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***Should Columbus Day Be Replaced With Indigenous Peoples Day?***

Image

A statue of the explorer Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle in Manhattan.CreditCreditSpencer Platt/Getty Images

**By**[**Katherine Schulten**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/katherine-schulten)

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Does your school or community recognize Columbus Day as an official holiday? What do you know about Christopher Columbus, and what did you learn about him in school?

Below, more information about the movements to remove statues of Columbus and replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day — as well as an Op-Ed that questions those movements. After you read both, let us know what you think by posting a comment.

In this 2014 piece, “[Columbus Day, or ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Day’?](https://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/13/columbus-day-or-indigenous-peoples-day/?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FColumbus%2C%20Christopher&action=click&contentCollection=timestopics&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection),” Jake Flanagin explains why many are arguing it should be replaced:

It’s a controversial day with a turbulent history. “This historically problematic holiday — Columbus never actually set foot on the continental U.S. — has made an increasing number of people wince, given the enslavement and genocide of Native American people that followed in the wake of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria,” [writes](http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/USA-Update/2014/1013/Is-Indigenous-Peoples-Day-a-long-overdue-change-or-political-correctness-run-amok%22%20%5Co%20%22%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)Yvonne Zipp for The Christian Science Monitor. “The neighborhood wasn’t exactly empty when he arrived in 1492.”

Back in 1992 — 500 years after Columbus’s fateful landing in the Caribbean — Berkeley, Calif., was the first American city to repurpose his day in honor of Native America. “Talk of an alternative Columbus Day dates back to the 1970s,” [writes](http://time.com/3495071/indigenous-peoples-day/) Nolan Feeney for Time, “but the idea came to Berkeley after the First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indian Resistance in Quito, Ecuador, in 1990. That led to another conference among Northern Californian Native American groups.” Attendees brought the idea in front of the Berkeley City Council, after which they “appointed a task force to investigate the ideas and Columbus’ historical legacy.” Two years later, council members officially instated Indigenous Peoples’ Day in lieu of Columbus by a unanimous vote.

The California state senator Lori Hancock, then the mayor of Berkeley, remembers encountering Italian-American pushback similar to that in Seattle. “We just had to keep reiterating that that was not the purpose,” she told Mr. Feeney. “The purpose was to really affirm the incredible legacy of the indigenous people who were in the North American continent long before Columbus.”

In September 2017, a [**statue of Columbus in New York City was defaced**](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/nyregion/christopher-columbus-statue-central-park-vandalized.html?module=inline)with red paint stained on his hands, symbolizing his role in the genocide of Native Americans. In [Baltimore](http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/347341-christopher-columbus-statue-in-baltimore-smashed), another statue of Columbus was graffitied with the words: “Racism: Tear it down.”

But in an Op-Ed last October called “[**Tearing Down Statues of Columbus Also Tears Down My History**](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/09/opinion/christopher-columbus-day-statue.html?module=inline),” John M. Viola, president and chief operating officer of the National Italian American Foundation, argued:

I appreciate that for many people, including some Italian-Americans, the celebration of Columbus is viewed as belittling the suffering of indigenous peoples at the hands of Europeans. But for countless people in my community, Columbus, and Columbus Day, represent an opportunity to celebrate our contributions to this country.

...I have never been one to blindly uphold any single figure as the representative of all things Italian-American, since all individuals are flawed, and all monuments represent just a snapshot of our history, now measured against 21st-century sensibilities. Some undoubtedly require re-evaluation, but that process should not include violence, vandalism and destruction of property. The “tearing down of history” does not change that history. In the wake of the cultural conflict that has ripped us apart over these months, I wonder if we as a country can’t find better ways to utilize our history to eradicate racism instead of inciting it. Can’t the monuments and holidays born of our past be reimagined to represent new values for our future?

...Respect for historical monuments should not signify blind acceptance of the values and judgments of past societies; rather, they should be instructive tools in our quest to understand our history and use it to better meet the challenges of the present. If we allow uncontrolled tearing down of memorials or unilateral reinterpretation of American history, then we will be damaging our democracy by limiting vigorous debate on our history, with all its beauty and blemishes. In his first inaugural address at the onset of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln called on Americans to allow a national dialogue led by the “better angels of our nature.” I think his counsel remains as wise and essential today as it was then.

We at the National Italian American Foundation strongly condemn the defacing of historical monuments and expect elected officials and law enforcement to protect our public memorials from further damage so that a true conversation on their place in modern society can be organized. We believe Christopher Columbus represents the values of discovery and risk that are at the heart of the American dream, and that it is our job as the community most closely associated with his legacy to be at the forefront of a sensitive and engaging path forward, toward a solution that considers all sides.

**Students:** Read both articles, then tell us:

— Why does the United States celebrate Columbus Day? In your opinion, is the holiday problematic?

— What do you think of the argument for changing the name and focus of the holiday from Columbus to Indigenous Peoples Day? Does it dishonor the heritage of Italian-Americans, a group that has also faced discrimination? Or does it serve to recognize and affirm the overlooked history and contributions of Native Americans?

— Do you think changing the name of the holiday can change the way indigenous peoples are treated and remembered in United States history? Or is this move largely symbolic?

— Where do you stand in terms the statue debate? Should all Christopher Columbus statues across the United States be taken down? Why or why not?

— What ideas or arguments in the two articles do you find most compelling or interesting? Why?

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