

# CONFERENCE of PRESIDENTS of Major Italian American Organizations

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Columbus Heritage Coalition  
Italian American One Voice Coalition  
Italian Sons and Daughters of America  
National Italian American Bar Association  
Order Sons & Daughters of Italy in America  
OSDIA-Commission for Social Justice  
Sons of Italy Foundation  
UNICO National  
  
A Chance in Life (Boys' & Girls' Towns of Italy)  
American Delegation of the Sacred Military  
Constantinian Order of Saint George  
American Italian Renaissance Foundation  
American Italian Federation of the Southeast  
Arizona Italian American Chamber of Commerce  
Canicattinese Society  
Casa Italiana Sociocultural Center  
Coalition of Italo American Association  
Coccia Foundation  
Columbus Citizens Foundation  
Cooley's Anemia Foundation, Inc.  
Delaware Commission on Italian Heritage  
and Culture  
Filitalia International & Foundation  
Garibaldi Meucci Museum  
Italian American Alliance  
Italian Academy Foundation  
Italian American Baseball Foundation  
Italian American Club of Nevada  
Italian American Committee on Education  
Italian American Democratic Leadership Council  
Italian American Legal Defense  
Italian American Museum  
Italian American Museum of Los Angeles  
Italian American Political Action Committee  
Italian American War Veterans of the US  
Italian Association (Arizona)  
Italian Cultural Society of Sacramento  
Italian Heritage and Culture Committee of  
the Bronx and Westchester.  
Italian Heritage and Culture Committee  
Italian Language Foundation, Inc.  
Italian Welfare League  
Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans  
Justinian Society of Lawyers  
La Festa Italiana di Lackawanna County  
NEPA  
Lt. Det. Joseph Petrosino Association in American  
National Columbus Education Foundation  
National Council of Columbia Associations  
Nat'l Council for Promotion of Italian Language in  
American Schools, Inc. (NCOPILAS)  
NJ Italian Heritage Commission  
OSDIA- Grand Lodge of Ohio  
The Italian Cultural Foundation at Casa Belvedere  
Tuscan Association of New York, Inc.  
UNICO Foundation

October 10, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

On behalf of the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations (COPOMIAO), we would like to convey the supreme disappointment of our organizations, as well as our own personal disappointment, at the hurtful, disparaging, and insensitive proclamation that you issued on October 8, 2021. In your remarks on Friday, you became the first President to issue a proclamation for Indigenous Peoples' Day on the same day as Columbus Day, and in doing so you have reaffirmed to the entire Italian American community that you do not support us, nor do you value the contributions and sacrifices of our community to this nation's history. These sacrifices and contributions have long been recognized by former Presidents with the celebration of Columbus Day as a federal holiday, and your actions yesterday have marginalized those achievements and alienated our entire community.

By effectively "canceling" Columbus Day, you have shown that you, like so many other Americans, do not truly understand our story, which began with the lynching of eleven Italian immigrants in 1891 by a mob of over five thousand people in New Orleans. Many do not know that this was the largest mass lynching in American history, and that these atrocities toward Italians continued with over forty additional lynchings over the course of thirty years. At the time this took place, the *New York Times*, the most widely read newspaper of the day, applauded the lynchings, and later President Roosevelt stated that the killing of these immigrants was "a rather good thing". This hostility toward Italian immigrants created an atmosphere of aggression and antagonism directed at our community that lasted for decades. It was because of these brutal atrocities that President Harrison proclaimed a national Columbus Day the following year to honor and thank Italians and Italian Americans for their contributions to the United States. You, sir, have undone over a century of good will and effectively stated that our contributions hold no meaning for you personally, or for our great country, despite the fact our First Lady is of Italian American heritage.

1296 Midland Avenue • Yonkers • NY • 10704

[copomiaio.org](http://copomiaio.org)

<https://www.facebook.com/Conference-of-Presidents-of-Major-Italian-American-Organizations-791684017883600/>

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The Italian American community has long been a proponent of an Indigenous Peoples' Day to mark the achievements of Native Americans to our nation. However, we believe these achievements should be acknowledged in addition to, not in lieu of, the achievements of Christopher Columbus, and that Indigenous Peoples' Day should be rightfully honored as its own distinct and separate holiday. The advocates for the removal and diminishing of Columbus Day base their argument on three false narratives that have been incorrectly and unjustly spread by those seeking to besmirch and vilify the great explorer.

The false narrative begins, most strongly, with the issue of slavery. Columbus is wrongly portrayed as the man who introduced slavery to the New World. Nothing could be further from the truth. Columbus never owned a slave, and, in fact, the slave trade had already existed and thrived long before his arrival, with the Native Americans possessing thousands of Indigenous slaves, and continued long after Columbus's death. It is not widely known that the slave trade from Africa did not begin until one hundred years after the death of Columbus, nor is it acknowledged that many Native American tribes owned African slaves. It is also seldom reported that Columbus is the man who pleaded with Queen Isabella to allow for the baptism of the native people to protect them from becoming slaves, because under the laws of the day a baptized person could not be enslaved.

