

PRO/CON: Should we celebrate Christopher Columbus?

By Silvio Laccetti, McClatchy Tribune, and Los Angeles Times Editorial Board, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.06.17

Word Count **1,046**

Level **1130L**



A statue of Christopher Columbus stands in Providence, Rhode Island. Photo by: Kenneth C. Zirkel/Wikimedia Commons

PRO: Columbus was a man of his time, his achievements are worth celebrating

Monuments honoring Christopher Columbus are being defaced and destroyed. This year's Columbus Day celebrations will spark strong debate over the explorer's legacy, but by looking at Columbus in the big picture of history, one can see today's anti-Columbian fury is either misguided or part of a blind political agenda to demonize early European activity in the New World.

First, let's consider the matter of European disease transmission, principally smallpox, which is estimated to have killed 70 to 80 percent of Native Americans. While those numbers are staggering, the deaths happened over many decades. Holding Columbus responsible is beyond preposterous. Further, calculating an actual number of deaths is impossible because estimates of pre-Columbus populations vary enormously. In Hispaniola, for example, the range runs from 250,000 to 3 million.

It's also worth remembering all other epidemics. The Black Death, originating in Central Asia, killed 40 percent or more of the European people — some 50 million souls — between 1346 and 1353. This is a negative consequence of the interaction and advancement of civilizations.

Diseases Aren't One Way

In the case of Columbus and later Spanish settlement in the Americas, let's remember, the exchange of disease worked both ways. Most historians believe the Great Pox epidemic that killed 5 million in Renaissance Europe came from the New World.

Next, consider the civilizations of the New World. They cannot be romanticized because they have left behind great monuments. The earliest societies, such as the Mayans, were as brutal in exploiting subject peoples as any other civilizations.

Tourists love to visit the magnificent pyramids of Teotihuacan and the Mayan sites close to resorts. So beautiful! So inspiring! So conveniently located! Not so beautiful if you consider the human sacrifice that regularly occurred there.

The later Aztec and Incan civilizations were no more humane. War, slavery and human sacrifice were common and pre-dated 1492.

How could Francisco Pizarro conquer the great Inca Empire with fewer than 200 men? How did Hernando Cortes overwhelm the powerful Aztecs? Answer: They found willing allies in subjugated, enslaved or rebellious native populations.

European civilization has evolved, but 20th century wars, atrocities, genocide and terrorism show humanity is still prone to the same savage impulses as Assyrians and Aztecs.

Remember The Period In Which He Lived

Columbus was a product of his time. He was also a great explorer, an intrepid adventurer, a man of fervent faith and a defiant leader who blazed a path to the modern world. His admirable traits allowed him to rise above his human imperfections.

He holds a special place in the minds of Italian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. These groups celebrate Columbus Day with parades and statues.

Christopher Columbus also enjoys iconic status in the wider American mind. Parks, playgrounds, streets, squares and schools pay tribute to him. Columbus was much admired by our founders. The District of Columbia carries his name.

No question, we must examine the accomplishments of Columbus. Doing so in the proper context shows there's no justification in destroying, defacing or removing his monuments — or in minimizing his legacy.

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CON: We must recognize that progress for some led to injustice for others

The Los Angeles City Council in California has joined many other cities in replacing Columbus Day with an official holiday called Indigenous Peoples Day. The new holiday is meant to recognize the contributions, as well as the suffering, of the people who originally lived in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans.

Of course, giving workers a day off does not make up for centuries of discrimination, enslavement and government-sanctioned killing of Native Americans, nor does wiping Columbus Day off the calendar.

Without question, the nation must do a far better job recognizing the violent history against the country's indigenous people. California's leaders in the 1850s made no secret of their desire to exterminate the area's native people. Legislators funded anti-Indian militias, and natives were massacred. Villages were destroyed and tribes forcibly relocated.

Indigenous Peoples Day Could Be The Answer

Will a holiday help Californians learn about this shameful period and encourage the process of reconciliation? Possibly.

California's leaders could consider an official public apology. Or they could debate whether to compensate tribes that lost sacred sites or return land that holds special value. The city could provide greater protection for sacred sites threatened by building projects. It could offer official support for local tribes, many of which still seek federal recognition. The true stories of native peoples, beyond the simplistic portrayal of the first Thanksgiving meal, must become part of our national story. Schools should be required to teach the history, even the parts we'd like to forget.

Proponents say it's not enough to designate an Indigenous Peoples Day. The government also has to remove Columbus Day from the calendar because Columbus was a cruel slave trader whose arrival in the "New World" set in motion the mass killing of native peoples.

Scrap Columbus Day?

Columbus represents the violent colonization of the Americas, they say, so in this war of symbolism Columbus Day must die so Indigenous Peoples Day can live.

The debate over Columbus Day reflects confusion about how the history of racism and oppression in the U.S. fits into a proud national identity. The U.S. has taken in millions of needy immigrants — but also grew through colonization that devastated native people. Columbus Day wasn't created to celebrate colonial domination but was designated a federal holiday in 1934 after a campaign by Italian-Americans and Catholics, who were then targets of ethnic and religious discrimination.

Erasing history is not the answer. The better approach is to confront it honestly and comprehensively.

Whether the holiday is called Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day or Explorers Day or History Day, is it not possible to honor ambition and exploration while also acknowledging the damage of colonial powers? Isn't there a way to celebrate a nation rising on a promise of liberty and equality, while also recognizing that progress for some led to displacement, injustice and death for others? There should be.

The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board represents the opinions of the publisher and staff of the newspaper.

Quiz

- 1 In the PRO article, how are native peoples compared to Europeans?
 - (A) Native peoples' ideas evolved while Europeans' did not change.
 - (B) Native peoples were peaceful while Europeans were violent.
 - (C) Both had powerful rulers who mistreated their people.
 - (D) Both were violent civilizations that spread disease.

- 2 According to the CON article, which option BEST describes most people's approach to the debate over Columbus Day?
 - (A) thoroughly open-minded
 - (B) admirably persistent
 - (C) misinformed and biased
 - (D) angry and confrontational

- 3 The author of the PRO article suggests that Columbus was a man worth admiring.
Which paragraph in the section "Remember The Period In Which He Lived" shows that the author acknowledges a limitation of this claim?

- 4 Which aspect of the CON author's argument is MOST important in the article as a whole?
 - (A) descriptions of the violence against Native Americans
 - (B) explanations of the purpose of Indigenous Peoples Day
 - (C) suggestions about what leaders could do to support tribes
 - (D) emphasis on the idea that all sides of history must be recognized