

An Open Letter From the AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT of Colorado and Our Allies

When the Taino Indians saved Christopher Columbus from certain death on the fateful morning of October 12, 1492, a glorious opportunity presented itself for the cultures of both Europe and the Americas to flourish. What occurred was neither glorious nor heroic. Just as Columbus could not, and did not, "discover" a hemisphere already inhabited by nearly 100 million people, his arrival cannot, and will not, be recognized by indigenous peoples as a heroic and festive event.

From a Native perspective, Columbus' arrival was a disaster from the beginning. Although his own diaries reveal that he was greeted by the Tainos with the most generous hospitality he had ever known, he immediately began the enslavement and slaughter of the Indian peoples of the Caribbean.

Defenders of Columbus and his holiday argue that critics unfairly judge Columbus, a 15th Century product, by the moral and legal standards of the late 20th century. Such a defense implies that there were no legal or moral constraints on actions such as Columbus' in 1492. In reality, European legal and moral principles acknowledged the natural rights of Indians and prohibited their slaughter or unjust wars against them.

The issue of Columbus and Columbus Day is not easily resolvable by dismissing Columbus, the man. Columbus Day is a perpetuation of racist assumptions that the Americas were a wasteland cluttered with dark skin savages awaiting the blessings of European "civilization." Throughout this hemisphere, educational systems and the popular media perpetuate the myth that indigenous peoples have contributed nothing to the world, and, consequently, we should be grateful for our colonization, our dispossession, and our microwave ovens.

The racist Columbus legacy enables every country in this hemisphere, including the United States, to continue its destruction of Indian peoples, from the jungles of Brazil to the highlands of Guatemala, from the Chaco of Paraguay to the Western Shoshone Nation in Nevada. Indian people remain in a perpetual state of danger from the system begun by Columbus in 1492. The Columbus legacy throughout the Americas keeps Indian people at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator. We are under continuing physical, legal and political attack, and are afforded the least access to political and legal remedies. Nevertheless we continue to resist and we refuse to surrender our spirituality, to assimilate, or to disappear into Hollywood's romantic sunset.

To dignify Columbus and his legacy with parades, holidays and other celebrations is repugnant. As the original peoples of this land, we cannot, and we will not, tolerate social and political festivities that celebrate our genocide. We are committed to the active, open, and public rejection of disrespect and racism in its various forms--including Columbus Day and Columbus Day parades.

For the past five years the American Indian Movement of Colorado and our allies have been compelled to confront and resist the continuing Columbus legacy in the streets of Denver. For every hour spent organizing non-violent opposition to the Columbus parade, we have lost an hour that we were not able to use in assisting indigenous treaty rights struggles, land recovery strategies, and the advancement of indigenous self-determination.

However, one positive benefit of our efforts was the public debate over Columbus Day that has spread into the public schools as an educational tool for students and their teachers. Overall, we view the demise of the Columbus Day Parade in Denver as a welcome opportunity to move beyond the divisive symbolism of the past.

We therefore suggest the replacement of Columbus Day with a celebration that is more inclusive and that more accurately reflects the cultural and racial richness of the Americas. We also suggest that the community support a more honest portrayal of social evolution in this hemisphere and a greater respect for all people on the margins of the dominating society. There is no more appropriate place for this transformation to occur than in Colorado, the birthplace of the Columbus Day holiday.

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This statement represents the position of the:

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Time to Abolish Columbus Day

Once again this year many schools will pause to commemorate Christopher Columbus. Given everything we know about who Columbus was and what he launched in the Americas, this needs to stop.

Columbus initiated the trans-Atlantic slave trade, in early February 1494, first sending several dozen enslaved Taínos to Spain. Columbus described those he enslaved as “well made and of very good intelligence,” and recommended to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella that taxing slave shipments could help pay for supplies needed in the Indies. A year later, Columbus intensified his efforts to enslave Indigenous people in the Caribbean. He ordered 1,600 Taínos rounded up—people whom Columbus had earlier described as “so full of love and without greed”—and had 550 of the “best males and females,” according to one witness, Michele de Cuneo, chained and sent as slaves to Spain. “Of the rest who were left,” de Cuneo writes, “the announcement went around that whoever wanted them could take as many as he pleased; and this was done.”

