

**Resolved:** "Christopher Columbus' role in American history should continue to be celebrated in the United States."



Although Columbus was not the first European mariner to sail to the New World - the Vikings set up colonies (c.1000) in Greenland and Newfoundland - his voyages mark the beginning of continuous European efforts to explore and colonize the Americas.

The debate over Columbus' character and legacy has continued into the twenty-first century, revived in 1992 with the celebration of the quincentenary of his first voyage to the New World. During the 1980s and 90s, the image of Columbus as a hero was tarnished by criticism from Native Americans and revisionist historians. Though the United States celebrates a national holiday in his honor (on the second Monday of October, closest to October 12, the date of the first landfall in 1492), much more attention has been paid in recent years to the Spanish explorers' treatment of the Native American peoples, and the word "discovery" has been replaced by "encounter" when used to describe Columbus' achievements in regard to the Americas. Columbus went to his grave believing he had reached the shores of Cathay...

In modern society, many have made Columbus out to be a villain and a symbol for all that is exploitative and predatory about the colonization of the Americas by Europe. Traditional historians view his voyages as opening the New World to Western civilization... For revisionist historians, however, his voyages symbolize the more brutal aspects of European colonization and represent the beginning of the destruction of Native American peoples and culture. One point of agreement among all interpretations is that his voyages were one of the turning points in history.

## Columbus Day sparks debate over explorer's legacy

**Michael Kan, Michigan Daily**

The explorer made his historic landing in the Americas 514 years ago, opening the pathway to the colonization of the New World. Now, not only is he remembered through Columbus Day, but his name is seen on street signs and bridges and is even the namesake of cities.

Yet in the minds of many Native Americans like Stehney, beneath the icon lies his spirit for conquest and an untold story of genocide, which ultimately led to the gradual takeover of Native American land.

This legacy has fostered Stehney's resentment toward Columbus. As a member of the Taino tribe, Stehney's people were the first Native Americans to encounter Columbus. Vivid in his view of Columbus are the historical records that he says indicate the murder and eradication of many of his people by Columbus and his men.

Yet what frustrates Stehney the most is the lack of awareness about Columbus's history.

Over the decades, efforts like those of NASA and Native Americans nationwide have initiated acknowledgement of the conflict behind the holiday. Though yesterday marked the federal holiday for Columbus Day, Michigan is one of the 17 states that does not observe it. California Rep. Joe Baca (D-Rialto) is also attempting to pass a federal bill which would change Columbus Day to Native American Day.

But ignoring the holiday, let alone altering it would also be overlooking Columbus's contributions, said Dona De Sanctis, the deputy executive director of the national Italian organization Sons of Italy.

Contrary to Native Americans, Italian Americans view Columbus Day as an Italian American ethnic holiday since he was an Italian explorer, De Sanctis said.

"It is the only holiday that recognizes the contributions of Italian Americans to the United States. We are largely absent from history books that children study in school. ... So we seize upon this one day," he said.

Regardless of the cruelty endured by Native Americans, De Sanctis said even opponents of the holiday cannot criticize the positive impact colonization had on America.

"If you blame Columbus for the colonization of America and the destruction of Native Americans, then you also have to thank him for bringing democracy, law, science, medicine, technology and all the benefits of civilization to the new world," he said.

Despite these arguments, Columbus Day is still an unjustified holiday, said Rackham student and Potawatomi Indian Jon Low. He added that in legal terms, the question comes down to why Columbus Day, an ethnic holiday, should be state-funded.

"Why should the tax payers be paying for this holiday? Why should we be subsidizing this holiday, when we aren't subsidizing any one else's ethnic holiday," he said.

Moreover, why is it necessary for Columbus to be the figurehead of an Italian American holiday, Low asked.

"As a native person, I would love to join Italian Americans in celebrating their heritage. But having Columbus as their symbol makes it difficult for us. It seems to me there are better ways to celebrate Italian culture," he said.

Yet beyond the issue over the holiday's meaning to Italian and Native Americans is his symbolism to Americans. Though hardly anyone celebrates Columbus Day, LSA freshman Billy Heisler said the idea of Columbus' greatness is prevalent among many Americans. He added that many students like him adopted this image of Columbus in elementary school.

"We learned that Columbus discovered America and sailed the ocean blue. We had picture books and it was just another story, so I didn't think much of it," he said.

For Heisler, that image of Columbus turned to fiction upon researching him for a paper in high school. Now Heisler said he remembers Columbus not as an American hero, but as a man who brutally mistreated many Native Americans.

Although he did discover America for Europeans, Heisler said he questions why Columbus deserves to have a holiday, whereas other great figures who contributed more to America do not have one. Yet at the same time, he said he acknowledges that Columbus is part of an American legend that all Americans have grown up living with and will most likely continue to do so.

"I think it is a folklore and we will always have it because it's always been there. Its' just part of what we expect from our traditions, even if they are not completely true."

But to Native American Studies Prof. Gregory Dowd, it might not only be due to an age-old tradition. Rather it may be apart of an American mindset that does not want to accept the dark reality of Columbus' impact.

"Maybe people don't want to recognize a great deal of harm that occurred from colonization."

