

November 24, 2021

To: Members of the MDP Class of 2021-2022

Fr: Andy Davies

I found this article very interesting and thought-provoking!

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"It's Time for a History Lesson- One that Doesn't Leave Out Native Americans"



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Milloy**

In a recent lecture commemorating Native American Heritage Month, historian Jim McClellan included lots of fun facts about the Americas' first

peoples.

"Chocolate and vanilla come from the native peoples of Mexico. Popcorn is more American than apple pie," McClellan said. "The Maya invented chewing gum — which they called 'chicle,' meaning 'moving mouth.'"

That might have been a nice place to stop if the lecture was just for kids — or grown-ups who like American history sugarcoated. But this lecture was about the unacknowledged contributions of Native Americans — and why a nod of gratitude this time each year is like telling veterans "Thanks for your service."

Both groups know that well-meaning words are often meaningless.

McClellan, 76, is dean of liberal arts at Northern Virginia Community College. He has been teaching Native American history at the college for 47 years. His lecture, part of NOVA's Joseph Windham Series on Race Relations, was titled "Native America: The Invisible

Foundation of the Modern World." Windham, who died in 2014, was a history professor at the community college and an activist.

McClellan not only revealed some of the pillars of that foundation but explained why

denying Native Americans credit for their contributions was necessary to establish the myth of America's creation.

"It is easier to justify taking native lives and land if Indians could be presented as primitive savages who stood in the way of a superior people," McClellan said. "We are only a few generations beyond a time when the official policy of the United States toward Native Americans was genocidal."

For McClellan, the saga is personal. He is a second cousin of Quanah, the last of the Comanche war chiefs. His grandmother was a Melungeon — a mix of Scots Irish, African and American Indian from southeastern Virginia.

"I was raised to respect Native Americans," he said. "It has always bothered me to hear that Columbus discovered America when there were people here to greet him when he landed on these shores. And even though he was a thief who trafficked in slavery, he was considered a hero."

The lecture was timely, adding to a growing debate about the role of history instruction in public education. African Americans and Native Americans, among other people of color, have been critical of

history courses and textbooks that misrepresent their contributions. Or leave them out altogether.

Slavery and genocide tend to be given short shrift, the horrors soft-pedaled, and so are the generational traumas.

Many people continue to resist any reexamination of the past — unless it is to further burnish the nation's reputation and bolster American exceptionalism. The historical landscape is left free of blemish.

For some, no doubt, the annual televised Charlie Brown Thanksgiving special is preferable to what history wrought. Who needs accuracy?

"History has to be honest; if it's not, it's mythology," McClellan said. "When it comes to American history, we've had enough mythology."

In his lecture, McClellan noted that the influence and impact of native tribes surrounds us but has been overlooked or unacknowledged. Many of the nation's cities are built upon what were once Indian villages. Much of the U.S. highway system is built over the trading trails laid out by Indians to connect their villages. Twenty-four of the 50 states have names of Indian origin.

Then there are the thousands of American cities — Chicago, Tucson, Seattle, Miami, Wichita,



MICHAEL S. WILLIAMSON/THE WASHINGTON POST

Northern Virginia Community College Professor Jim McClellan displays Native American tools this week in his Alexandria office.

Tacoma, Waco, to name a few — with names that derive from native peoples, as well as rivers such as the Potomac and Anacostia.

"We talk of Irish potatoes and Jerusalem artichokes," McClellan said. "We associate tomatoes with Italy, pineapples with Hawaii, vanilla with Madagascar, chocolate with Belgium. But all of these foods were developed by Native Americans long before the Old World invaded the new. In fact, over half of the crops grown on American farms come from plants domesticated and

developed by Native Americans. And yet, we give them little credit."

One of the greatest contributions of American Indians to the world may be in the area of political theory, he said.

He cited the Iroquois League, a federation of six Indian nations founded about 1250, as the model for Benjamin Franklin's concept of federalism. "Franklin's Albany Plan of Union, copying the Iroquois constitution, became the blueprint for the Articles of Confederation and later the federalism embodied in the American Constitution," McClellan said.

Franklin recognized the significance of the contribution — even as he felt compelled to denigrate the contributors. McClellan cited a message in 1750 from Franklin in which he referenced the Iroquois while calling for the 13 colonies to form a federation.

"It would be a very strange thing, if six nations of ignorant savages should be capable of forming such a scheme for such a union . . . and yet that a like union should be impracticable for ten or a dozen English colonies to whom it is more necessary and must be more advantageous," Franklin wrote.

Not very statesmanlike, but definitely the American way.

At this time of the year, we've been taught to acknowledge the contributions of native people to that first Thanksgiving. But much of what we were taught about that first gathering was myth.

"The gathering was not like a celebration where the native people were treated as equals," McClellan said.

Today, some members of the Wampanoags regret that their ancestors showed such hospitality to the new arrivals.

Native Americans have been enslaved, displaced from their

lands and subjected to genocidal slaughter. A people with a 12,000-year history in the Americas, who developed the world's first democracies, have been relegated to the margins of history.

And still, they survive. And this nation thrives, in no small measure because of them.

McClellan noted that in 1799, the council of the League of the Iroquois issued a statement that read in part: "Long before the arrival of European peoples in North America, our peoples met in council to enact the principles of peaceful coexistence among nations and the recognition of the rights of people to a continued and uninterrupted existence. European people left our council fires and journeyed forth into the world to spread principles of justice and democracy which they learned from us and which have had profound effects upon the evolution of the Modern World."

Or as McClellan put it: "No two cultures can collide without both being changed by the encounter. We have all been influenced by Native American culture more than we realize."

Perhaps we can begin to realize that.

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