Taino slavery in Spain turned out to be unprofitable, but Columbus later wrote, “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.”

The eminent historian of Africa, Basil Davidson, also assigns responsibility to Columbus for initiating the African slave trade to the Americas. According to Davidson, the first license granted to send enslaved Africans to the Caribbean was issued by the king and queen in 1501, during Columbus’s rule in the Indies, leading Davidson to dub Columbus the “father of the slave trade.”

From the very beginning, Columbus was not on a mission of discovery but of conquest and exploitation—he called his expedition *la empresa*, the enterprise. When slavery did not pay off, Columbus turned to a tribute system, forcing every Taíno, 14 or older, to fill a hawk’s bell with gold every three months. If successful, they were safe for another three months. If not, Columbus ordered that Taínos be “punished,” by having their hands chopped off, or they were chased down by attack dogs. As the Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas wrote, this tribute system was “impossible and intolerable.”

And Columbus deserves to be remembered as the first terrorist in the Americas. When resistance mounted to the Spaniards’ violence, Columbus sent an armed force to “spread terror among the Indians to show them how strong and powerful the Christians were,” according to the Spanish priest Bartolomé de las Casas. In his book *Conquest of Paradise*, Kirkpatrick Sale describes what happened when Columbus’s men encountered a force of Taínos in March of 1495 in a valley on the island of Hispaniola:

The soldiers mowed down dozens with point-blank volleys, loosed the dogs to rip open limbs and bellies, chased fleeing Indians into the bush to skewer them on sword and pike, and [according to Columbus’s biographer, his son Fernando] “with God’s aid soon gained a complete victory, killing many Indians and capturing others who were also killed.”

All this and much more has long been known and documented. As early as 1942 in his Pulitzer Prize winning biography, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that Columbus’s policies in the Caribbean led to “complete genocide”—and Morison was a writer who admired Columbus.

If Indigenous peoples’ lives mattered in our society, and if Black people’s lives mattered in our society, it would be inconceivable that we would honor the father of the slave trade with a national holiday. The fact that we have this holiday legitimates a curriculum that is contemptuous of the lives of peoples of color. Elementary school libraries still feature books like *Follow the Dream: The Story of Christopher Columbus*, by Peter Sis, which praise Columbus and say nothing of the lives destroyed by Spanish colonialism in the Americas.

No doubt, the movement launched 25 years ago in the buildup to the Columbus Quincentenary has made huge strides in introducing a more truthful and critical history about the arrival of Europeans in the Americas. Teachers throughout the country put Columbus and the system of empire on trial, and write stories of the so-called discovery of America from the standpoint of the people who were here first.

But most textbooks still tip-toe around the truth. Houghton Mifflin’s *United States History: Early Years* attributes Taíno deaths to “epidemics,” and concludes its section on Columbus: “The Columbian Exchange benefited people all over the world.” The section’s only review question erases Taíno and African humanity: “How did the Columbian Exchange change the diet of Europeans?”

Too often, even in 2015, the Columbus story is still young children’s first *curricular* introduction to the meeting of different ethnicities, different cultures, different nationalities. In school-based literature on Columbus, they see him plant the flag, and name and claim “San Salvador” for an empire thousands of miles away; they’re taught that white people have the right to rule over peoples of color, that stronger nations can bully weaker nations, and that the only voices they need to listen to throughout history are those of powerful white guys like Columbus. Is this said explicitly? No, it doesn’t have to be. It’s the silences that speak.

For example, here’s how Peter Sis describes the encounter in his widely used book: “On October 12, 1492, just after midday, Christopher Columbus landed on a beach of white coral, claimed the land for the King and Queen of Spain, knelt and gave thanks to God...” The Taínos on the beach who greet Columbus are nameless and voiceless. What else can children conclude but that their lives don’t matter?

Enough already. Especially now, when the Black Lives Matter movement prompts us to look deeply into each nook and cranny of social life to ask whether our practices affirm the worth of every human being, it’s time to rethink Columbus, and to abandon the holiday that celebrates his crimes.

More cities—and school districts—ought to follow the example of Berkeley, Minneapolis, and Seattle, which have scrapped Columbus Day in favor of Indigenous Peoples Day—a day to commemorate the resistance and resilience of Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, and not just in a long-ago past, but today. Or what about studying and honoring the people Columbus enslaved and terrorized: the Taínos. Columbus said that they were gentle, generous, and intelligent, but how many students today even know the name *Taíno*, let alone know anything of who they were and how they lived?

