



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

April 30, 2021

Mr. John Stankey
Chief Executive Officer
Warner Media, Inc.

Mr. Kenneth Jautz
Executive Vice President
CNN / US

Dear Messrs. Stankey and Jautz,

On April 23, 2021, in remarks given before the Young America Foundation, CNN senior commentator Rick Santorum denied the history of Native Americans on this continent and effaced their contributions to “American culture.” This speech betrayed his deep ignorance of both the historical and present-day realities of the Indigenous cultures of this nation. By extension, Mr. Santorum did not just deny the contributions of our Indigenous cultures, but those of all non-European Americans. We call upon CNN to allow Mr. Santorum time on its network to apologize for his remarks, to correct the erroneous statement he made, and to share with your audience what concrete steps he will be taking to become better educated about his country.

The SAA is an international organization that, since its founding in 1934, has been dedicated to research about and interpretation and protection of the archaeological heritage of the Americas. With nearly 7,000 members, SAA represents professional and avocational archaeologists, archaeology students in colleges and universities, and archaeologists working at Tribal agencies, museums, government agencies, and in the private sector.

Mr. Santorum’s speech included the following: “We [European settlers] came here and created a blank slate. We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes we have Native Americans but candidly there isn't much Native American culture in American culture. It was born of the people who came here pursuing religious liberty to practice their faith, to live as they ought to live, and have the freedom to do so.”

Every word in that statement concerning Native Americans is incorrect and spreads a false narrative about the history of the land area that became the United States. Far from encountering a “blank slate” when they arrived in the Western Hemisphere, the European explorers and settlers of the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries very quickly came into contact with many hundreds of


different Indigenous societies, each with its own history, cultural lifeways, and spiritual traditions. Direct assistance from Native Americans enabled more than one of the early European settlements, such as Jamestown, to survive. Further, it was Native Americans who introduced the Europeans to many of the resources, such as tobacco and corn that would become the economic engines of the colonies and later, the United States. As others have noted, the enormous influence of the myriad Native American cultures upon every aspect of the larger culture of America, both past and present, cannot be overstated. In everyday terms, witness place names of Native American origin: states such as Massachusetts, Delaware and North and South Dakota; towns such as Oshkosh, Malibu, and Spokane; and geographic places such as the Illinois, Mississippi, and Missouri rivers and Denali National Park. And do not forget, it was Sakakawea that guided Lewis and Clark from the Upper Missouri to the Pacific; without her, the expedition probably would have failed and our nation would not look like it does today.

In terms of contributions to democracy, we point to the Haudenosaunee, or the Iroquois Confederacy. The Haudenosaunee influence goes back some 500 years before the coming of Europeans and is the oldest living participatory democracy on earth. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin suggested that the 13 colonies form a “voluntary Union” similar to that of the Iroquois Confederacy. In 1988, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution that recognized the influence of the Confederacy on our form of government: "The confederation of the original 13 colonies into one republic was influenced by the political system developed by the Iroquois Confederacy, as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the constitution itself.”

We believe that CNN, along with other prestigious journalistic outlets, has an obligation to ensure that its reporters, presenters, commentators, and personalities base their opinions on facts. In this instance, Mr. Santorum perpetuated a mythology about our shared history that obliterates the contributions to our culture and our democracy from a diverse range of sources. For CNN to let this fraud go unchallenged is to further call into question the journalistic standards of the media, and risk exacerbating the anger and divisiveness that the nation is presently experiencing.

We strongly urge CNN to allow time for Mr. Santorum to openly and publicly apologize on the air as soon as possible. A meaningful apology must include a correction of erroneous statement, and outline specific actions he will take in order to be better informed about the history of the United States.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Deborah Nichols".

Deborah Nichols, Ph.D., RPA
President