

Canceling Columbus: The Rhetoric of Redemption in *Courage and Conviction*

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*This analysis uses Burkean theory to examine how the documentary film *Courage and Conviction* makes its case against canceling Columbus. First, we argue the film represents a new variation of “amnestic rhetoric”: a type of public memory discourse that normally encourages its audience to forgive and forget. Second, this Catholic documentary closely follows the formula of Kenneth Burke’s guilt-redemption cycle. Third, the film addresses two different audiences simultaneously: the sympathetic but silent Columbus supporter and the so-called “cancel culture crusaders” who might be persuaded that they have been misled about the legacy and intent of the movement to cancel Columbus.*

Keywords: Amnestic rhetoric, Kenneth Burke, guilt-redemption cycle, cancel culture

On Sunday, June 9, 2024, the city of New Haven, Connecticut, dedicated a new memorial in the “heavily Italian neighborhood of Wooster Square.”¹ This dedication should have been one of those commemorative acts that attracted little attention in the local media and even among residents. But this dedication was different. The 1,400-pound bronze memorial honored immigrants at a time when immigration was back on top of the national agenda during yet another contentious presidential election year. Moreover, the immigrant memorial replaced a Columbus statue that had stood watch for over a century in the city that is home not only to Yale University but also to the Knights of Columbus’s national headquarters. A petition started by a single high school student led to the toppling of the monument to the man who may or may not have discovered America.

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¹ “New Haven dedicates immigrant monument where Christopher Columbus statue was removed,” *NBC Connecticut*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.nbcconnecticut.com/news/local/new-haven-immigrant-monument-christopher-columbus-removed/3309844/>.

Reactions to the New Haven incident were predictably mixed and hardly muted.² The same may be said of many similar decisions to remove many similar memorials since the summer of 2020 when George Floyd was murdered by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota.³ Although most of the momentum and success has been on the side of those calling for Columbus to be canceled, Columbus apologists haven't been as silent as the statues they seek to defend. The most forceful defense to date came in the form of a documentary produced by the Knights of Columbus. This documentary appeared on YouTube in the fall of 2020, just months after the first shots were fired in the war on Columbus.

Courage and Conviction: The True Story of Christopher Columbus is a 28-minute documentary that debuted on the Catholic-themed television network EWTN on October 12, 2020. Assuring its viewers that the broadcast was occurring on what was and forever should be Columbus Day—and therefore *not* Indigenous Peoples' Day—was central to the film's agenda. The documentary was co-produced by the Knights of Columbus and the National Columbus Education Foundation, two groups whose hostile attitudes toward the movement to cancel Columbus are expected. Although the film's primary subject is more than five hundred years old, the film doesn't ignore the current political battle over Columbus Day and Columbus statues. Indeed, *Courage and Conviction* pushes back rather aggressively against calls to remove Columbus from calendars and courtyards alike.

This essay relies on Burkean theory to examine the rhetoric with which the film makes its case against canceling Columbus. We arrive at three conclusions. First, regarding content, the film promotes a series of fact, value, and policy arguments. These arguments include the factual argument that many commonly held beliefs about Columbus are provably untrue if one examines the historical record; the value argument that anti-Columbus attitudes are racist because they descend directly from the KKK's anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic rhetoric; and finally, the policy argument that calls on the audience to oppose the movement to cancel Columbus.

Whether the viewer accepts or rejects these arguments, it's surely apparent even to the casual viewer that the film advances these arguments. What may not be apparent, however, is that the nature of these arguments aligns very closely with what has been called *amnestic rhetoric*. Amnestic rhetoric is a type of public memory discourse that typically encourages an audience to forgive and forget, to move on from a controversial and divisive issue, and to leave well enough alone. We argue that *Courage and Conviction* represents a new variation of amnestic rhetoric, one in which a call for personal amnesty is complemented not with a call for, but rather by an accusation of, historical and cultural amnesia.

Second, regarding the film's structure, we find that this Catholic documentary's rhetoric follows the formula of Kenneth Burke's religiously themed guilt-redemption cycle. The film's persuasiveness, we contend, lies as much in its structure as in the case it builds through content (claims and evidence). Our analysis is thus an example of how rhetorical critics use theory to shed light on persuasive texts' content *and* rhetorical forms. Burke's theory of dramatism includes recipes for apologia, or a formal written defense of one's opinion, and other rhetorical forms that are

² Tim Harfmann, "A look at what will replace Wooster Square's Columbus Statue," *WTNH*, March 7, 2024, <https://www.wtnh.com/news/connecticut/new-haven/a-look-at-what-will-replace-wooster-squares-columbus-statue/>; Elizabeth L.T. Moore, "New statue in Wooster Square depicts immigrant experience, replacing controversial Columbus," *New Haven Register*, May 23, 2024, <https://www.nhregister.com/news/article/new-wooster-square-statue-replaces-columbus-19468507.php>.

