

PRO/CON: Should we celebrate Christopher Columbus?

By Silvio Laccetti, McClatchy Tribune, and Los Angeles Times Editorial Board, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.06.17

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A statue of Christopher Columbus stands in Providence, Rhode Island. Photo by: Kenneth C. Zirkel/Wikimedia Commons

PRO: History shows that Columbus is worth celebrating

Monuments honoring Christopher Columbus are being vandalized and destroyed. This year's Columbus Day will spark debate over celebrating the explorer. However, looking at Columbus in the big picture of history proves today's anger with him is misguided.

First, let's consider the explorer's role in spreading European disease, mainly smallpox. Estimates say smallpox killed 70 to 80 percent of Native Americans. These deaths happened over many decades. Holding Columbus responsible does not make sense. Also, calculating an actual number of deaths is impossible. Population estimates at that time are not reliable. In Hispaniola, the island of the countries Haiti and the Dominican Republic, the estimated population ranges from 250,000 people to 3 million.

Diseases Occur When Civilizations Mix

It's also worth remembering other widely-spread diseases. The Black Death started in Central Asia. It killed 40 percent or more of the European population. That was roughly 50 million people between 1346 and 1353. When civilizations advance, they often cross paths. Disease is a negative result.

Furthermore, the exchange of disease worked both ways. Most historians believe the Great Pox that killed 5 million in Renaissance Europe came from the Americas.

Next, think about the early civilizations of the Americas. These societies mistreated and enslaved certain people as well. War, slavery and human sacrifice happened before Columbus arrived in 1492.

The world has made progress. Still, recent wars and violence show humans are prone to the same deadly instincts.

Columbus' Positive Traits

Columbus was a fearless explorer, a man of faith and a leader who blazed a path to the modern world.

He holds a special place in the minds of Italian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. They celebrate Columbus Day with parades and statues.

Parks, playgrounds, streets, squares and schools throughout the U.S. use Columbus' name.

We must examine the accomplishments of Columbus. We have to look at these accomplishments while remembering the times in which he lived. Doing so shows there's no reason to destroy, vandalize or remove his monuments — or erase him from history.

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CON: We must recognize that progress for some meant injustice for others

The Los Angeles City Council in California has joined many other cities. It will no longer recognize Columbus Day. A holiday called Indigenous Peoples Day will instead recognize the contributions, and suffering of Native Americans, people who lived in the Americas before Columbus arrived.

Giving people a day off does not make up for centuries of unfair treatment of Native Americans. Nor does ending Columbus Day.

Without question, the nation must better recognize its violent history against Native Americans. In the 1850s, California's leaders wanted to destroy the area's native people. Lawmakers gave money to anti-Indian armed forces. Natives were killed. Villages were destroyed, and tribes had to move.

Can a holiday help us learn about our nation's past? Can it encourage us to treat Native Americans and their history with more respect? Possibly.

Options The Government Can Take

The government could apologize publicly. It could pay back tribes that lost sacred land. Or it could return the land. The city of Los Angeles, in particular, could protect sacred sites. It could offer

more support for local tribes.

The true stories of native peoples must become part of our national history. Schools must teach more than the simple version of the first Thanksgiving meal.

People who want an Indigenous Peoples Day also want to end Columbus Day. These people consider Columbus a cruel slave trader. They say he caused the killing of natives.

Ugly Side Of U.S. History

The U.S. has a history of racism and mistreatment of groups of people. However, the U.S. has also welcomed millions of needy immigrants.

Columbus Day wasn't created to celebrate domination by one group. It became a federal holiday in 1934 after an effort by Italian-Americans and Catholics. They were targets of discrimination.

We cannot erase history. What we can do is face it honestly.

Whether the holiday is called Columbus Day or Indigenous Peoples Day or Explorers Day or History Day, isn't there a way to celebrate a nation rising on a promise of liberty and equality, while also recognizing that progress for some led to injustice and death for others? There should be.

The Los Angeles Times Editorial Board represents the opinions of the publisher and staff of the newspaper.

Quiz

- 1 According to the PRO article, what is the relationship between Columbus and diseases in the Americas?
- (A) Columbus brought many diseases to the Americas, but they did not harm people as much as violence.
 - (B) Columbus brought the Black Death from Central Asia to Europe, and then brought it to the Americas.
 - (C) Columbus brought several diseases to the Americas, and they were the cause of millions of deaths.
 - (D) Columbus brought some diseases from Europe to the Americas, but he also brought new diseases back.
- 2 According to the section "Options The Government Can Take" in the CON article, HOW can the government recognize its unfair history against Native Americans?
- (A) by changing the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day
 - (B) by giving people more days off for holidays like Columbus Day
 - (C) by paying back the tribes and making their stories part of national history
 - (D) by welcoming more immigrants instead of targeting them with discrimination
- 3 Read the paragraphs from the section "Columbus' Positive Traits" in the PRO article.
- He holds a special place in the minds of Italian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans. They celebrate Columbus Day with parades and statues.*
- Parks, playgrounds, streets, squares and schools throughout the U.S. use Columbus' name.*
- How do these paragraphs support the claim that Americans should still celebrate Columbus Day?
- (A) They show that Columbus has become a large part of American culture.
 - (B) They explain that Columbus did things to support Italian- and Hispanic-Americans.
 - (C) They describe the way that Americans worked to make Columbus Day a holiday.
 - (D) They compare the ways that Hispanic- and Italian-Americans celebrate Columbus.
- 4 How does the section "Ugly Side Of U.S. History" support the CON author's argument?
- (A) by illustrating that no one understands why America still celebrates Columbus Day anyway
 - (B) by providing evidence that America has been a welcoming place for millions of immigrants
 - (C) by highlighting the discrimination that Italian-Americans and Catholics faced because of Columbus Day
 - (D) by emphasizing the idea that the day should focus on teaching the good and bad parts of American history