

Should We Celebrate Columbus Day?

Just about every middle school and high school history class in America has taught us all the same basic things: Columbus discovered America in 1492, Jamestown, the first English settlement, was founded in 1607, the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4th, 1776, and the Civil War was fought from 1861-1865. Everyone can agree that these are all indisputable, unequivocal facts. Or are they? The truth is, most of history, whether we know it or not, has been sugar-coated and cleansed as to make us look less guilty of the crimes that have been committed. Arguably one of the biggest lies in history is that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Because of this widespread belief, he is celebrated as a hero and even has acquired a federal holiday that is celebrated in his name. In reality, a massive group of people had been living in harmony for over 14,000 years before Columbus docked in the Caribbean (Bragdon 12). In fact, Columbus was responsible for over three million deaths from 1494-1508 (McCormack 19). So, why is our education system feeding us false truths, and why do we as a nation celebrate someone who was solely responsible not only for the beginning of the slave trade, but also the almost complete annihilation of an innocent group of people?

According to history books, Christopher Columbus, born October 31st, 1451 in the Republic of Genoa, Italy, was an explorer and navigator who, in his lifetime, completed four voyages across the Atlantic Ocean with the intentions of finding a new trade route to the far east. He instead 'discovered' the Americas. His voyages were the first European expeditions to Central America, South America, and the Caribbean which were sponsored by the Catholic King and Queen of the Spanish Empire (History.com Editors). Upon reaching an island in the Bahamas, he visited the islands now known as Cuba and Hispaniola and established a colony in what is now Haiti. During this first trip to what Columbus thought was the far east, he kept a

very detailed journal from August 3, 1492 to November 6, 1492. In his journal he describes everything including the native people that he encountered, saying that they were willing to trade everything that they owned, and that they do not know about modern weapons. He also stated that “they would make fine servants... with fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want” (Halsall and Frodham University 1996).

Columbus Day was invented by the Knights of Columbus in the 1930s when they were looking for a role model for school age children. As a result, in 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Columbus Day into law as a way to celebrate the hero who changed the world (Bragdon 12). The first talk of an Indigenous Peoples’ Day began in the 1970s, although Native Americans have been disturbed by this holiday since its conception (Flanagin 14). In fact, most Natives believe that Columbus Day is a celebration of racism and discrimination and have been trying to educate the public about why we should instead be celebrating the victims. In 1977, indigenous leaders organized a United Nations conference in Geneva to promote sovereignty and independence. Their recommendation was to observe this ‘day of discovery’ instead as an “International Day of Solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples’ of the Americas” (Lowery 2019).

The first issue with Columbus Day is that, yes Natives were living there for thousands of years, but also the fact that Columbus was not the first explorer to discover this part of the world. Leif Ericson, who also has his own holiday, was a Viking who founded a Norse village on Newfoundland 500 years before the Santa Maria, Pinta, and Nina ever touched South America. There is now even DNA evidence that Polynesia natives sailed across the Pacific in canoes and settled there before the Vikings. When Columbus did finally reach the Americas, he found that the land was inhabited by three different nations of natives; the Lucayans, Tainos, and Arawaks. In his journal, he talks about the day that the Santa Maria was shipwrecked and how the Arawaks

labored for hours trying to save the cargo and crew. In that same journal entry, he explains how he was so impressed with these natives that he immediately seized their land in the name of Spain and enslaved all of them. They were forced to work in his gold mines where they worked until they died of exhaustion. One of the more brutal entries in Columbus' journal depicts the punishments his men would enforce. If an 'Indian' did not meet their gold dust quota by the deadlines, their hands would be cut off and strung around their necks. These conditions were so unbearable for these kindhearted, benevolent people that over 100 of them ended up committing mass suicide (Halsall and Frodham University 1996).

Another horrifying piece of evidence against Christopher Columbus is again an entry in his journal. He says, "A hundred castellanoes are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from 9 to 10 are now in demand" (Bragdon 12). As the father of the slave trade, Columbus was never shy about his involvement or being vocal about the money that came with it. He tells of how he supervised the selling of young Native girls, saying that girls around the age of 9 or 10 were of the most value to him and his Catholic men. Now, how could anyone of the Catholic faith be involved in the slave trade as it is strictly prohibited to take another Christian and enslave them? Well, Columbus decided that he could bypass this law by refusing to baptize the native people of Hispaniola (Halsall and Frodham University).