³ Ross Sandler, "Toppling Christopher Columbus; Public Statues and Monuments," *CityLand*, January 4, 2023, <https://www.citylandnyc.org/toppling-christopher-columbus-public-statues-and-monuments/#:~:text=Political%20pressure%20to%20remove%20Columbus,the%20murder%20of%20George%20Floyd>.

similar to what is now called crisis communication or reputation management in public relations. Burke's guilt-redemption cycle begins by challenging a social structure's power dynamic, proceeds with an examination of possible guilt, and concludes with an argument of mortification (confession) and/or accusation (scapegoating). When it succeeds, this rhetoric of redemption results in symbolic purification. By accident or design, *Courage and Conviction* follows Burke's pattern precisely.

Third, the film appears to be aimed not only at the sympathetic but silent Columbus supporter who could speak on Columbus's behalf but also at the so-called "cancel culture crusaders" who might be persuaded to believe that they have been misled about the historical legacy and ideological intent of the original movement to cancel Columbus. Therefore, the film simultaneously addressed two very different audiences through its complicated rhetorical work, and it did so amid a raging culture war.

Culture Wars

In the fall of 2020, *Courage and Conviction* was broadcast on a small religious cable channel. The film also appeared on the Knights of Columbus's YouTube channel, which boasts just over seventy-five thousand subscribers. To date, the documentary has been viewed online over ninety-six thousand times on this channel alone. The film was released during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when vaccines weren't yet available. Concerned citizens were staying home, and online activity, including viewership of streaming services, was at an all-time high.⁴ Dominating global news and the American psyche was the historic 2020 US Presidential Election, in which former Vice President Joe Biden defeated incumbent President Donald Trump (who never conceded the election and maintains that it was stolen).

The film clearly responded to the so-called culture wars that escalated during Trump's first presidency. These wars included recurring Black Lives Matter protests that followed numerous police shootings of unarmed African American men, including and especially George Floyd, who had been killed by Derek Chauvin just five months earlier. Arguably even more relevant was the ongoing battle over calls to remove, or at least recontextualize, the many Confederate statues and monuments across the southern United States. Nearly two hundred such structures were removed in 2020, and countless others suddenly seemed to be standing in quicksand.⁵

Both divisive issues overlapped with the media frenzy surrounding critical race theories, which seek to rewrite early American history and change what students are taught about American slavery's origins and legacy. The 1619 Project was a particularly controversial curriculum that was promoted in a series of essays published in *The New York Times Magazine* in August 2019.⁶ The film also resonated throughout cancel culture, which gained considerable steam after the #MeToo movement succeeded in the shunning and, in some high-profile cases, the arrest of rich, powerful, and famous men such as Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Matt Lauer, and Kevin Spacey. Together,

⁴ Lillian Rizzo and Drew FitzGerald, "Forget the Streaming Wars—Pandemic-Stricken 2020 Lifted Netflix and Others," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/forget-the-streaming-wars-pandemic-stricken-2020-lifted-netflix-and-others-11609338780>.

⁵ Rachel Treisman, "Nearly 100 Confederate Monuments Removed in 2020, Report Says; More Than 700 Remain," *NPR.org*, February 23, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/23/970610428/nearly-100-confederate-monuments-removed-in-2020-report-says-more-than-700-remain>.

⁶ Hannah-Jones, Nikole, "Our Democracy's Founding Ideals Were False When They Were Written," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.

these provocative issues created a perfect storm that further divided an already polarized American society.

In a press release, the Knights of Columbus touted the historical accuracy and cultural significance of the nonfiction Columbus biopic that would be released amid this storm: “Weaving in expert interviews and archival footage, the film . . . examines questions about the legacy of Christopher Columbus and what gave rise to modern-day feelings of antipathy towards the explorer.”⁷ The Italian Sons and Daughters of America’s blog more forcefully articulated the film’s agenda: “the film addresses the current indictments against Christopher Columbus with boldness and exposes the motive of revisionist historians.”⁸ The documentary was directed by David Naglieri, an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker known for creating Catholic content. Naglieri has collaborated numerous times with the Knights of Columbus. Not shy about engaging with controversial content in his work, Naglieri has addressed child sex abuse in the Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII’s relationship with the Nazis during World War II. Naglieri’s films almost always position him as a Christian apologist defending the faith, even when he is willing to criticize those who claim to be among the faithful. The filmmaker described *Courage and Conviction*’s rhetoric in this way:

I think our film is two-pronged. On one hand, yes it does make a strong and robust defense [of Columbus]. However, that defense is anchored in facts that can be backed up with concrete evidence. The film is also an invitation for those who embrace the attacks on Christopher Columbus, and also for those sitting on the fence, to reconsider their position.⁹

Indeed, *Courage and Conviction* presents a multitiered argument aimed at rallying the faithful, converting nonbelievers, and motivating the undecided by preaching the Gospel of Columbus. As the following close reading demonstrates, the film faithfully follows the formula for Burke’s guilt-redemption cycle, thereby offering its audience a powerful personal incentive to reject the new status quo and accept its claims about Columbus and the movement to cancel him.

