

Why We Should Abolish Columbus Day

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We live in a great country. Even those among us who would most like to see change occur are seldom willing to give up the personal freedoms ensured by our constitution and the principles on which it is based. And, generally, we like to celebrate the holidays that remind us of these principles and freedoms. We like our fireworks and our cookouts on the Fourth of July, and we like our turkey and football at Thanksgiving. There is one American holiday, however, which should not be included in that list: the one that celebrates discovery of America by Columbus.

We should cease to celebrate Columbus Day, first because it is ludicrous to say a place already inhabited can be "discovered"; second because Columbus failed to add anything new to the pool of European knowledge; and finally because the celebration of Columbus sends a message of hostility to the very peoples who have paid most dearly to establish the great nation of which we are a part.

Why do I use the word "ludicrous"? Consider what it was that Columbus allegedly discovered: a vast set of lands. Estimates of the pre-Columbian population of these lands vary widely, but numbers proposed in recent years by authorities on New World demographics such as Henry Dobyns suggest some 145 million people lived in the hemisphere in 1492, with some 18 million of those north of Mexico. These estimates are cited by David Stannard in his book *American Holocaust* as well as by others. Stannard goes on to show that this 145 million figure is roughly equal to the estimated 1492 populations of Europe, Russia, and Africa put together. Clearly, the lands visited by Columbus could not be said to be empty by any stretch of the imagination.

But if they were not empty, could these lands be "discovered"? The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "discover" as "To be the first to find, learn of, or observe." How can anyone discover a place which tens of millions already know about? To assert that this can be done is to say that those inhabitants are not human. And in fact this is exactly the attitude many Europeans and early Euroamerican displayed toward indigenous Americans. We know, of course, that this is not true, but to perpetuate the idea of a Columbian discovery is to continue to assign a non-human status to those 145 million people and their descendants.

Okay, you may say, so Columbus did not discover America in that sense, but he still contributed important knowledge to the Europe of the time. After all, he was the first non-American to find the New World, and he proved the earth was round. Actually, neither of these statements is true.

Jeffrey Burton Russell, a professor emeritus at University of California-Santa Barbara and an authority on the intellectual history of medieval Europe, has shown in his book *Inventing the Flat Earth* that educated Europeans of Columbus' time did not believe the earth was flat. The few who did believe so, the ones routinely cited by modern historians to support the medieval flat earth idea, were the exceptions rather than the rule, ridiculed by their peers.

Russell further states that "Columbus's speculations about sailing west to [reach the East]... [were] part of a broad front of opinions already advancing in that direction." There is another school which argues Columbus had no illusions about finding Asia on his voyage, because he already had certain knowledge of "new lands" across the Atlantic. Vincent Sinovic states that Columbus even had a chart given to him by a mariner who returned from Hispanola in 1484. There is, indeed, considerable evidence that people from all around the world, including Europe, had visited the Americas for trade, fishing, refuge, and even settlement. Information about these previous voyages is published in numerous books, some sensational, some not. Several scholarly

accounts are summarized in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, by James Loewen. Clearly, then, Columbus did not add new knowledge to the sum of what was known by people in Europe, either in terms of the shape of the earth or in terms of the lands of the earth.

Whatever the mystery and controversy may surround the story of Columbus, there can be no doubt about the results of his voyage for both the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and for the peoples of Africa, and these constitute the most pressing arguments for ending Columbus Day. Most of us are familiar with these results in a general sort of way: we all know that Indian populations were decimated and the remnant peoples pushed westward, and we all know that large numbers of Africans were brought to the Americas involuntarily and enslaved. But few of us are aware of the personal involvement of Columbus in each case.

Columbus was personally and intimately involved in wanton violence against the Native people of the islands of the Caribbean, where he landed. He encouraged his men to rape Native women as young as nine or ten; he punished minor offenses against his domination by cutting off the Natives' noses and ears. Resistance only inspired him to full warfare on the island people, using, among other things, hunting dogs to literally tear the Indians apart. Later Columbus set up a tribute system to get the gold he had been unable to find, forcing the people to bring him gold regularly. Those who failed to do so had their hands cut off. Columbus' men hunted the people for sport and used the bodies for dog food. Soon forced labor was added to the list as well, in a system which led to malnutrition and disease. The Native people of Haiti, where Columbus established a colony in 1493, were almost completely exterminated within one generation, due directly or indirectly to Columbus' actions.

Meanwhile Columbus set in motion the machinery which would lead to so much suffering for African peoples. Unconcerned about the depopulation he had caused on Haiti, he merely imported vast numbers of Native people from other islands to do his work for him, depopulating those islands in turn. He also sent large shipments of these people to Europe as slaves, thus beginning the pattern of transatlantic slave trade. Others followed his example, shipping Natives from various parts of north America both to Europe and to the Caribbean. But so many of these people died that the Spanish turned to Africa as their new source for slaves, reversing the direction of human traffic across the Atlantic. The first Africa-to-Caribbean slave trade was carried out by none other than Columbus' son, in 1505--only twelve years from the founding of Columbus' colony.

As Loewen points out with these and other facts, the legacy of Columbus' actions has been profound and long-lived. The pattern of genocide against the indigenous peoples of the Americas has been repeated over and over, and continues today in perhaps a more subtle form. The habit of white dominance over African-Americans which became so integrated into American society during the centuries of slavery remains a central characteristic of our culture. Yet what is important here is not so much to blame Columbus, but to understand what we are doing when we celebrate such a man. The message being sent to Native Americans and to African-Americans by Columbus Day is not merely one of irrelevance, but one of active, overt hostility. Celebrating the father of genocide and slavery in the Americas tells the groups who were victims of those crimes that we as a nation think those things were good, and that as a nation we neither respect nor value the peoples so victimized.

I am not suggesting that we abandon any of the features that make America the great country it is, or that we cease to celebrate the principles that we value so much. I am asking instead that we take those very principles on which our country and our patriotic pride are based, and apply them. As Americans, we must cease to endorse this holiday which embodies not our highest values, but their very opposites.

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