

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

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WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

COMMENTARY

St. Patrick's Day events honor us all with red, white and blue

By Edward T. O'Donnell

Anyone who viewed Worcester's St. Patrick's parade on Sunday surely noticed the greater than usual number of American flags flying alongside the Irish tricolor.

Indeed, all across America this week, as more than 100 parades step off to mark St. Patrick's Day, the most evident colors may very well be red, white and blue, not green.

The reason is that from Boston to San Francisco this year's parades are being dedicated to the heroes and victims of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11.

Many will see this as an appropriate gesture, because March 17 falls so close to the six-month mark of Sept. 11, and also because there's always been a strong connection between municipal fire and police departments and Irish America.

But there's an additional, more profound reason why this linkage between Sept. 11 and March 17 makes sense. That's because beneath the annual scenes of Hibernian pride and pageantry on St. Patrick's Day, there lies a larger and deeper message of American inclusion and tolerance.

This message is evident in the parade's origin and evolution. Although the first recorded St. Patrick's Day marches took place in Colonial New York City, it was in the mid-19th century that the parade as we know it took form.

This coincided with both the massive influx of Irish immigrants to the United States because of the Great Famine in Ireland in the 1840s and the sharp rise in anti-Irish bigotry by those convinced the Irish would never make good Americans.

As a result, these early St. Patrick's Day parades expressed both the pride of the Irish in their heritage and their demand for acceptance as full and equal citizens.

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As I See It

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Simply put, the original ethnic celebration in America and its dual message of pride and inclusion has spawned thousands of ethnic parades.

This year in New York City, the birthplace of the St. Patrick's Day parade, more than 40 such events will occur, from Cinco de Mayo in the spring to Columbus Day in the fall. The largest will take place not on March 17, but on Sept. 2 — the annual West Indian Day Parade and Carnival.

Critics and pessimists among us have argued that this proliferation of ethnic parades, in contrast to the decline in tradi-

tional parades for Veterans Day and Labor Day, indicates a fragmentation of American society.

Yet we only need look at the catastrophic results of ethnic, racial and religious hatred around the world in places such as Afghanistan, Kosovo, Rwanda, Israel and Northern Ireland to appreciate the unprecedented degree to which Americans have found ways to weave ever more disparate groups into their national fabric.

Surely we have a long way to go in pursuing this ideal, especially when it comes to race relations, but it's important to recognize how far we've come.

So when this weekend's St. Patrick's Day parades pay tribute to those directly affected by the events of Sept. 11 with honor guards of New York City police officers and firefighters, special moments of silence and copious displays of red, white and blue, they will be more than mere gestures of solidarity.

Rather, they will highlight the central place the ethos of tolerance and inclusion has come to occupy in America's remarkable and ongoing, if imperfect, experiment in multicultural democracy.

It's hard to imagine a better way to both honor the victims and heroes of Sept. 11 and to reject the message of hatred and division delivered so violently by the terrorists that day.

Edward T. O'Donnell, of Holden, is associate professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross and author of "1001 Things Everyone Should Know About Irish American History."

Endorsements

Because of the high volume of letters to the editor in support of political candidates, election letters are limited to a maximum of 100 words. To ensure publication, letters must be received by the Telegram & Gazette at least 10 business days before the election.