



Columbus Day Renamed “Indigenous People’s Day” by Some Cities

Columbus Day, traditionally October 12, but observed as a federal holiday on the second Monday in October since 1970, evokes fond memories among Americans who remember celebrating the day in school by cutting out construction paper images of the Niña, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, and by singing: “In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.”



This year, however, the cities of Seattle and Minneapolis are celebrating “Indigenous People’s Day” in place of a day that has a long, proud tradition in America. The Seattle City Council voted last week to replace Columbus Day with another holiday to celebrate “the thriving cultures and values of Indigenous Peoples in our region.”

And the Minneapolis City Council approved a similar measure in April “to reflect upon the ongoing struggles of Indigenous people on this land, and to celebrate the thriving culture and value that Dakota, Ojibwa and other indigenous nations add to our city.”

President Benjamin Harrison called on Americans to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the landing of Columbus in the New World in 1892, but it did not become a federal holiday until 1934, when President Franklin Roosevelt designated it as such in response to lobbying by both the Knights of Columbus and Italian-American New York newspaper publisher Generoso Pope. Pope also founded the annual Columbus Day parade in New York City.

A CNN report noted that in many cities, Columbus Day is a celebration of Italian-American heritage, and eliminating the holiday did not sit well with Americans of Italian ancestry.

“Italian-Americans are deeply offended,” Lisa Marchese, a lawyer affiliated with the Order Sons of Italy in America, was quoted by the *Seattle Times* as saying. “By this resolution, you say to all Italian-Americans that the city of Seattle no longer deems your heritage or your community worthy of recognition.”

Seattle resident Ralph Fascitelli told the Associated Press after the city council voted to change the holiday: “This is a big insult to those of us of Italian heritage. We feel disrespected.”

Though never a widely celebrated holiday, the day has enjoyed popularity among Italian Americans (as a day of ethnic pride akin to the Irish Americans’ celebration of St. Patrick’s Day) and in New England, where it coincides with the peak of the fall foliage season and provides leaf peepers with a convenient three-day weekend to go up North and view the flaming maples.

But for years, Columbus Day was one of those barely noticed holidays like Flag Day or Arbor Day that



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was observed but not made a big deal over by most people. It was certainly not a subject of controversy. In recent times, however, the celebration of Columbus Day has come under attack, mostly from organizations composed of, or sympathetic to, native American Indians, whose history unquestionably included abuse by European Americans. However, to attribute four centuries of abuse (which was by no means universal) to the arrival of Columbus is a classical logical fallacy: *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (“after this, therefore because of this.”)

Prompted by efforts to hold Columbus responsible for the subjugation of American Indians, the stealing of their historic lands, and removal of them to reservations (which, granted, are legitimate grievances) several locales have stopped celebrating Columbus Day in recent years.

Berkeley, California, was the first U.S. city to change the name of Columbus Day to Indigenous People’s Day in 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s first voyage. However, South Dakota has celebrated the second Monday in October as Native American Day since 1990.

In an interview included in a recent *Time* magazine article — “How Indigenous Peoples Day Came to Be — included a quote from California State Senator Lori Hancock, who was mayor of Berkeley in 1992. Back then, she had told *Time* that Columbus Day celebrations have been “Eurocentric and [have] ignored the brutal realities of the colonization of indigenous peoples.”

In the recent *Time* interview, Hancock utilized the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy to justify the change:

[Columbus] was one of the first Europeans to get to the American continent, but there was a lot of history that came after that in terms of the wiping out of native people. It just didn’t seem appropriate. It seemed like a reemphasizing of history and recognizing that to be very ethnocentric really diminishes us all.

The *Time* article accepted Hancock’s explanation about the origins of Indigenous Peoples Day, stating: “The idea came to Berkeley after the First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indian Resistance in Quito, Ecuador, in 1990. That led to another conference among Northern Californian Native American groups.”

That explanation omits a very significant, but little-known, piece of Indigenous Peoples Day history — that the day was first proposed at a UN conference in 1977, the International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas, held in Geneva. The Quito conference mentioned in *Time* merely took that idea and ran with it. Attendees at that conference formed the Bay Area Indian Alliance, and the Resistance 500 task force, which convinced the city council of Berkeley to declare October 12, a “Day of Solidarity with Indigenous People,” and 1992 the “Year of Indigenous People.”

In 1994, the UN declared an International Day of the World’s Indigenous People, but, fearful about creating resentment in some member nations, chose August 9 instead of the traditional Columbus Day. October 12 is celebrated as Día de la Raza (“Day of the Race”) in many Latin American countries, and Día de la Hispanidad and Fiesta Nacional in Spain.

Some of the most vehement criticism of Columbus Day celebrations has come from the radical American Indian Movement (AIM) and its philosophical allies. What is less known is that AIM objects not only to Columbus Day, but also Thanksgiving, which it asserts should be a national day of mourning. (AIM shares these goals with United American Indians of New England [UAINEN], which has protested



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Thanksgiving since 1970.)

Unknown to most Americans, AIM has an unsavory past. The group was founded in 1969 by three men named Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and George Mitchell who at the time of AIM's founding had accumulated 42 convictions for assault, armed robbery, and criminal violence among them. They were soon joined by Russell Means, who also had a criminal background.

Means and AIM first received media attention when they led a group of Indian protesters who seized control of a replica of the Mayflower in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on Thanksgiving Day 1970. (Remember, AIM opposed not only Columbus Day, but Thanksgiving.) Means later attempted to gain control of the Mount Rushmore monument in South Dakota.

In 1973, Means and his AIM colleagues led hundreds of other militants in a takeover of the village of Wounded Knee, South Dakota. After they occupied the area for more than two months, they were forced out after a violent confrontation in which several Indians were killed and a federal official was severely wounded.

In his 1996 book *Where White Men Fear to Tread*, Means wrote: "I planned to kill a few rednecks at random... Most of the whites I wanted dead were U.S. Congressmen, Senators, federal and state appellate judges — the most visible proponents of institutionalized racism."

In 2007, Means and 80 other protesters were arrested in Denver after they disrupted a Columbus Day parade, which they stated was a "celebration of genocide."

While not every proponent of replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous People's Day may share in AIM's radicalism, it might be wise for those who fall into the anti-Columbus Day trap to think about the company they want to keep.

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