Last year, Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant put it well when she explained Seattle’s decision to abandon Columbus Day: “Learning about the history of Columbus and transforming this day into a celebration of Indigenous people and a celebration of social justice ... allows us to make a connection between this painful history and the ongoing marginalization, discrimination, and poverty that Indigenous communities face to this day.”

We don’t have to wait for the federal government to transform Columbus Day into something more decent. Just as the climate justice movement is doing with fossil fuels, we can organize our communities and our schools to divest from Columbus. And that would be something to celebrate.

Can we still celebrate October 12 as an American holiday?

One man, two narratives:

1. Born to a working-class wool weaver in the port city of Genoa, Italy, Cristoforo Colombo apprenticed as a sailor and went to sea as early as age ten. A self-taught and curious man, Colombo lived by his wits and rose in the heady world of 15th-century sea traders, until he hit upon an ingenious idea: He would outflank the Mohammedan Turks and reach the East Indies by sailing west across the Ocean Sea. After weathering nearly a decade of rejection and failure, in 1492 Colombo won the support of the Spanish Crown and set off on an uncertain journey that inadvertently opened a New World, laying the foundation for that most glittering daughter of the Western heritage: America.

2. Christopher Columbus, a dead white male of the worst variety, was a slaver, a capitalist, and a murderer of millions who embarked on a voyage motivated only by greed, which brought European imperialism to the shores of the "New World" and laid waste the ancient indigenous peoples there. Columbus deserves little credit (Leif Erikson had "discovered" the "new" continent 500 years earlier) and much blame for the horrors of the Columbian Exchange — the vast transfer of people, animals, and plants between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. In his wake, the "New World" suffered smallpox, starvation, the cruel subjugation of the indigenous peoples, and the establishment of that most dastardly spawn of the West: America...

The Internet is full of condemnation of Columbus: the Daily Dot: "8 Reasons to Hate Columbus Day"; the Huffington Post: "Columbus Day? True Legacy: Cruelty and Slavery"; and snarky Columbus Day e-greeting cards: "Columbus: A Real Illegal Alien." In June, a statue of Columbus in Boston's North End was vandalized with red paint and the phrase "Black Lives Matter." In September, the Graduate Student Senate at the University of Oklahoma, my alma mater, passed a resolution (unanimously) renaming Columbus Day "Indigenous Peoples Day." San Francisco, Seattle, and Minneapolis, among other American cities, have extirpated their Columbus Day parades... But what are we to make of this Genoese sailor and his appointed day? Should we celebrate the man who led three little wooden ships across an ocean and changed the course of history? Or was Columbus a greedy psychopath who today would be vilified as a genocidal war criminal?

First, to dispel a myth, Columbus Day is actually not the Italian-American equivalent of St. Patrick's Day for Irish-Americans — although Italian-Americans have (and rightly so) long taken pride in Columbus's Italian origins. There were celebrations in New York City commemorating the 300th anniversary of his journey in 1792, long before Italians had settled in the city in any numbers.

In fact, Columbus has been celebrated on this continent and in this country for over two centuries. King's College in Upper Manhattan became Columbia College in 1784, and the nation's capital was established in the District of Columbia in 1791. "Hail Columbia" competed with "The Star-Spangled Banner" as the nation's unofficial national anthem until 1931. And, for a brief period after the American Revolution, there was even a movement to name the new country simply "Columbia."

For most of American history, Columbus Day was associated with a celebration of the American experience. President Benjamin Harrison, in 1892, proclaimed "the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, as a general holiday for the people of the United States."

"On that day," President Harrison continued, "let the people, so far as possible, cease from toil and devote themselves to such exercises as may best express honor to the discoverer and their appreciation of the great achievements of the four completed centuries of American life."

President Roosevelt unashamedly credited Columbus and his men as "harbingers" of the great movement of people from the Old World to the New. In the midst of a world war, Roosevelt asked the American people to "contemplate the estate to which the world has been brought by destructive forces, with lawlessness and wanton power ravaging an older civilization, and with our own republic girding itself for the defense of its institutions," but knowing "we can revitalize our faith and renew our courage by a recollection of the triumph of Columbus after a period of grievous trial."