Burke’s Guilt-Redemption Cycle

Kenneth Burke made significant contributions to the field of rhetoric. Although he claimed to be an avowed agnostic, he often borrowed religious terminology.¹⁰ Burke used the language of faith throughout *The Rhetoric of Religion* and in concepts such as “consubstantiality,” “pieties,” and “God terms” to unpack the language of both the sacred and the secular. Burke is best known for introducing dramatism as a theory and the pentad as a methodological tool for analyzing rhetorical situations as if they were a stage drama. Dramatism, Burke explained in *A Grammar of Motives*, “invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the

⁷ Knights of Columbus, “New Documentary Seeks to Tell True Story of Columbus,” *PRNewswire.com*, October 11, 2020, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-documentary-seeks-to-tell-true-story-of-columbus-301149874.html>.

⁸ “Courage and Conviction: The True Story of Christopher Columbus,” October 19, 2020, Italian Sons and Daughters of America. <https://orderisda.org/culture/news/know-columbus/>.

⁹ David Naglieri (filmmaker) in discussion with the author, June 10, 2021.

¹⁰ Wayne C. Booth, “Kenneth Burke’s Religious Rhetoric: ‘God-Terms’ and the Ontological Proof,” *Rhetorical Intervention and Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, eds. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000): 25-39.

analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action.”¹¹ In *The Elements of Dramatism*, David Blakesley clarified that “Dramatism analyzes language and thought as modes of action rather than as means of conveying information.”¹²

Although identification, consubstantiality, and the pentad are central concepts in Burkean dramatism, our analysis is interested in another major element: the guilt-redemption cycle. Although “guilt” is not inherently a religious term, Burke drew on religious rhetoric when he first summarized the cycle: “Order Leads to Guilt (for who can keep commandments!), Guilt needs Redemption (for who would not be cleansed!), Redemption needs Redeemer (which is to say, a Victim!).”¹³ In “Guilt, Purification, and Redemption,” Rise Jane Samra later clarified Burke’s cycle: “Guilt, purification and redemption: these three elements are the culmination of Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic process.”¹⁴

According to Burke’s logic, language creates hierarchies that may wield rhetorical power. Questioning or rejecting the existing social order can call forth accusations of unacceptable transgressions. In such rhetorical situations, the accused may publicly purge themselves of “guilt” (for Burke, this term could represent an array of negative concepts including shame, anger, fear, unease, anxiety, embarrassment, and disgust) through expressions of “victimage.” Expressions of victimage include either a confession of wrongdoing (mortification) or accusing someone else of wrongdoing (scapegoating).

Rhetorical redemption may be seen as an early form of reputation management that assumes the form of a public plea for forgiveness or vindication and is based on either a confession or an accusation, depending on whether rejecting the existing social order was justified. *Courage and Conviction* engages in both forms of rhetorical redemption: acknowledging that some of Columbus’s actions may not be entirely defensible when judged by today’s standards (mortification) while rather aggressively accusing villains who are misjudging the past to unjustly condemn Columbus (scapegoating). Not only are accusations of wrongdoing by Columbus denied (disorder), but his critics are also accused of creating their own form of disorder by unfairly attacking him five hundred years after his death. The guilt associated with this disorder may be purged by viewers in the following ways.

Courage and Conviction offers each of its audiences a path to redemption. Columbus proponents who may be experiencing the pain or frustration of being told their hero is a villain (disorder) can purge this “guilt,” restore order, and redeem themselves (and Columbus) by defending who he was and what they value. Columbus opponents are invited to experience the guilt of disorder, which they may exorcise by recognizing that they’ve been misled and by rejecting those who have misled them. The film is thus a tale that casts Columbus as hero, victim, and, in very limited ways, as a minor but reluctant villain. Its viewers are similarly cast: sympathetic viewers have the opportunity to be heroic, while the unsympathetic can reject the real villains.

The subsequent analysis divides the film into ten sections. We find that each of the first nine sections follows Burke’s cycle: we are introduced to a wrong, told who is to blame, and offered a means by which the wrong may be set right (forgiving Columbus for minor infractions or rejecting his accusers for major transgressions). Doing so restores order and redeems the film’s subject and its viewers. Indeed, each new challenge to Columbus’s legacy is presented as a threat

¹¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): xxii.

¹² David Blakesley, *The Elements of Dramatism* (New York: Pearson, 2001).

¹³ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970): 4-5.

¹⁴ Rise Jane Samra, “Guilt, Purification, and Redemption,” *The American Communication Journal* 1, no. 3 (1998).

to both him and to us. The guilty parties are identified, and a redemptive path is laid bare. Rhetorical redemption can lead to symbolic purification if both of the film's major audiences choose to be on the right side of history, morality, spirituality, and textuality.

