

Columbus or Native American Day?

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The writing is on the wall for Columbus Day. In the latest move to rid the calendar of its day of infamy, in April, the Minneapolis City Council voted unanimously to rename Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. Many American Indians have long resisted the observance of a day to honor Christopher Columbus.

Since 1970, the holiday has been fixed to the second Monday in October, coincidentally the same day as Thanksgiving in Canada—another holiday of dubious origins from the native point of view. Most states celebrate Columbus Day as an official state holiday, though already many states are uncomfortable with the reality of Columbus, and mark it as a “Day of Observance” or “Recognition”.

Alaska and Oregon do not recognize Columbus Day at all. Hawaii calls it Discoverers' Day, which commemorates the Polynesian discoverers of Hawaii, though not as a legal holiday.

The first governor with the smarts to foresee the political astuteness of at least balancing the holiday scales was ironically California's Ronald Reagan. He proposed adding a holiday in September called American Indian Day. Interestingly, Reagan played the ill-fated General Custer in the 1940 blockbuster Santa Fe Trail. Another Hollywood icon, Marlon Brando, gave the movement to reassess colonial chauvinism prominence with his 1973 refusal of the Oscar for Best Actor in *The Godfather* in protest to treatment of Native Americans in movies.

In 1989, South Dakota decided to change its name for the October holiday “Native American Day”, and keep it as a non-work day devoted to educating citizens about Native American heritage. The South Dakotans also declared 1990 as a “Year of Reconciliation”. Berkley California adopted the name Native American Day in 1992, California and Washington state joined them in 1998, and other municipalities have kept up the momentum over the past decade.

Despite the later dominance of Spain and Britain as the colonizing powers, Italians were the earliest explorers. Apart from Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci explored the east coast of South America, and his name was adapted to the entire hemisphere.

In 1792, New York City and other US cities celebrated the 300th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the ‘New World’, and the flood of Italian immigrants led New York Italians to celebrate the day in a big way in 1866. Ironically, the first opposition to the day was by WASP Americans anxious to eradicate Columbus Day celebrations because of their association with these (Catholic) immigrants and their ‘Knights of Columbus’.

It did not occur to Americans fresh from decimating the indigenous peoples and stealing their land that celebrating their own good fortune was unseemly, so the day became a

holiday in many states, and finally a federally recognized holiday in 1937. It was used by teachers, preachers, poets and politicians to teach ideals of patriotism, especially support for war, US citizenship, its ever-expanding national boundaries, and social progress.

Columbus's navigational feats have traditionally been celebrated throughout the Americas. In Haiti and Santo Domingo (Hispaniola) December 5 is Discovery Day. In Brazil, Discovery Day (in April) commemorates the day when Pedro Alvares Cabral became the first European to land in Brazil in 1500.

The Dia de la Raza ("Day of the Race"), like Columbus Day on or near October 12, originally celebrated the Spanish 'race', both in the colonies and the motherland, though by 1918, Mexican philosopher Antonio Caso took it as an opportunity to praise the "Mexican mestizo race". In 1928, the Dia de la Raza was declared an official national holiday in Mexico, and other Latin American countries followed suit.

Despite the notoriety of the Spanish conquerors, they were in fact less awful than the French and British. "Spain was constantly debating with itself: 'Am I right, am I wrong? What is it I'm doing with these peoples?'" notes Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World* (1992).

In 1552 Dominican Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas published "A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies". Bernal Díaz, a soldier in Cortés' army wrote a history of the conquest of Mexico. "We came here to serve God, and also to get rich." University of California (Berkeley) prof Woodrow Borah points out that, "The Spanish made a place for the Indians—as part of the lowest order, but at least they had a place", whereas, "North Americans in many cases simply exterminated the Indians."

Instead of Day of the Race, Argentina has a Day of Respect for Cultural Diversity. Spain renamed Race Day as National Day in 1987. In 1994, Costa Rica changed the official holiday from Dia de la Raza to Dia de las Culturas (Day of the Cultures) to recognize the mix of European, American, African and Asian cultures. Bahamas changed its Discovery Day to National Heroes Day in 2001.

Venezuela changed Race Day to Day of Indigenous Resistance in 2002. In 2004 activists toppled the statue of Christopher Columbus in Caracas and wrote: "Just like the statue of Saddam in Baghdad, that of Columbus the tyrant also fell this October 12 in Caracas.

The momentum to cancel Columbus Day went global in 1990, when 350 Native Americans met in Ecuador and launched the campaign. The American Indian Movement declared October 12, 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's landing, "International Day of Solidarity with Indigenous People". The National Council of Churches called on Christians to refrain from celebrating the Columbus quincentennial, saying, "What represented newness of freedom, hope, and opportunity for some was the occasion for oppression, degradation and genocide for others."

In a 2000 press release, the American Indian Movement called Columbus "the beginning of the American holocaust, ethnic cleansing characterized by murder, torture, raping, pillaging, robbery, slavery, kidnapping, and forced removals of Indian people from their homelands."

In Canada, there was never a Columbus Day (it was too cold for him). The closest is Discovery Day in Newfoundland and Labrador in June, commemorating John Cabot's

'discovery' of Newfoundland in 1497. National Aboriginal Day (June 21) was established in 1996 though not as a legal holiday, as part of the "Celebrate Canada" series, followed by St-Jean Baptiste Day on June 24, Canadian Multiculturalism Day on June 27, and concluding with Canada Day on July 1.

Nova Scotians have Treaty Day October 1, honoring the Treaty of 1752 and the date on which the Mi'kmaw people would receive gifts from the Crown to "renew their friendship and submissions." But the only Canadians to honor native bloodlines with a statutory holiday are Manitobans, with Louis Riel Day in February (when other Canadians have Family Day) in honor of the Métis leader regarded as the Father of Manitoba.

However, we must ask 'What's in a name?' There has been little sign of genuine reconciliation to date between conquerors and the conquered—with the possible exception of the South Dakotans, who have the third highest proportion of indigenous peoples and seven large reservations.

Reagan's astute move in 1968 was more a precognition of the growing wave of political correctness and identity politics that became the hallmark of the post-communist New World Order which Reagan's vice president, Bush Senior, was soon to declare.

In 2005, the UN recognized International Holocaust Remembrance Day to commemorate the Nazi killing of Jews, Roma and homosexuals on January 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp, by Soviet troops. It's time to take the campaign to recognize the much worse genocide against Native Americans (not to mention the plight of African slaves) to the UN and follow it up with real measures to promote "reconciliation". WWII is only the tip of the imperialist iceberg.

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