Ronald Reagan, on the approach to the quincentennial, did not hesitate to root Columbus firmly in the American family, remarking that he "was a dreamer, a man of vision and courage, a man filled with hope for the future and with the determination to cast off for the unknown and sail into uncharted seas for the joy of finding whatever was there."

"Put it all together and you might say that Columbus was the inventor of the American dream," Reagan said. "Yes, Columbus Day is an American holiday, a day to celebrate not only an intrepid searcher but the dreams and opportunities that brought so many here after him and all that they and all immigrants have given to this land."

That's a hell of an endorsement. But what of the accusations of disaster and genocide brought against Columbus? Should we indict the man, his voyages, and, in turn, ourselves and our country for all that followed from contact between the Old World and the New?...

Let us dispense with any pretense that the indigenous peoples of the Americas lived in a peaceful idyll in harmony with their neighbors and with nature, and that the advent of Columbus destroyed a noble paradise. The great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere were indeed advanced, and yet, like Europeans, Asians, and Africans, the American peoples used their technology to subjugate. Anyone familiar with the expansionist and warlike cultures of the Aztec and Inca Empires should know that the tables would have been turned had it been the New World that "discovered" the Old and possessed the power to conquer it. Human nature, tainted with original sin, is what it is and has been — of that we can be certain.

Europeans, beginning with Columbus, treated the Indians pitilessly — that should not be whitewashed or forgotten — but, in the same way, we should not ignore the genuine good that has come down to us as a result of the course of human events — namely, the space for a unique idea to grow and flourish: the self-government of a free people, with an ever-expanding idea of who can partake of that promise.

How much is Columbus personally responsible for all of this — for the good and the ill? Only as much as any one man can be. As the historian William J. Connell has written, "What Columbus gets criticized for nowadays are attitudes that were typical of the European sailing captains and merchants who plied the Mediterranean and the Atlantic in the 15th century. Within that group he was unquestionably a man of daring and unusual ambition." Connell concluded that "what really mattered was his landing on San Salvador, which was a momentous, world-changing occasion such as has rarely happened in human history."

Unlike Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Columbus Day marks an event — landfall in the New World — not one man's birthday. As such, it is akin to the greatest American holiday, Independence Day. The two serve as important markers in our journey as a people: the opening act and, then, the promissory note of our long and complicated struggle.

A great and complicated people should not shirk its history on a date meant for the commemoration of a great man and his great achievement.

Mark Antonio Wright, Oct. 12, 2015, Assistant Editor at National Review.

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/425389/christopher-columbus-hero-or-villain>

The Christopher Columbus Controversy

Columbus Day approaches, but to the "politically correct" this is no cause for celebration. On the contrary, they view the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 as an occasion to be mourned. They have mourned, they have attacked, and they have intimidated schools across the country into replacing Columbus Day celebrations with "ethnic diversity" days.

The politically correct view is that Columbus did not discover America, because people had lived here for thousands of years. Worse yet, it's claimed, the main legacy of Columbus is death and destruction. Columbus is routinely vilified as a symbol of slavery and genocide, and the celebration of his arrival likened to a celebration of Hitler and the Holocaust. The attacks on Columbus are ominous, because the actual target is Western civilization.

Did Columbus "discover" America? Yes--in every important respect. This does not mean that no human eye had been cast on America before Columbus arrived. It does mean that Columbus brought America to the attention of the civilized world, i.e., to the growing, scientific civilizations of Western Europe. The result, ultimately, was the United States of America. It was Columbus' discovery for Western Europe that led to the influx of ideas and people on which this nation was founded--and on which it still rests. The opening of America brought the ideas and achievements of Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, and the thousands of thinkers, writers, and inventors who followed.

Prior to 1492, what is now the United States was sparsely inhabited, unused, and undeveloped. The inhabitants were primarily hunter-gatherers, wandering across the land, living from hand-to-mouth and from day-to-day. There was virtually no change, no growth for thousands of years. With rare exception, life was nasty, brutish, and short: there was no wheel, no written language, no division of labor, little agriculture and scant permanent settlement; but there were endless, bloody wars. Whatever the problems it brought, the vilified Western culture also brought enormous, undreamed-of benefits, without which most of today's Indians would be infinitely poorer or not even alive.

