



“Unity in Action. Humanity in Motion.”

Christopher Columbus: The Man. The Myth. The Legend.

Reframing the Narrative for Indigenous Peoples Day

Who He Was — The Man

- Born circa 1451 in Genoa, Italy; trained as a sailor and navigator.
- Secured funding in 1492 from Ferdinand & Isabella of Spain for a westward voyage.
- Landed in the Caribbean (Bahamas), believing he had reached the “Indies.”
- First contact with the Taíno, Arawak, and other Indigenous communities of the Caribbean.
- Married Filipa Moniz Perestrelo and had a son, Diego Columbus; later had another son, Ferdinand Columbus.

The Myth

- Common narrative: “Columbus discovered America” — erases Indigenous presence and history.
- Eurocentric framing: Columbus as a heroic pioneer, brave and visionary.
- Used in U.S. national mythology to justify colonization, westward expansion, Manifest Destiny.
- Widely taught in schools and celebrated in monuments, often omitting the violence that followed.

The Legend Versus the Reality

Violence, Enslavement, & Genocide:

- Instituted encomienda systems forcing Indigenous labor; slavery, abuse, mutilation, and executions were widespread.
- Reports from contemporaries describe Columbus’s orders for harsh punishment and enslavement.
- Indigenous populations in the Caribbean collapsed rapidly from disease, warfare, forced labor, starvation, and displacement.
- Columbus’s own writings describe the taking of “slaves” and exploitation of Indigenous women and girls.

Long-Term Impact:

- Columbus’s voyages initiated the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization of the Americas.
- His actions set precedent for subsequent conquest, displacement, and systemic oppression of Indigenous nations.

The Contemporary Turn

Indigenous Peoples Day:

- Celebrated on the same day (second Monday in October) to center Indigenous voices, histories, and survival.
- Many states and municipalities have replaced or added Indigenous Peoples Day in place of or alongside Columbus Day.
- In 2021, President Biden issued a proclamation recognizing Indigenous Peoples Day and acknowledging the “painful past” of colonization and violence.



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Trump’s 2025 Proclamation:

- On October 9, 2025, President Trump issued a proclamation designating October 13 as Columbus Day, praising Columbus as “a true American hero.”
- The proclamation framed efforts to reevaluate his legacy as “left-wing radicals” trying to “erase our history.”
- Trump said he will not recognize Indigenous Peoples Day alongside Columbus Day, calling the reevaluation “an attack on our civilization.”
- Critics note that Columbus Day was never abolished — Trump’s rhetoric symbolizes cultural resistance to historical truth-telling.

Why This Matters Today

- Historical justice & truth-telling: A more accurate narrative acknowledges Indigenous loss, resistance, and intersectional histories.
- Recognition & respect: Indigenous Peoples Day celebrates Indigenous resilience, cultures, languages, and sovereignty.
- Critical thinking in education: Encourages examination of whose stories are elevated and whose are marginalized.
- Power of symbols: Holidays, monuments, and national rhetoric shape memory and values.

Questions to Ponder

- If Columbus “discovered” the Americas, who was already here?
- What gets lost when we celebrate explorers without accountability?
- How does choosing to name or rename public symbols affect collective memory?
- What would a history centered around Indigenous perspectives look like?

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