times which is the ground on which his greatness is supported and elevated.

Follow the young Columbus through the first part of his bold youth to the time when, a full grown man and a valiant leader, he went forth with the plan which was to double the space of the then known earth.

Try to behold through what dangers and adversities, through what bitter privations and sufferings, was formed and matured that wonderful character of his, so conspicuous for its bold daring, its patience, its firmness, and all the other virtues necessary to carry out the discovery of the New World and to support him in the fierce struggle he had to undergo.

He has been charged with putting his undertaking in endless jeopardy because of the terms that he demanded for his first voyage.

And yet these terms corresponded with the importance of what he was offering Spain - glory over all generations, souls that the Church would save, and profits to the treasury.

For himself, if his undertaking failed, he asked nothing. He not only risked his life in the dangers of the voyage, but he offered to pay a share of the expense of carrying it out. And the sum that he asked was so trifling that any wealthy individual of the time could have put it up without inconvenience.

After his second voyage, he had to return to Spain in 1496 because his treacherous opponents had his dealings with the Indians investigated.

It is ironic that while he had hoped to regenerate them in faith for Christ, his opponents who were portrayed as merciful killed them like dogs. Further complaints continued after his third voyage in 1498 even while he generated them with infinite labor to the knowledge of the Old World.

But his enemies knew no bounds. Columbus ended up in prison after both his third and fourth voyage - brokenhearted, stripped of his honor and dignity.

Even his son Diego had to defend himself from charges brought against him; and while he was never convicted, he never did obtain a redress of the grievances.

If ever a nation was given a historical mission in the world, Spain was. In the 16th century Spain had both hegemony and supremacy - due to the efforts and talents of one man - Columbus.

But even as the century started, the great human virtues of Columbus was replaced by the avarice and greed of a materialistic people bent on plunder.

The end of that glorious Spain did not come in 1599 with the defeat of the Spainish Armada by the English. The end of that glorious Spain really started with the moral decay which set in with the inhuman treatment of Columbus.

And when Spain stripped Columbus of his dignity, his honors, and his rights, she was beginning a decline that every nation is bound to face when human values are suppressed.

Are there any lessons that can be garnered from the life of Columbus?

Not generalities, that would apply to everyone - such as perseverance and persistence, try, try again.

But for you descendants - not too far removed from a great wave of immigration to this country. Surely there must be something that the descendants of Columbus can gleen from his hopes and aspirations, his despair and hopelessness.

Your story is one of cultural assimilation in three generations - from immigrant to foreign-born parentage to American. Each generation has a definite role to play in the assimilative process. You are either first, second, or third generation. HAVE YOU PLAYED YOUR PART?

Let's see.

The first generation came here to explore a new economic world. Unequipped with any particular skills or talents, you worked with your hands. You of this generation - and there are some here - hewed the forests, and tilled the soil of a virgin country. You were the workers and builders. You charted a course to an alien land - you left the Old World to explore a new world. You were the pioneers. Warmhearted, simple, pleasant, and religious, you built well for the next generation.

The Second Generation is the middle group between immigrant and American. You have made the change - cast aside the old fashioned. You have skills and talents. Unlike the first generation, you have had the time and opportunity to become artisans. You have cast off the discipline, customs, and traditions of your immigrant fathers. You have become part of your communities.

The Third Generation, for all practical purposes, is American. Having climbed on the shoulders of the other two generations, you even look down on other foreigners. Your culture is American. Born here, you know little about the country of origin of the first generation. The process of the melting pot becomes complete with your generation.

BUT IS IT?

Did the second generation lay the groundwork for the traditions and ideals of America? Or did the second generation think that it did when it made the change from pizza to hamburgers, from bracciola to steak.

From the first generation to the third generation, the progression should have been PEOPLE, THINGS, IDEAS. Has it been?

Or did the second generation get so preoccupied with material things that it forgot that it was supposed to build another step on the ladder of assimilation for the third? Did this generation think that it was building for an appreciation of human values - the preoccupation of the third generation - when it built that two car garage?

More specifically, did it add a TV room - a den - rather than a library to that new house? Was it pleasure or love of learning. Which?

If this third generation lacks those ideals that distinguish an American from all other people in the world, where did the second generation fail? Did it avoid the pitfalls? And I must say that I am a trifle alarmed -

In a recent survey conducted among high school graduates in a city with many third generation Americans - 58% agreed that police are justified in using the third degree to make a man talk; 22% would prohibit the right of people to assemble peaceably; 15% would deny a criminal the right to have a lawyer; and so on.

While few third generation students favor the abolition of the Bill of Rights, their answers indicate to me that they aren't so willing to put it into practice.

What's the explanation for this trend in totalitarian thinking among third generation American high school students?

