

On Celebrating Columbus Day

Columbus Day is celebrated as a holiday in most of the United States. The 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas inspired a spirited national debate on whether this event is worthy of celebration.

As you read the differing points of view on honoring Christopher Columbus, consider your position on this controversial issue.

A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

David Archambault, a Lakota, is president of the American Indian College Fund.

During this quincentenary of Columbus's voyage, attention is once again focused on what the white man brought to this land and on Columbus himself. This man who made such a remarkable journey has become the stuff of legend as well as history. He is admired and detested, exalted and condemned. Columbus Day will surely never be a favorite holiday among Indians, but we should consider Columbus for what he was—not for what we may wish he had been.

Columbus was a skilled and courageous mariner who led his ships across uncharted waters. He found land and people unknown to Europeans. He discovered a sea route between Europe and America. . . .

Columbus came here, however, not to trade, but to conquer; he came to enrich himself and enslave his captives. His mission, in the words of his royal charter, was to "discover and acquire" all new lands as well as "pearls, precious stones, gold, silver," and other valuables. He would write back to Spain, "From here, in the name of the Blessed Trinity, we can send all the slaves that can be sold."

Columbus was a man of his time. He felt inspired by his God, empowered by his monarch, and reassured by the rightness of his cause. He was sailing, as the saying had it, for "God, glory, and gold." If he had objected to enslaving others and taking their lands, someone else may have gotten that royal charter. To me, Columbus is neither hero nor villain, but rather a symbol of a world forevermore transformed. His culture and mine have never fully made peace.

A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

Donald J. Senese is a former Assistant Secretary of Education and a charter member of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission.

This year we are celebrating the quincentennial of the founding, discovery, or encounter with the American continent, an event of great historical, cultural, and political significance. The mere fact that I used other terms beyond the common word "discovery" is an indication of a problem we face in celebrating this event.

Many of us have spent many years looking forward to this great occasion which created one of the truly great revolutions in world society and history.

We can truly say that when Columbus "sailed the ocean blue in 1492" the result of his adventure created such a revolution, an earthquake in the scale of historical events, that the world has never been the same again. . . .

We can concede that in the process of discovery, conquest, and eventually assimilation, certain injustices occurred. Yet, our concession on this point must not obscure the overall picture of what happened when two distinct societies came into contact. The overall picture is much more positive than the critics prefer to paint it. . . .

In considering whether Columbus was a hero or villain, we must look at the broader picture. We must put aside narrow ideological considerations to view the greater concept of how this remarkable person changed the world by—and you can choose your own term—his "discovery," or "encounter," or "exchange." Whichever one you select, it does not diminish the remarkable achievements of Christopher Columbus and a fair assessment which leaves him as a hero not only for his times but our times as well.

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES (continued)

A LATINO PERSPECTIVE

Richard Rodriguez is an editor with Pacific News Service and an author.

Five hundred years after Christopher Columbus set foot in the Americas, Indians are alive and growing in number from the tip of South America to the Arctic Circle. If you do not believe me, look at brown Mexico City. . . .

We know from our history books that Indians died from their contact with the Europeans. But those who tell you only this cannot account for the tens of millions of Indians who are alive today. I am, for example, of Mexican ancestry. I am mestizo, of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. I am alive and I count my life to be the result not simply of the European's will on my ancestral Indian mother but of her interest in the European, too. Oh, the poor Indian! The white lament is that the Indian lost her soul when the European arrived, lost her gods, lost her purity, lost her virginity. But in 1992 it is Europe that has lost its God. The religion of Spain—I mean Roman Catholicism—is now centered in the Latin Americas. Christianity is an Indian religion. The Indian has stolen your God!

Do not pity the Indian in this year of Columbus. Spanish is an Indian language now. The capital of the Spanish-speaking world is Mexico City, not Madrid. . . .

Five hundred years ago, the European met the Indian and vice versa. But what is 500 years? Who among us can say how the story of Columbus will end?

A "EUROCENTRIC" PERSPECTIVE

Malcolm S. Forbes, Jr., is editor-in-chief of Forbes magazine.

In 1892 America exuberantly celebrated the quadricentennial of Columbus' "discovery" of the New World. The 500th anniversary, by contrast, is passing with the barest of notice. Controversy swirls around it as certain historians, environmentalists and "native activists" portray the Spanish-financed Italian's voyage as the beginning of a barbarous, rapacious assault on the innocent peoples and ecology of North and South America.

The criticisms are mostly nonsense, but are a sign of how warped a view of our history many people now have.

The Spanish and other Europeans did not introduce war and inhumanity to the New World. They were here in abundance already. Most groups and tribes had no inhibitions about attacking each other. Conflicts were incessant. Prisoners were routinely tortured, killed and sometimes eaten. . . . The New World was no paradise when Columbus set sail.

Nor was European migration to the New World a new happening in history. What makes Columbus and the subsequent "voyages of discovery" of unique historical importance—and worthy of celebration—is the civilization they spawned in North America. . . .

For all our faults, there has been no other country that has enjoyed as much freedom as we have. Nor has there been another so open to outsiders and that has had such a positive impact on other nations and peoples. Columbus deserves more than a shrug or an accusing finger.

DEBATING THE ISSUE

You are a member of Congress debating a bill to make Columbus Day a national holiday. Write a statement that you will deliver on the floor of the House of Representatives or the Senate for or against passage of the bill. Begin by identifying yourself (name, state or district, and party affiliation), explain how you view the controversy, and give reasons to support your position.