Section I: Canceling Columbus

The film opens with an on-screen quotation that's as subtle as a shot across the proverbial bow: "My preference is to accentuate all the positive aspects of the great mosaic of America and stop nitpicking over wrongs that were committed by cultures hundreds of years ago." These words hang on the screen without attribution for a full ten seconds before the following appears beneath them: "You don't stop hate and division by fostering animosity and disharmony." Both lines are eventually attributed to Phil Foglia, "Italian-American Civic Leader."¹⁵

These opening words function as a literal thesis statement, a symbolic call to arms, and an undeniable declaration of (a culture) war on those nitpickers who would accentuate the negative and foster animosity and disharmony. There's no confusion whatsoever about the social order that's being challenged and rejected (step one of the guilt-redemption cycle). The following twenty-eight minutes, it seems, are to be as much about the viewers' courage and conviction as Columbus's.

Quoting Phil Foglia—and not, say, Christopher Columbus—in the opening frame is an interesting choice. Foglia died of COVID complications in April 2020—just six months before the film's release. Foglia was an attorney-turned-activist known for pushing back against Italian American stereotypes during his years fighting organized crime in the 1980s as an Assistant United States Attorney under Rudy Giuliani in the Southern District of New York.¹⁶ Foglia later enlisted in the culture wars by advocating to erect and defend public memorials honoring notable Italian American immigrants in his hometown of New York City. After the 2017 white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Foglia led the effort to protect the iconic statue that gives Columbus Circle its name.¹⁷ He later achieved a major political victory when New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo overruled frequent foe and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio by approving Foglia's proposal for a statue in honor of Frances Xavier "Mother" Cabrini, which will one day stand in Battery Park.¹⁸ Foglia's unexpected death early in the pandemic was a blow to New York's Italian American community, and framing the fight to uncancel Columbus as a means of honoring Foglia was no doubt an intentional and highly emotional call to arms.

The film's opening sequence is a fairly well-executed montage of digitized and photoshopped images of Columbus, Columbus-era public figures, sailing ships, letters, documents, maps, and the like. The brief montage's rhetorical point, it seems, is to invest the film with as much historical credibility as possible. Narration—supplied by Foglia's childhood friend, actor Chazz Palminteri—is layered over this opening sequence. Palminteri states:

¹⁵ Naglieri, David, director, *Courage and Conviction: The True Story of Christopher Columbus*, Knights of Columbus, 2020, 28 min, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCakeGr5Z-VqLJFoJ6vCh-DQ>.

¹⁶ Jason Cohen, "'He Was a Champion of Italian Americans': COVID-19 Claims Bronx Legend, Phil Foglia," *Bronx Times*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.bxtimes.com/he-was-a-champion-of-italian-americans-covid-19-claims-bronx-legend-phil-foglia/>.

¹⁷ Cohen, "'He Was a Champion of Italian Americans.'"

¹⁸ Kevin Clarke, "Only in New York, a Fight Over a Statue of Mother Cabrini," *America Magazine*, October 16, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/10/16/only-new-york-fight-over-statue-mother-cabrini>.

Since the dawn of human history, humanity has desired to explore what lay beyond the far horizon. But wonder is often shackled by fear. For Christopher Columbus, faith and conviction inspired a voyage that will forever change our world.¹⁹

In retrospect, “Faith and Conviction” might have been a more apt title for the film because Columbus’s Catholicism is presented as the source from which his character emerged and the foundation upon which his good deeds were built.

The film proceeds to blame the new Columbus narrative for this animosity and disharmony, and challenges viewers to consider that what they think they know about Columbus might be a lie. Palminteri’s voice-over is replaced with a medley of excerpts from interviews with those who appear later in the film as talking heads, amateur historians, and Columbus apologists. None is identified yet by name, so this opening chorus on Columbus’s character and career stands on its own for the viewer to accept or reject. These interviewees serve as the voices of guilt and Burke’s “victimage.” In this case, accusations of unfair damage done to Columbus and to all who support him and his beliefs function as victimage. For example, the viewer is told by one interviewee, “You can no more ignore his contributions to our country than you can those of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.”²⁰ Then, another interviewee—the only woman to appear in this sequence—fires the first (scapegoating) shot in this little skirmish within the much larger culture war:

There are strong Marxist and anarchist elements that want to take down Columbus not really because they care about Native Americans but because they care about tearing down symbols of Western civilization.²¹

This opening sequence concludes with one last interviewee, whom many Catholics watching the film on EWTN would have recognized as Carl A. Anderson. At the time of the film’s release, Anderson was still the Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus. Anderson elaborates on the anti-revisionist argument suggested by Foglia’s opening quotation and offers a preview of the mild mortification to come:

Columbus was a fearless navigator, perhaps the best who ever lived. First and foremost, he was the discoverer of America. Certainly, mistakes were made under his watch as Governor, but now a radical one-sided narrative says that Columbus represents all that is evil in the American experience.²²

The film’s title finally appears on screen, two and a half minutes into this 28-minute film, and the film’s real rhetorical work begins. If one focuses on content, each section of the film uniquely examines a new and different aspect of Columbus’s life and legacy. But when one focuses on form and structure, the identical and invisible pattern of each section is revealed. Within each of its first nine sections, the film repeatedly rotates through Burke’s guilt-redemption cycle. Redemption is within reach for both Columbus and the audience, but only if each side of the audience finds the courage and conviction to respond to the film’s call.