Doesn't this sound just a little bit like what Spain did to Columbus? Hadn't Spain become a nation that had lost such human values as the dignity of man, principles of justice, and belief in the individual, when it cast Columbus into jail to die without being convicted or having the opportunity to obtain redress of his grievances?

Need I remind you again that at that point, Spain began her decadence?

Here are some questions that you could ask yourselves - just a little introspection - which relate either to a strong or decadent America.

1. Have I myself been an effective instrument of social policy?
2. Have I helped to inculcate in the minds of my children those ideals which make America strong?
3. Have I helped to build a community, state, and nation devoid of the running sores of social tensions?
4. Do I recognize a sense of mission or destiny for America?
5. Do I fully understand the meaning of peace, justice, freedom and liberty?

When a nation is still growing, it has the sinews for searching for that happiness related and stemming from freedom. It appears that middle class security has set in so that we have stopped searching for something. Happiness has been redefined, not in terms of a quest for ideals, but of a suppression of ideals.

Freedom is never an accomplished fact. It is always a process. The drafters of the Declaration of Independence spoke of the pursuit of happiness. They also knew that the secret of happiness is freedom and the secret of freedom is courage. Happiness is never in the fear of consequences, but rather in the striving for accomplishment.

This is the courage which Columbus had. We in our generation have revised this and believe that the secret of happiness is to be overfed (nothing at all to do with freedom).

But what about freedom and authority? How can freedom and authority really be reconciled? They can't be reconciled. All that we can hope for is a viable accommondation. Some limits there must be. But no formula will ever locate in advance the point at which the claims of freedom are over-borne by the claims of authority.

This is so because, as Justice Holmes said "general propositions do not decide concrete cases."

The only conclusion, I submit, is that no mere set of words can be devised which will tell us in advance where to strike the balance between the contesting claims of authority and freedom. It is futile to look for a ready answer.

Nonetheless, the contest between freedom and authority , even in a democracy, is an unequal contest, with the advantage on the side of authority; for authority has power and power has the drop on freedom. This is why eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.

When authority and freedom collide, the presumption must favor freedom. And the burden of proof rests on him who seeks to hobble freedom of inquiry and expression.

That freedom should have the benefit of every doubt may seem too vague, but the simple truth is that you have to be for the Bill of Rights or not. You can't be for the Bill of Rights for yourself and your friends. It's all or nothing.

The Supreme Court said in 1945 in the case of Cramer v. U. S. -- "He that would make his own secure must guard even his enemy from oppression."

Judge Pound in Gitlow v. People in 1922 said it this way--"The rights of the best of men are secure only as the rights of the vilest and most abhorrent are protected."

A right that is effective only when not needed is scarcely a right at all. The importance of the safety of the nation cannot be underestimated; equally important is the more inclusive safety of a way of life which is based on principle and not expedience.

Freedom has its dangers. There is no doubt about that. Our forefathers took a calculated risk. The risk was worth taking. It's still worth taking. Just as the greatest menace to freedom is an inert people, so the best hope is the will of the people to be free. And this flame of freedom must be kept burning in the souls of the oppressed.

These people have an honorable place in the company of the free. America can't just promise peace or just freedom or just material benefits. But a peaceful world with freedom based on our value system. Peace is not the cessation of hostilities but a product of justice.

The danger is that we think freedom is absence of law rather than the environment of duty. The mistake that the world makes is to think that peace is something directly sought. It is not. Rather peace is indirectly achieved. It is a by-product, like the bloom on a cheek. First you have health, then the glorious bloom. In like manner, first you have justice, then peace.

But to seek peace without justice is only to put rouge on the international cheek and the first good rainstorm of selfishness will wash it away. The selfishness was the beginning of the end for Spain. The unconscious readiness to sacrifice freedom for sentimental justice based on false, material benefits is the complete betrayal of peace. Freedom creates justice, but not the converse.

Maybe other societies are becoming grossly materialistic--some in the free world and some outside. But we must show and give meaning and must declare again about our own exciting human experience. We must convince the world that we are not running through an American cycle of complacency and affluency but are rather incubating ideas. We need to concern ourselves with the current, not the waves. That will tell us whether or not the American dream has died, whether the promise of the New World of Columbus has withered away, whether America is the haven of the poor, whether it is the defender of the oppressed abroad.

We must prove that America isn't finished. The descendants of Columbus in America must help prove that America isn't finished. The New World for these descendants is not one of geography--but of the mind and the heart, of courage and intelligence, of peace and progress.

If you have played your role in the assimilation process, if this developmental process is complete in three generations, and if you have a profound understanding of the basic fabric of American democracy, America will be strong. It will not be finished.

It will be the dream that Columbus had of the New World.

Al Groh of our English Department at Wilkes College puts it

this way:

America lies before us,

A promise, a dream, a song:

Perpetually rediscovered

As we go along.