Secondly, those seeking to cancel Columbus state that he was aggressive and brutal toward the native population. The truth is that Columbus was a great friend to the Taino Indians and had a good and mutually respectful relationship with their chief. Columbus and his men protected the Taino people from the ruthless and vicious attacks they had long endured by the neighboring cannibalistic Carib tribe who sought to massacre and enslave them. Columbus adopted a Taino Indian boy as his own son, and to this day, Columbus' achievements and contributions are celebrated by the descendants of the Taino people throughout Puerto Rico.

The third narrative, one which has long since been debunked, is that Columbus was responsible for genocide in the new world. This negative portrayal insinuates that Columbus and his men intended to murder and slaughter all of the native population they encountered. When examined rationally, it is clear that this is a preposterous falsehood. The main motivation of Columbus's journey was not to plunder, but to evangelize the world and bring the Christian faith to all that he encountered. Columbus also sought to develop strategic trade partnerships in these new lands, not to indiscriminately massacre the population. The truth is that it was the inadvertent spread of disease, not the sword, that unfortunately killed vast numbers of the native population. The global COVID pandemic we are facing today is a prime example of how easy it is for a virus to spread over a vast population, and how devastating its effects can be.

Speaking on behalf of over fifty of the largest and most influential Italian American membership organizations, that represent the vast majority of the nearly sixteen million Italian Americans in this country, six percent of the total U.S. population, COPOMIAO strongly condemns your proclamation and acknowledges that you obviously do not wish to establish a meaningful relationship with the Italian American community. Our organization has shown its support for you personally, as well as for the First Lady, who has twice been invited to speak at our National Italian American Summit Meetings and has declined on both occasions. Your abandonment of the Italian American community has been noted by the majority of our members, and your dismissal of Columbus and his achievements signals your blatant disregard for our contributions and our worth as an ethnic minority group.

Every ethnic group in this country has made meaningful contributions to our society and should be recognized for those accomplishments in a productive and mutually respectful way. Just as we have vocally supported the celebration of an Indigenous Peoples' Day, we demand that the achievements and accomplishments of Italian

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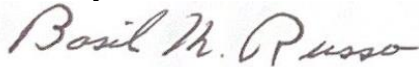
October 10, 2021

Americans continue to be honored and celebrated as they most justly deserve to be. The history of the Italian American community is deeply woven into the very fabric of our nation, and our contributions to the advancement of the national culture is of equal value to every other ethnic group that comprises the United States of America. Columbus Day is the only clearly recognized national acknowledgement of the history and sacrifices of Italian Americans, and by taking that away from us, and promoting another ethnic group in our place, you are alienating our entire community and sowing the seeds of further division rather than being the unifying force that you have declared yourself to be.

It is regretful and disheartening that you believe neither the Italian American community nor the Indigenous Peoples' community deserve their own separate and distinct holidays. You can begin correcting this situation by issuing an apology for your recent hurtful and disrespectful remarks, as well as issuing a new proclamation designating Indigenous Peoples Day on any day other than Columbus Day. Just as we do not wish to diminish the sacrifices and achievements of Native Americans, we ask for the same respect and acknowledgement for our own sacrifices and achievements. There is no reason for you, or any American, to support the minimization and dismissal of our cultural achievements. In order to strengthen the bond amongst the many ethnic groups that comprise our country, something that is so desperately needed at this time, we should be acknowledging and celebrating all of our respective achievements. By favoring and celebrating one ethnic group at the expense of another, your proclamation is counterproductive, disappointing, and divisive.


Only you can correct and repair the damage you have inflicted upon the relationship between the Executive branch of our government and the Italian American community. We respectfully request a meeting with you to discuss our concerns and make a genuine effort to find a mutually agreeable pathway forward that honors our community and preserves our history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Basil M. Russo". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Basil" being the most prominent.

Basil M. Russo, President  
Italian Sons and Daughters of America  
Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations

October 10, 2021



Robert Ferrito  
President  
OSDIA, Commission for Social Justice



Frank N. DeFrank  
UNICO National



Angelo Vivolo  
President  
Columbus Heritage Coalition



Emanuele Alfano  
Chairman  
Italian American One Voice Coalition



Joan Prezioso  
President  
Italian Welfare League



Joseph Sciamè  
President  
Sons of Italy Foundation



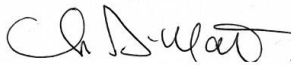
Josephine Maietta  
President  
Association of Italian American



Joseph V. Scelsa  
President  
Italian American Museum



Ron Onesti  
President  
Joint Civic Committee of Italian  
Educators



Chris DiMaggio  
President  
La Festa Italiana



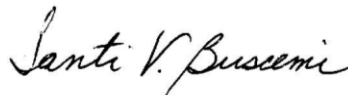
Robert Petrone  
President  
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Filitalia International



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Frank Maselli  
Chairman  
American Italian Renaissance  
Foundation



Santi V. Buscemi  
Vice President  
Italian American Legal and  
Defense Fund