Columbus may be a symbol of their origins for Americans, but to Native Americans his image only evokes a great deal of loss, he said. But in the end, Columbus is not solely responsible for the colonization of America.

Dowd said, "I wouldn't want Columbus to take the entire rap for what followed him in the United States, that diminishes American responsibility. ... The United States has plenty to answer for."

## Hero? Monster? No big deal?

Fans and foes of Columbus worlds apart; then there are those who don't care

By From Denver  
Denver Post Staff Writer

Christopher Columbus is a hero. A daring figure who stared down critics to find a new trade route across a perilous sea.

Or he is a murderous monster. A beast who slashed through the native people of the Caribbean like Genghis Khan through Asia.

Sandra Grays sees him differently: as an excuse for a holiday.

"I don't care whose birthday it is, as long as they're giving me a day off from work," said Grays, a recent transplant from Washington, D.C., enjoying a beer after work this week in a Denver bar.

Cities large and small across the country are preparing today for what has become an annual weekend of protest and party by groups who see Columbus in the context of either genocide or genuflection.

But no festivities are traditionally as heavily protested as those in Colorado - the birthplace of the celebration and vilification of Columbus.

It begins today in Denver, with what is billed as a peaceful Four Directions All Nations March to downtown. On Saturday, a protest march will precede the annual Columbus Day parade to take place near Coors Field.

The protests center on the belief of Indians and their allies that Columbus Day should be abolished. The legacy he left, they say, has ravaged countless cultures in the Americas. And worse, that history has been "sugarcoated," according to Glenn Morris of Colorado's American Indian Movement, who spoke to the City Club of Denver this week.

He held aloft a children's book on Columbus published in 1999 that shows a picture of happy Indians greeting the explorer.

"It's a day at the beach," Morris said. "It's a party. And then you compare that to the accounts of eyewitnesses. Millions of people were killed under the supervision of Columbus."

But Italian-American groups call Columbus a hero and a symbol for their culture.

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed Oct. 12 Columbus Day. President Richard Nixon later declared Columbus Day a national holiday to be observed the second Monday of each October.

"My education teaches specifically of a man named Christopher Columbus, who, at a time when most people believed the world to be flat, he believed the world to be round," said parade backer Gary Gambino at the same City Club event.

He was an adventurer, a discoverer, Gambino said, and "is worthy of admiration." He said such a journey taken in the 1400s is akin to space travel today. "The adversities he had to overcome were staggering."

Backers of Columbus Day also argue that the often-quoted eyewitness accounts of Columbus' atrocities were penned by one of his enemies. And, Gambino said, Columbus may not have been perfect, but he did not invent murder and thievery.

"No culture has ever been exempt," he said.

The arguments aside, to many in Denver the controversy over Denver's Columbus Day parade has been seen as squabbling between interest groups: offended Native Americans who annually square off with Italian-Americans who insist on holding Columbus up as a hero.

Residents such as Grays simply do not see the issue as a big deal. In fact, most view Columbus in a good way.

A survey of 500 Denver residents conducted this week showed 73 percent with a favorable view of Columbus. Twenty percent viewed Columbus unfavorably, 6 percent were unsure and 1 percent had no idea who he was, according to 9News Survey USA.

"The fighting isn't great, but the yawning is worse than the fighting," said Patricia Limerick, faculty director of the Center of the American West.

Limerick has been championing a better understanding of Columbus and his legacy. She fears that Columbus Day means too little to too many.

"Look at what Memorial Day is about now," she said. "It's become about barbecues, which hardly gets at the goal of thinking about war and its consequences. That's hardly the outcome we want for Columbus Day."

Not caring about Columbus Day also belies a small but powerful movement spurred by Native Americans and other groups to radically change the holiday.

One effort that is gaining momentum wants the federal government and all the states to stop using taxpayer money to pay for the Columbus Day holiday.

Far-fetched? Maybe not, according to some Western experts who point to a series of successes won throughout the United States.

In South Dakota, a group of bipartisan legislators led by a Republican governor renamed Columbus Day as Native American Day in 1990.

In all, 17 states have dropped Columbus Day as a state paid holiday, according to United Native America.

Limerick also said that in Denver, with few people caring, it is unlikely the schism between two ethnic groups that view something in a very different ways can be healed.

Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper met Monday with parade organizers and those who are planning to protest the parade.

Like his predecessor, he was unable to bring the two sides together.

In 1992, Mayor Wellington Webb, the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell met with parade organizers and protesters, with no resolution. Parade organizers canceled the parade that year, opting instead for a rally on the steps of the state Capitol.

In 2000, Italian-American groups restarted the parade, and the controversy has been just as fierce.

So far, parade organizers have rejected a request to rename the event an Italian heritage parade, saying they are allowed to name it anything they like under the First Amendment.

Russell Means, a founder of the American Indian Movement, said he and an American Indian elder are going to approach the Columbus Day parade leaders just as they start the 2 p.m. Saturday march. Means will ask the parade organizers to change the name "one last time."

Can a compromise be reached, given the mix of two passionate ethnic groups, and a vast majority of residents who may not care or know that much about the issue?

"I don't know, honestly," said South Dakota state Sen. Ed Olson, who proposed the legislation changing the holiday's name in that state. "It is worthy of a continued effort. Without dialogue, there will never be answers."