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# Columbus Day holiday perpetuates 'big lie'

By Glenn Morris

**B**etween now and October 1992 (the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Western Hemisphere) a great international debate about Columbus, the man, and the legacy of his voyages will take place.

It is fitting that the first rounds of that debate should begin in Colorado. Colorado was among the first states to proclaim Columbus Day a state holiday, and it was through the efforts of some Colorado Italians, among others, that Columbus Day was elevated to a national holiday in 1968.

Vincent Carroll's recent appraisal of Columbus as a historical figure worthy of a national holiday (March 11 commentary, "Columbus has skeletons in his closet, but who doesn't?") laid bare the essential points of one side in this debate. The other side of the question was superficially presented by the media in their coverage of a Columbus Day rally held last October in Denver's Civic Center Park.

In his column, Carroll posed the question, "Was Columbus such a terrible guy?" In a word, yes, but that question only touches the surface of the issue. Even by the standards of the 15th century, Columbus was a cruel and inhumane man, but confronting only that point leaves other very important issues unresolved.

A more important question is: What does honoring a man like Columbus say about our national sense of ethics and morality?

To address the first question, about Columbus the man, remember back to your elementary school lessons about Columbus' arrival. We were taught that Columbus was a brave and expert captain and navigator, who discovered America and brought with him the blessings of European civilization, upon which contemporary American society has been constructed.

In truth, Columbus should not be considered a great navigator. After all, he was off course by half a planet, and he went to his grave believing that he had discovered a new route to China. However, the point of Columbus' navigational or geographical prowess is of little importance except to illustrate that the Columbus myth is rife with inaccuracies.

A more important point concerns the lie that Columbus "discovered" America. Discovery is used as a euphemism to mean



The Columbus statue at Civic Center has been an object of controversy.

that because no European culture or peoples were discovered here, the theft and plunder of the hemisphere was justified.

We know now, of course, that the only thing that Columbus discovered was that he was lost. According to demographer Henry F. Dobyns, the indigenous population of the Western Hemisphere in 1492 was between 90 million and 112 million people, and the population of North America was between 10 million and 18 million. How could Columbus discover a place already populated by more than 100 million people?

Another demographer, Russell Thornton, estimates that between Columbus' arrival and the beginning of the 20th century, the indigenous population in this hemisphere was reduced by 96%, because of massacres and the introduction of European-rooted diseases. It should come as no surprise that an event that ushered in a

holocaust, which destroyed tens of millions of our people, is not a reason for celebration of indigenous peoples.

Can Columbus, the man, be blamed for this decimation? In part, yes, primarily because he began it.

The brutality of the Europeans towards the Indians is difficult to overstate. In his account of the invasion, *The Devastation of the Indies*, Dominican friar Bartolome de Las Casas recounts brutality that makes the Gestapo look like amateurs.

After describing the Indians as "the most humble, patient and peaceable . . . of any people in the world," Las Casas recounts their treatment at the hands of the invaders: Columbus' men "laid bets as to who, with one stroke of the sword, could split a man in two. . . . They took infants from their mother's breasts, snatching them by the legs and pitching them head-first against the crags . . . roaring with

laughter and saying as the babies fell into the water, 'Boil there, offspring of the devil.'"

The most dastardly legacy of Columbus, however, was known as the *encomienda* system, a variant of which can still be found throughout Latin America where significant Indian populations exist, such as in Guatemala and southern Mexico. Under this system, the European invaders would parcel out Indian lands for purposes of mining or agriculture and Indians would be enslaved to work the lands. Hundreds of thousands were literally worked to death in this arrangement.

This brings us to perhaps the most serious question in the Columbus debate — not whether Columbus was a good or bad person, but how U.S. society remembers its own history and celebrates it.

Think, again, of your own education about Columbus. Was there any mention of the contributions of the Indians to the world? Probably not. Did you learn that approximately 220 drugs found in the *Pharmacopoeia of the United States* were originally used by indigenous peoples? Or that Indian people engaged in brain surgery and dental surgery before Columbus arrived?

You probably did not learn that Indian societies had developed some of the most sophisticated political institutions in the world. The democratic system of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy was even copied by the framers of the U.S. Constitution.

One compelling explanation is that history has been written almost exclusively from the European perspective. This denial of legitimacy to the Indian viewpoint and the Indian voice provides only a parody of history for future generations.

Columbus Day is a lie that should be abolished because it is a racist justification of genocide. It sends a dangerous message to young people in this society. At the least, it teaches them that it is morally acceptable to find the property of other people, seize it, kill the people in possession of it and then be venerated as a hero. At most, it is reflective of a malignant self-deception about who the people of the United States are.

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