¹⁹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁰ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²¹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²² Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

Section II: Italian American Persecution

The film's second section opens with footage of protestors tearing down a Columbus statue and then dumping it into Inner Harbor in Baltimore, Maryland. The next element of the new social order that must be rejected has been identified: social justice protests. Lengthy narration from Palminteri plays over footage of the still-standing statue at Columbus Circle in New York City to illustrate the film's first history lesson:

Before it became a subject of protest and controversy, Christopher Columbus and his epic voyage in 1492 was seen as the first chapter in the birth of the United States. The term 'Columbia' becomes the national personification of the thirteen colonies. 'Hail Columbia' is composed for George Washington's Inauguration and remains the unofficial national anthem for more than a century.²³

What follows is a story of Italian American persecution that strongly implies that their suffering was similar to the suffering experienced by African slaves.

After noting that Italian immigrants replaced slave labor on southern plantations, the film testifies how "dark-complected" Italian Americans faced ongoing discrimination because "they were treated as people of color" and "called sub-humans because of the color of their skin."²⁴ A lengthy tale about falsely accused Italian Americans who were later executed by a mob for the killing of a white police commissioner in New Orleans is offered as proof of the price paid to earn dignity and respect in their new land: "Local newspapers freely blamed *dagos* for the murder."²⁵ Horrified by the attack, we are told, President Benjamin Harrison called for a national observance of Columbus Day to promote peace and tolerance. Those who now oppose Columbus are thus positioned rhetorically as the "mob" opposed to peace and tolerance. The national apotheosis of Columbus, therefore, was meant to promote national unity and to quell the very kind of violent protestors that are now pulling down Columbus statues.

This section concludes with a shift in focus from Italian American persecution to Native American inclusion. Palminteri narrates that Columbus Day was intentionally created to include Native Americans, who—by such logic—have no need for an Indigenous Peoples' Day. We are reassured:

President Harrison is not just seeking to appease the Italian community in calling for a celebration of Columbus Day. It is also to be a national holiday for Native Americans. The 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, where US soldiers brutally killed nearly two hundred Sioux men, women, and children, is still a fresh wound on the national psyche.²⁶

Section III: Unmasking the Klan

In the film's third section, Palminteri asks:

²³ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁴ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁵ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁶ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

How did Christopher Columbus go from an American hero to a brutal conqueror and genocidal maniac? The first thing to realize is that these attacks are nothing new. In fact, it is white supremacists who historically spearheaded attacks on Columbus.²⁷

Here we are provided old black-and-white photographs of the KKK first marching in front of the US Capitol carrying American flags and then standing on the steps of the building holding a gigantic American flag. For viewers who watch the film after January 6, 2021, it's impossible not to compare these photos to the Capitol insurrection. Finally, we see an old car in close-up on which these words have been painted: "Let's Keep America For Americans!"²⁸ This photo evokes the America First movement's most recent incarnation.

Former Supreme Knight Carl Anderson explains that starting in the 1920s, the KKK opposed a Columbus holiday and his statues because "The Klan was anti-immigrant, anti-Hispanic, anti-Italian, and anti-Catholic."²⁹ The KKK even used cross burning as one means by which to make their displeasure with Columbus known. The pieces have now been placed on the chessboard. On one side are immigrants, African Americans, Hispanics, and Catholics. On the other side are the KKK of old and modern social justice warriors. The film thus does the impossible: connecting social justice warriors on the left and the MAGA movement on the right not only to one another, but also to and through the KKK.

Section IV: Canceling Communism

Left-wing Communist intellectuals are the film's next target. Palminteri tells the audience:

The attacks on Columbus's legacy gain new steam in 1980 when historian Howard Zinn publishes *A People's History of the United States*. The book sells more than two million copies and spawns a cottage industry.³⁰

Here the viewer is introduced to Dr. Mary Grabar, identified as the author of *Debunking Howard Zinn*. Zinn is a Communist with a 500-page FBI file, Grabar assures the audience. Zinn's goal in writing the book, we are told, was "to inspire students and readers to overthrow this country."³¹ Black-and-white photographs of a young Zinn are presented as apparent "evidence" of his longstanding political activities.

