AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

COLUMBUS DAY/ INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY

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Considering Columbus Day's Complexities

History is replete with complexity. Part of teaching our students our storied past is to have them sift through the various layers, propelling them to make meaning of it. Columbus Day was first recognized by President Benjamin Harrison in 1892 when he declared it a national celebration in honor of the 400th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 New World voyage. In 1934, FDR designated October 12 as Columbus Day, and in 1968, Columbus Day was established as a national holiday set as the second Monday in October, effective in 1971. While commissioned by the Spanish for his expedition, Columbus was a native Italian, and many Italian Americans consider Columbus Day to be a day recognizing their heritage. By the turn of the 20th century, a cluster of states began replacing the celebration of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day, or Native American Day, paying homage to the devastation incurred by the conquest of the New World. Today, many states do not celebrate Columbus Day, although it remains a federal holiday.

Source 1: Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Statement on Columbus Day." October 12, 1940

The voyage of Christopher Columbus and his diminutive fleet toward the unknown west was not only a prelude to a new historical era. For the brave navigator, it was the culmination of years of bold speculation, careful preparation, and struggle against opponents who had belittled his great plan and thwarted its execution. Expounding the strange doctrine that beyond the ocean stood solid, habitable earth, Columbus had first to make his views plausible to his doubting patrons and then to overcome the seemingly endless array of obstacles with which men of little minds barred the way to the fitting out of a fleet. Even when the three small ships were well away on their epoch-making course the crews mutinied and demanded that he turn back. Columbus, however, held to his course and on the morning of October 12, 1492, the welcome land was sighted.

The courage and the faith and the vision of the Genoese navigator glorify and enrich the drama of the early movement of European people to America. Columbus and his fellow voyagers were the harbingers of later mighty movements of people from Spain, from Columbus's native Italy and from every country in Europe. And out of the fusion of all these national strains was created the America to which the Old World contributed so magnificently.

This year when we contemplate the estate to which the world has been brought by destructive forces, with lawlessness and wanton power ravaging an older civilization, and with our own republic girding itself for the defense of its institutions, we can revitalize our faith and renew our courage by a recollection of the triumph of Columbus after a period of grievous trial.

The promise which Columbus's discovery gave to the world, of a new beginning in the march of human progress, has been in process of fulfillment for four centuries. Our task is now to make strong our conviction that in spite of setbacks that process will go on toward fulfillment.

Source 2: Biden, Joseph R. Jr. "A Proclamation on Columbus Day, 2021" October 8, 2021

More than 500 years ago, after securing the support of Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II, Christopher Columbus launched the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria from the coast of Spain in 1492. While he intended to end his quest in Asia, his 10-week journey instead landed him on the shores of the Bahamas, making Columbus the first of many Italian explorers to arrive in what would later become known as the Americas.

Many Italians would follow his path in the centuries to come, risking poverty, starvation, and death in pursuit of a better life. Today, millions of Italian Americans continue to enrich our country's traditions and culture and make lasting contributions to our Nation — they are educators, health care workers, scientists, first responders, military service members, and public servants, among so many other vital roles.

Today, we also acknowledge the painful history of wrongs and atrocities that many European explorers inflicted on Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities. It is a measure of our greatness as a Nation that we do not seek to bury these shameful episodes of our past — that we face them honestly, we bring them to the light, and we do all we can to address them. For Native Americans, western exploration ushered in a wave of devastation: violence perpetrated against Native communities, displacement and theft of Tribal homelands, the introduction and spread of disease, and more. On this day, we recognize this painful past and recommit ourselves to investing in Native communities, upholding our solemn and sacred commitments to Tribal sovereignty, and pursuing a brighter future centered on dignity, respect, justice, and opportunity for all people.

In commemoration of Christopher Columbus's historic voyage 529 years ago, the Congress, by joint resolution of April 30, 1934, and modified in 1968 (36 U.S.C. 107), as amended, has requested the President proclaim the second Monday of October of each year as "Columbus Day." Today, let this day be one of reflection — on America's spirit of exploration, on the courage and contributions of Italian Americans throughout the generations, on the dignity and resilience of Tribal Nations and Indigenous communities, and on the work that remains ahead of us to fulfill the promise of our Nation for all.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR., President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim October 11, 2021, as Columbus Day. I direct that the flag of the United States be displayed on all public buildings on the appointed day in honor of our diverse history and all who have contributed to shaping this Nation.

Source 3: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Excerpt from "Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies." 1542

(Bartolomé de Las Casas was a Spanish priest and historian who lived from 1484 to 1566)

Those that arrived at these Islands from the remotest parts of Spain, and who pride themselves in the Name of Christians, steered Two courses principally, in order to the Extirpation, and Exterminating of this People from the face of the Earth. The first whereof was raising an unjust, bloody, cruel War. The other, by putting them to death, who hitherto, thirsted after their Liberty, or designed (which the most Potent, Strenuous and Magnanimous Spirits intended) to recover their pristine Freedom, and shake off the Shackles of so injurious a Captivity: For they being taken off in War, none but Women and Children were permitted to enjoy the benefit of that Country-Air…

Now the ultimate end and scope that incited the Spaniards to endeavor the Extirpation and Desolation of this People, was Gold only…Finally, in one word, their Ambition and Avarice, than which the heart of Man never entertained greater, and the vast Wealth of those Regions; the Humility and Patience of the Inhabitants (which made their approach to these Lands more easy) did much promote the business: Whom they so despicably contemned, that they treated them (I speak of things which I was an Eye Witness of, without the least fallacy) not as Beasts, which I cordially wished they would, but as the most abject dung and filth of the Earth; and so solicitous they were of their Life and Soul, that the above-mentioned number of People died without understanding the true Faith or Sacraments. And this also is as really true that the _Spaniards_ never received any injury from the Indians, but that they rather reverenced them as Persons descended from Heaven, until that they were compelled to take up Arms, provoked thereunto by repeated Injuries, violent Torments, and unjust Butcheries.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does FDR illustrate the value of resilience through Columbus' Expedition to the New World? Is there a moment that you can think of that required resilience? How did it make you stronger?

2. Which two opposing forces do Presidents FDR and Biden each juxtapose?

3. What does President Biden mean when he says, "It is a measure of our greatness as a Nation that we do not seek to bury these shameful episodes of our past — that we face them honestly, we bring them to the light, and we do all we can to address them?"

4. How should the above quote shape our perception of how we regard complex historical chapters that occurred before our national progress?

5. How do accounts such as those offered by Bartolomé de Las Casas provide a moral voice amidst what FDR refers to "a new beginning in the march of human progress?"