Columbus should be honored, for in so doing, we honor Western civilization. But the critics do not want to bestow such honor, because their real goal is to denigrate the values of Western civilization and to glorify the primitivism, mysticism, and collectivism embodied in the tribal cultures of American Indians. They decry the glorification of the West as "Eurocentrism." We should, they claim, replace our reverence for Western civilization with multi-culturalism, which regards all cultures as morally equal. In fact, they aren't. Some cultures are better than others: a free society is better than slavery; reason is better than brute force as a way to deal with other men; productivity is better than stagnation. In fact, Western civilization stands for man at his best. It stands for the values that make human life possible: reason, science, self-reliance, individualism, ambition, productive achievement. The values of Western civilization are values for all men; they cut across gender, ethnicity, and geography. We should honor Western civilization not for the ethnocentric reason that some of us happen to have European ancestors but because it is the objectively superior culture.

Underlying the political collectivism of the anti-Columbus crowd is a racist view of human nature. They claim that one's identity is primarily ethnic: if one thinks his ancestors were good, he will supposedly feel good about himself; if he thinks his ancestors were bad, he will supposedly feel self-loathing. But it doesn't work; the achievements or failures of one's ancestors are monumentally irrelevant to one's actual worth as a person. Only the lack of a sense of self leads one to look to others to provide what passes for a sense of identity. Neither the deeds nor misdeeds of others are his own; he can take neither credit nor blame for what someone else chose to do. There are no racial achievements or racial failures, only individual achievements and individual failures. One cannot inherit moral worth or moral vice. "Self-esteem through others" is a self-contradiction. Thus the sham of "preserving one's heritage" as a rational life goal. Thus the cruel hoax of "multicultural education" as an antidote to racism: it will continue to create more racism.

Individualism is the only alternative to the racism of political correctness. We must recognize that everyone is a sovereign entity, with the power of choice and independent judgment. That is the ultimate value of Western civilization, and it should be proudly proclaimed.

Michael S. Berliner (*Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 30, 1991; *Buffalo News*, Jan. 12, 1992; *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 3, 1992; *San Jose Mercury News*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Charlotte Observer*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Jan. 6, 1992; *Allentown Morning Call*, Jan. 6, 1992; *Asbury Park Press*, Jan. 7, 1992; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Jan. 8, 1992; *Orange County Register*, Oct. 11, 1992; *Daily Oklahoman*, Oct. 11, 1992; *Tennessean*, Oct. 9, 1995; *Virginian-Pilot*, Dec. 9, 1995; *Providence Journal*, Oct. 12, 1996; *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1997; *Daily News of Los Angeles*, Oct. 13, 1997; *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Oct. 1, 1998; *Augusta Chronicle*, Oct. 10, 1999; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 11, 1999; *Houston Chronicle*, Oct. 7, 2001; *Florida Times Union*, Oct. 11, 2002; *Washington Times*, Oct. 15, 2002; *El Nuevo Herald*, Oct. 12, 2003)

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QUESTIONS

1. What is The American Indian Movement's main opinion of Columbus? On what evidence do they base their opinion?
2. What is real issue "behind Columbus the man" for The American Indian Movement? What is their solution to the problem?
3. For Bill Bigelow what is Columbus guilty of? What evidence does he use to make his point?
4. For Bigelow what does keeping Columbus in a "good light" in textbooks teach students? What does he say should be alternately taught to students?
5. What does Mark Antonio Wright say Columbus Day is associated with? How does he back up his claim?
6. What argument(s) does Wright make in regards to Columbus being blamed for all the ills that happened with contact between the Old and New Worlds?
7. What is Michael Berliner's general opinion of Columbus? On what evidence does he base his opinion?
8. What is Berliner's view of "Western" civilization? How does he compare it with the culture of the natives?
9. In Berliner's opinion, was Columbus' "discovery" of America a major achievement? Explain why or why not.
10. In all the articles you have read, which views do you find yourself in more agreement with *and* how therefore do you think Columbus should be remembered or should he? *Explain in detail* and consider the following:
 - a. Cite evidence from the articles you use to respond with. Be sure that you use in-text citations for paraphrasing and quotations.
 - b. LIMIT quotations!

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