The rhetorical baton is then passed to Jennifer C. Braceras, who is now identified as a "political columnist."³² Viewers will recognize Braceras as the talking head from the film's opening minutes who warned of the "Marxist and anarchist elements" in our society who wish to take down Columbus and all of Western culture with him. Braceras accuses Zinn of plagiarizing a book by another author who is never identified but is instead dismissed as a socialist playwright and "not a historian."³³ Braceras appears to be referring to Hans Koning's 1976 book *Columbus: His Enterprise: Exploding the Myth*:

²⁷ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁸ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

²⁹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁰ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³¹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³² Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³³ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

Howard Zinn took passages from Columbus's diary, but he left out where he talks with affection about these native people, where he wants to bring them to the faith. He's doing this out of love. Those are all eliminated. And so, you get these distorted passages taken out of context.³⁴

Palminteri concludes this section by asserting that Zinn's book "has helped transform how multiple generations of American students view their country."³⁵

Section V: Spreading the Gospel

Palminteri resumes his narrating responsibilities and begins to retell the story of Columbus: "The search for the real Columbus begins in fifteenth-century Genoa...."³⁶ In 1492, after several years of lobbying, Columbus's wish to find a new western route to Asia was granted by Ferdinand and Isabella. True, he was seeking a new trade route, but "what he was also after was evangelizing, of preaching the Gospel to all nations, as Jesus says in Matthew."³⁷ Indeed, evangelization appears to have been the primary reason for Columbus's voyage. This is the first major revision to what's supposed to be a well-known story, but it will not be the last.

Subsequent interviews are stitched together to connect Columbus's piety to his pacifism. One interviewee notes, "During Columbus's first voyage, he treated the natives that he encountered with kindness, and the natives reciprocated. There was no violence on either side."³⁸ Another talking head reads a passage from one of Columbus's journals:

I believe that in the world there are no better people or a better land. They love their neighbors as themselves. They have the sweetest speech in the world. They are gentle and always laughing.³⁹

The West is thus described as a new Garden of Eden into which an original sin hasn't (yet) been introduced.

When the Santa Maria crashed on the rocks, "friendly natives" helped the crew.⁴⁰ We are told that Columbus developed a deep friendship with the Chief Guacanagarix. When he returned to Spain, Columbus left behind dozens of his men to live peacefully among the natives. Columbus also took six willing natives back to Spain, where they were treated like royal guests. In fact, all six were baptized, we are assured, and baptized people couldn't be enslaved. The obvious rhetorical point is that Columbus was spreading Christianity among willing natives, not colonizing—and certainly not killing—a peaceful indigenous population.

Everything had changed, we learn, upon Columbus's return to the West. All of the men he had left behind had been killed. Although the crew that accompanied Columbus on this voyage wanted to seek revenge on Chief Guacanagarix and his people, Columbus insisted on diplomacy. Columbus's men had attacked the neighboring tribe, Guacanagarix assured the explorer—and the film assures the audience—and thus Columbus's men were responsible for their fate. Such was Columbus's relationship with the tribal leader that Columbus chose to believe Guacanagarix and didn't avenge his crew.

³⁴ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁵ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁶ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁷ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁸ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

³⁹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁰ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

Section VI: Canceling Cannibalism

Although Columbus and his crew peacefully coexisted with Guacanagarix and his tribe, all was not peaceful in this new world. The enemies of the Taino, the peaceful indigenous inhabitants of Hispaniola, are presented as a violent people who murdered and practiced cannibalism. In fact, we're told that the words "Caribbean" and "cannibal" come from the name of this godless tribe: the Caribs.⁴¹

A succession of talking heads testifies that violence, torture, warfare, genocide, cannibalism and, yes, even slavery existed all over the world until only recently. Columbus brought none of these horrors to the New World, because they were already present in this world. Even the peaceful Native Americans, who are now celebrated by those who would take Columbus's holiday away from him, practiced slavery. If this is mortification, it's the most mild manifestation imaginable.

Then, Dr. Robert Royal explains:

The Caribs, who were cannibals, were at war with the Tainos, the more peaceful people that [Columbus] first encountered. And he gets drawn into this conflict. And so he does things that, you know—repressing certain tribes that are warring with one another, but because he doesn't know what else to do.⁴²

Palminteri adds, "Because the Caribs are captured in war and guilty of cannibalism, they are eligible for enslavement under the laws of Columbus's time."⁴³ That slavery was common across the globe and existed in the New World before Columbus's arrival, Royal concludes, is "the one thing that I think most revisionist historians don't recognize."⁴⁴

The section concludes with the revelation that Columbus, after returning to Spain, joined the Franciscans and "wore the robes" until his death.⁴⁵ Such was his commitment to Christianity—which is defined by the film as antithetical to slavery—that, after exploring the globe, he embarked on an even greater spiritual journey. Importantly, the film's focus (and ours) in this section has shifted from act to agent, examining and evaluating not what Columbus may or may not have done but rather who he was. This subtle refocusing of the critical lens is an important part of the film's rhetoric of redemption.

Section VII: The Black Legend

Palminteri opens this section with a sweeping and unsupported statement: "Most of the settlers who join Columbus on his third voyage are greedy men bent on making quick profits."⁴⁶ This statement sets the stage for Columbus to fail as spectacularly as a governor as he succeeded as an explorer. Oddly, this failure is good for Columbus, at least reputationally. That Columbus made mistakes as the ruler of his newly established colony is perhaps the only concession that the film

⁴¹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴² Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴³ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁴ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁵ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁶ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

makes about the man and his legacy. However, this concession is designed to clear him of any malice. There was no intentional wrongdoing, just an inexperienced leader (on land) making excusable mistakes while trying his best to do good work in the world.

