

Name:

CORE QUESTION: What are some of the arguments for keeping and for eliminating Columbus Day?

(Please excuse the formatting. Converting the online article to a Word Document did not allow for proper spacing.)

TASK:

- Read the article below.
- As you are reading, highlight the evidence (quotes) that are in favor of keeping the celebration of Columbus Day in one color.
- Also, highlight the evidence (quotes) that are in favor of eliminating (getting rid of) Columbus Day.

CHALLENGING COLUMBUS

Christopher Columbus's journey to the New World transformed the globe. But many Americans are now taking a hard look at his legacy.

SEPTEMBER 4, 2017

By Bryan Brown

Probably no single journey changed the world more profoundly than that of Christopher Columbus. For hundreds of years, his story was the stuff of legend: how the Italian navigator sailed west from Spain in 1492, braving uncharted seas, and "discovered" America.

The Founders of the United States often cited Columbus as an inspiration for their experiment of a nation dedicated to the idea of freedom. In fact, the young country was often referred to as *Columbia* in honor of the explorer. And generations of Americans have celebrated him on the second Monday in October: Columbus Day.

But today, many Americans are questioning this history and Columbus Day itself. Columbus couldn't *discover* a place where millions of people already lived, they say. Worse, honoring him ignores how he—and the waves of European settlers that arrived in his wake—forced the indigenous peoples of the Americas off their land.

To professor Leo Killsback of Arizona State University, Columbus Day is not a time of celebration but a reminder of "historic crimes" to Native Americans.

This point of view has inspired a growing trend. Last year, Boulder, Colorado, voted to transform Columbus Day into Indigenous Peoples Day.

"The day should not be about the people who came, but the people who were already here," says Mayor Suzanne Jones. More than 30 other cities and the states of South Dakota and Alaska have similar celebrations. (Some continue to observe Columbus Day as well.)

Other Americans defend Columbus. They say it was his bold vision that enabled Europeans to brave the journey to a new land.

So was Columbus a villain or a hero? Some 525 years after he set sail, Americans are struggling with that question.

Columbus's Voyages

Born in the Italian city of Genoa, Columbus was a man of great ambition. In 1492, he persuaded Spain's king and queen to fund a journey to what Europeans called the Indies—China, Japan, and India.

Columbus was convinced by the ancient writings of travelers that those lands held great treasures of gold, silver, silk, and spices.

At that time, Europeans' contact with Asia was rare because getting there was so difficult. The trip—by ship around Africa and Asia or over land routes controlled by hostile armies—was long and dangerous. But Columbus proposed a bold new scheme: to reach Asia by sailing *west* through open sea.



Like other people of his time, Columbus didn't know that two continents would be in his way: the Americas. So when he landed in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, after an 11-week journey from Spain, Columbus thought he had reached the Indies.

That December, Columbus claimed an island in the Caribbean Sea for Spain, calling it Hispaniola. (Today, the island is split into Haiti and the Dominican Republic.) The explorer praised the island's people, the Taino, for their generosity. Yet he also let his men loot and kidnap the Taino in search of their riches.

Columbus made three other journeys to the New World, as Europeans soon began calling the Americas. With each journey, the Taino suffered. Many were sold into slavery. Countless others died from smallpox and other European diseases to which they had no resistance. Within decades, most of them had been wiped out.

Built on Indian Lands

Yet Columbus's voyages transformed the world. European powers rushed to build settlements in the New World. When the native people got in their way, say scholars, the newcomers pushed them aside.

Later, after the U.S. was founded and began expanding west across the continent, Congress repeatedly forced treaties on Native Americans that stripped them of their ancestral homelands. America was built "on lands which Indians were essentially forbidden to keep," says professor Ron Welburn of the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Benjamin Railton, a historian at Fitchburg State University in Massachusetts, traces this treatment directly to Columbus:

"[Columbus saw] this place as open and available for European possession." U.S. settlers merely continued this treatment, he says.

Columbus's Achievement

Still, many Americans continue to admire Columbus. In particular, Italian-Americans take pride in the explorer, holding Columbus Day parades in New York and other cities.

Historian William Connell of Seton Hall University in New Jersey views Columbus Day as a tribute to an important American trait: diversity. That was an explicit goal of Benjamin Harrison, who in 1892 became the first president to proclaim a celebration of Columbus.

At the time, Italian immigrants "were near the bottom rung in American society," Connell has written. Harrison intended Columbus Day "to celebrate our land and its many peoples."

"Columbus was definitely not a saint," Connell says. Yet he believes it's wrong to blame the explorer for every crime that came after his arrival. In his view, Columbus's achievement is undeniable. His linking of the New World with the Old was "a world-changing occasion such as has rarely happened in human history."

Bleak Conditions for Native Americans

Today, experts agree that Native Americans are suffering. According to 2014 figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, 28 percent live in poverty, the highest of any race group.



Eduardo Munoz/Reuters (Indigenous Peoples' Day festival)

Some cities hold Indigenous Peoples Day festivals like this one as “counter celebrations” to Columbus Day. Railton blames much of this on the “bleak” conditions on Indian reservations. These areas were created by the U.S. government starting in the 19th century for American Indians forced off their lands.

Railton says that reservations have kept Native Americans isolated from other Americans, many of whom see Indians only as part of a tragic past.

Two Holidays?

Confronting the present reality—and its connection to the treatment of Native Americans since Europeans arrived in the New World—is behind the push to establish Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

But should Columbus Day be eliminated completely in the process? Not everyone who backs Indigenous Peoples Day thinks so.

In Railton’s “ideal world,” Americans would address a difficult past by holding celebrations of both Columbus *and* indigenous peoples. “These back-to-back days could allow us to think in depth about the European and Native American threads throughout the history of the Americas,” he says.

Connell has come to a similar conclusion. The “Columbus Discussion” is a good thing, he writes. “It reminds us—and our students—that history is messy.” It’s absolutely necessary “to have these discussions—to celebrate the good that has come out of [Columbus], while also pondering the bad.”

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