Today, the Native American's main objection to Columbus Day is because of the acts of genocide Columbus committed against the natives he encountered. Yes, Columbus did consciously rape and kill thousands of innocent natives, but the Europeans also unintentionally started a form of biological warfare. While trading plants, blankets, and animal skins with the natives, new diseases were also passed along. The natives had never been exposed to these germs

before and the effects were eventually devastating to the population (History.com Editors 2019).

“There were 60,000 people living on this island, including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508, over 3,000,000 people had perished from war, slavery, and the mines” (McCormack 19).

So, given all of the damning evidence against Columbus, it is no wonder Native Americans today have been upset. It does not make sense why we as a nation would continue to celebrate this ‘hero.’ The first official Indigenous Peoples’ Day was celebrated in Berkeley, California in 1992. The idea came after the First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indian Resistance in Quito, Ecuador which led to another conference among Northern California Native American groups (Flanagin 14). Today, many cities with high native populations celebrate Indigenous Peoples’ Day or Native American Day, and even some states like Alaska, Hawaii, Minnesota, and Nevada have officially adopted similar holidays.

On the other hand, Columbus is seen as a very important icon to the Italian American community. This is mostly due to the fact that they share the same heritage. Some immigrants even go as far as to compare their journey to America to Columbus’ first expedition. “Columbus Day for me recalls my childhood with my dad and his family, from the region of Campania, Italy, who struggle so that we might all achieve that American Dream” (Allen 2017). Allen continues to say that the American Dream would not be possible without Columbus’ bravery and courage, “Celebrating Columbus Day was, and continues to be, a way of saying ‘We are proud to be Americans, and equally proud of our Italian heritage and ancestry.’”

According to some historians, Columbus’ approach to the natives that he encountered was impeccable and exemplary. He was delighted by their friendliness and willingness to trade everything they had. He gave firm orders to his men not to abuse or mistreat the natives in any way and disciplined anyone who disobeyed, and he only disliked tribes he met later because they

practiced cannibalism (Allen 2017). Some do not even shy away from the fact that the natives and the Vikings were the first to set foot in the Americas, but agree that neither groups would have “ushered in the vast economic and social revolution that Columbus did... Furthermore, [the natives] would never have been able to develop a technologically advanced society independent of the west” (Marie 2018). In response to the belief that Columbus committed genocide, Marie thinks this claim outlandish because the death toll that was brought upon the natives was unintentional.

Another point to bring up is that we should not judge Columbus based on our standards today, but look back at what the world was like in 1492. Jeanne Allen claims that slavery had already been an established concept in the Americas and contrary to popular belief, the Spanish King and Queen prohibited the enslavement of the indigenous people that Columbus might encounter, and even granted them the same rights of citizenship the people of Spain enjoyed. Most importantly, the goal of these explorations was the “desire to evangelize those they encountered elsewhere in the world to Christianity” (Allen 2017). Some supporters even believe that Columbus Day’s “central principle has allowed it to change from within, to recognize its past failures and to liberate those whom it used to repress” (Olsen 2019). Olsen continues on with saying that if you only focus on Columbus’ imperfect past, you basically reject the ideals that we have as a society today and that it is possible to celebrate Columbus Day in a way that recognizes its faults all while asserting its virtues.

In my opinion, if it has not been crystal clear already, I do not understand why we even started celebrating Columbus in the first place. There are plenty of role models for children to look up to who have not committed acts of rape and genocide. Like I said before, history is almost always written to make us look like we did nothing wrong, and that all acts of war and

murder were justified. To say that slavery was already established in the Americas before Columbus even got here is wildly insane. The natives who lived here did not even know how to use the weapons that the Europeans brought over, they did not have jails, or crimes, or a justice system. They did not need it. So, why would they have come up with and have been practicing enslavement?

This debate also hits close to home for me because I am currently taking a Native American Studies class this semester, and we have been learning all about the heartbreaking history that has been hidden for so long. As we celebrated Columbus Day this month, there was a conference at Northern on October 14th in Jamrich about what it means to natives to have an Indigenous Peoples' Day, and the guests' answers were almost painful. The speakers did not understand how people could turn their backs on actual historic events such as these, and not want to celebrate Indigenous People. For me, celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day worldwide would be almost like an apology to every native person for what the Europeans did, and also taking responsibility for those actions, unlike what we are doing now, which is in some cases completely ignoring this. Also, this subject was brought up to Northern Michigan University, and the board's first comment on celebrating Indigenous Peoples' Day was that the holiday would be "too exclusionary." So, why are we still celebrating Columbus Day after all of the evidence against him? I'll answer my question with a question; how do we convince the unconvinced that the history they believe in is a lie?

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