What follows is a hasty dismissal of Columbus's removal—in shackles—from the colony that he had settled after he executed seven “Spanish rebels” by hanging.⁴⁷ Precisely how this little-known episode came to pass isn’t explained. What is instead emphasized is Columbus’s “acquittal of all wrongdoing” and his subsequent fourth and final return to the West.⁴⁸ One might expect that Columbus’s death in 1506 would be the culmination of the film. However, his death introduces Palminteri’s indictment of Columbus’s successors:

In the years to follow, Columbus’s successors on Hispaniola will carry out great abuses against the natives. Many of these crimes have been erroneously charged to Columbus.⁴⁹

Rival colonial powers and, later, revisionist historians spread this anti-Columbus propaganda, which is known today as the “Black Legend.”⁵⁰ Robert Royal reappears to explain:

The Black Legend is a kind of a myth that French and British and Dutch explorers set up that the Spaniards were uniquely evil in the way that they repressed Indians. And the irony is that within ten years of Columbus’s first arrival in the New World, Spain absolutely forbade slavery.⁵¹

Section VIII: The Columbian Exchange

In this section, Robert Royal speaks yet again, this time to declare:

If we’re gonna blame Columbus for everything that went wrong, maybe we ought to also give him some credit for the many, many good things that have happened, the great explosion of prosperity, the very unification of the world that has happened since the fifteenth century.⁵²

Accusations of disorder are thus offset with proof of order—order as a kind of defense against the alleged evils Columbus is said to have committed. Frantic images of a bustling city are replaced with footage of farms and food. The obvious shift from city to country masks another more subtle shift from the sacred to the secular. Near the conclusion of such an overtly religious film, it’s curious to be told that the true measure of Columbus’s work is evidenced by the introduction and availability of peppers, peanuts, tomatoes, corn, potatoes, coffee, and sugar in the West. The “unification of the world” is defined neither by peace nor the absence of prejudice, and certainly not by the spread of Christianity. Rather, this unification is accomplished by the distribution of goods and commodities.

⁴⁷ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁸ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁴⁹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁵⁰ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁵¹ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁵² Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

Section IX: Columbus Uncanceled

In the film's penultimate section, Carl Anderson articulates the most carefully nuanced rhetorical act of apology in the whole film:

Columbus did not discover a perfect world, nor did he build one. But he opened up the possibility for those who came after him to create a better one. That is the promise and the responsibility of America, a nation that we must not allow to be defined by the mistakes of its past but instead be defined by its continued progress in the pursuit of freedom and justice for all.⁵³

As Anderson speaks, painted images of Columbus are replaced with video of modern memorials for MLK, Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and finally, Columbus himself. Interestingly, it's not the statue at Columbus Circle that's featured in this section but rather the one in Syracuse—the one at greater risk of removal because it features Columbus standing above the faces of four Native Americans, those whom he tried to give the gift of freedom in this life and the next.

Section X: Rhetorical Redemption

This section is the only part of the film that doesn't follow the guilt-redemption cycle, presumably because the case for redemption has already been made. The viewer is again offered animated images of maps, ships, and other icons of Columbus's era while Palminteri begins the closing argument in the film's case to uncancel Columbus. Over old black-and-white footage of immigrants coming to America, and then over more recent color footage of the immigrants' apparent descendants celebrating their heritage and their hero, Palminteri states:

Columbus's bold journey planted the seeds of the great American experiment. It opened the doors for more than five hundred years of immigration, allowing hundreds of millions to discover the American dream. Each immigrant's story is one of courage and determination, but new immigrants have always recognized that Columbus went first.... His daring spirit and his Christian faith changed the course of history and made America what it is today. That is why we celebrate Columbus Day, and that is why statues in his honor will continue to stand tall.⁵⁴

Amnesty and Amnesia

In addition to revealing the film's repetition of the structure of Burke's guilt-redemption cycle, we identify the film as a form of public memory discourse that typically discourages, of all things, remembering. Bradford Vivian, in his study of the loss of public memory, observes, "Forgetting is acutely meaningful in both scholarly and public circles as the ontological opposite of memory, a hindrance to mature understanding and full experience of a nourishing past."⁵⁵ The loss of collective memory, by accident or design, "is itself integral to the work of public memory."⁵⁶ Indeed,

⁵³ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁵⁴ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

⁵⁵ Bradford Vivian, Bradford, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010): 5.

