

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 **859**

Level **980L**



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, history shows he is 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. However, looking at Columbus in the big picture of history, one can see today's anti-Columbus sentiment is misguided.

First, let's consider the spread of European disease, principally smallpox. Smallpox is estimated to have killed 70 to 80 percent of Native Americans. Though these numbers are staggering, the deaths happened over many decades. Holding Columbus responsible is not logical. Further, calculating an actual number of deaths is impossible. Estimates of pre-Columbus populations vary widely. In Hispaniola, the island that now makes up the countries of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, for example, the estimates run 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 population. Roughly 50 million people died between 1346 and 1353. This is a negative result of the interaction of any civilizations.

Let's also remember the exchange of disease worked both ways. Most historians believe the Great Pox that killed 5 million in Renaissance Europe came from the Americas.

Mayans Were Barbaric People

Next, consider the early civilizations of the Americas. They have left behind beautiful monuments. However, the earliest societies, like the Mayans, were as brutal in exploiting subject peoples as any civilization elsewhere.

Tourists love to visit the magnificent pyramids of Teotihuacan and 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.

War, slavery and human sacrifice pre-dated the 1492 arrival of Columbus.

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

Columbus was a product of his time. He was also a great explorer, a fearless adventurer, a man of faith and a leader who blazed a path to the modern world.

Italian And Hispanic Descendants Celebrated Him

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

Parks, playgrounds, streets, squares and schools throughout the U.S. bear Columbus' name.

No question, we must examine the accomplishments of Columbus. Doing so in the proper context shows there's no reason to destroy, deface or remove his monuments — or minimize his legacy.

Silvio Laccetti is a retired professor of social sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey.

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. A holiday called Indigenous Peoples Day will instead recognize the contributions, and suffering, of Native Americans.

Of course, giving workers a day off does not make up for centuries of discrimination, enslavement and government-approved killing of Native Americans., nor would 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 destroy the area's native people. Legislators funded anti-Indian armed forces. Natives were massacred. Villages were destroyed and tribes forcibly relocated.

Special Holiday Could Appease Opponents

Would a holiday help Californians learn about this shameful period? Would it encourage reconciliation? Possibly.

Leaders could consider an official public apology. Or they could consider compensating tribes that lost sacred sites or returning land of special value. Los Angeles, in particular, could provide greater protection for sacred sites. It could offer official support for local tribes. Many tribes 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.

Supporters of Indigenous Peoples Day say the government also must remove Columbus Day from the calendar. Columbus was a cruel slave trader who brought about the mass killing of native peoples.

Columbus Day Appeased Special Interests

But why must this be a choice? 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 populations. Columbus Day wasn't created to celebrate colonial domination. It was designated a federal holiday in 1934 after a campaign by Italian-Americans and Catholics. They were targets of ethnic and religious discrimination at the time.

Erasing history is not the answer. The better approach is confronting it honestly.

Whether the holiday is called Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day or Explorers Day or History Day, 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.