⁵⁶ Stephen H. Browne, "Reading, Rhetoric and the Texture of Public Memory," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 2 (1995): 242.

many have echoed the sentiment that public memory “is shared by people . . . bound together as much by forgetting as remembering . . .”⁵⁷

One unique form of discourse that’s antithetical to public memory has been labeled “amnestic rhetoric.” Amnestic rhetoric is defined as “rhetoric that seeks to discourage public debate and to diminish public memory.”⁵⁸ “Amnestic” is the adjetival form of both amnesty and amnesia. As such, amnestic rhetoric invites the audience to forgive and forget. Asking one’s audience to move beyond a sticking point is the aim of such persuasion. This type of persuasion typically involves a call to inaction, to focus elsewhere, and to leave well enough alone.

President Clinton’s controversial 1993 speech at the Vietnam Wall on his first Memorial Day as commander in chief is one example. Other scholarship in rhetoric has cited the concept, including an analysis of the 2004 attack ad on Senator and presidential candidate John Kerry by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth.⁵⁹ However, no scholarship seems to have attempted to further develop the concept until now. Clinton’s discourse functioned as a call for amnesty *and* amnesia: a plea for his audience to excuse his protests against the Vietnam War and to accept him as commander in chief. *Courage and Conviction* functions differently and therefore represents a new possibility for this public memory rhetoric: amnesty *without* amnesia.

The documentary calls on its audience to spare Columbus and to redeem itself, but neither to forget the explorer nor the times in which he lived. The film’s unseen narrator and many of its talking head interviewees urge the audience to actively reexamine the past and to keep the memory of Columbus alive. Forgetting, or amnesia, is among the accusations aimed at Columbus’s critics who need to remember that Columbus lived in a very different time that shouldn’t be judged by contemporary standards. In this way, the film seeks to exonerate Columbus (amnesty) not by encouraging the audience to forget (amnesia) but rather by accusing his detractors of having already forgotten. These detractors have forgotten that slavery, cannibalism, and other horrors were, as Robert Royal states in the film, commonplace in Columbus’s time, including among the native people inaccurately remembered today as only the victims of such barbaric practices.

Carl Anderson engages in this novel form of amnestic rhetoric more than any other participant in the film. The former Grand Knight calls for amnesty for Columbus by challenging the amnesia required to replace the moral and ethical standards of the past with those of the present:

We should have an honest review of the work and legacy of Christopher Columbus. And we should have something more. Every community, state, and province should undertake a review of its own treatment of the native peoples, both past and present. That review will find no trace of Columbus. He was not there when the Puritans of Connecticut destroyed the Pequot Nation, nor was he along the Trail of Tears fought by the Cherokee or at the massacres of Sand Creek or Wounded Knee. None of this was the influence of Christopher Columbus. He never even set foot on the mainland of North America. Native people have a right to an honest recounting of their history. Scapegoating one man for what has happened over centuries does not bring us closer to understanding, reconciliation, or even justice. In fact, it does just the opposite.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ John R. Gillis, *Commemoration: The Politics of National Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.

⁵⁸ Brian J. Snee, “Clinton and Vietnam: A Case for Amnestic Rhetoric,” *Communication Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2001): 189

⁵⁹ G. Mitchell Reyes, “The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, the Politics of Realism, and the Manipulation of Vietnam Remembrance in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (2006).

⁶⁰ Naglieri, *Courage and Conviction*.

Here Anderson articulates most clearly this new form of amnestic discourse by urging the audience to avoid judging what Columbus did back then according to the standards of how we would want him to behave now. It's a call for personal amnesty justified by an accusation and broad condemnation of historical and cultural amnesia.

Conclusion

If it's not altogether surprising that a Columbus-friendly film would rally the faithful, the film's aggressive attempt to engage the viewer who sympathizes with the cancel Columbus movement is indeed unexpected. Remarkably and rather boldly, *Courage and Conviction* seeks to create a "safe space" in which hostile viewers are offered cultural cover to convert on Columbus without sacrificing their commitment to racial justice. Converting to the cause of uncanceling Columbus is presented as a means of redoubling one's commitment to real racial justice. In fact, both religious freedom (for the right) and racial justice (for the left) are presented as the antitheses of the movement to (literally and figuratively) take down Columbus.

Courage and Conviction defends Columbus and attacks many of his detractors. The film's rhetoric, we suggest, represents a new form of amnestic rhetoric that calls for the persecuted to be exonerated not by urging the audience to move on from an alleged wrongdoing but rather by accusing the audience of having forgotten that time moved on, standards have inevitably changed, and judging the past according to the politics of the present is illogical and unjust.

Finally, we find that the film's form mirrors Kenneth Burke's guilt-redemption cycle. Each of the film's first nine sections follows Burke's cycle: challenging Columbus's newly contested place in American culture, attacking his attackers, defending his defenders, and offering viewers a path to redemption wherein they may purge their "guilt" by standing up for Columbus and standing against those seeking to tear him down.

By combining rhetorics of amnesty and amnesia within its act of apologia, *Courage and Conviction* demonstrates the complexity and persuasive potential of public memory texts that purport to correct the historical record by recasting its characters and rearranging its audiences' sympathies toward these characters, their defenders, and their detractors.