**Can we still celebrate October 12 as an American holiday?**

One man, two narratives:

1. Born to a working-class wool weaver in the port city of Genoa, Italy, Cristoforo Colombo apprenticed as a sailor and went to sea as early as age ten. A self-taught and curious man, Colombo lived by his wits and rose in the heady world of 15th-century sea traders, until he hit upon an ingenious idea: He would outflank the Mohammedan Turks and reach the East Indies by sailing west across the Ocean Sea. After weathering nearly a decade of rejection and failure, in 1492 Colombo won the support of the Spanish Crown and set off on an uncertain journey that inadvertently opened a New World, laying the foundation for that most glittering daughter of the Western heritage: America.

2. Christopher Columbus, a dead white male of the worst variety, was a slaver, a capitalist, and a murderer of millions who embarked on a voyage motivated only by greed, which brought European imperialism to the shores of the “New World” and laid waste the ancient indigenous peoples there. Columbus deserves little credit (Leif Erikson had “discovered” the “new” continent 500 years earlier) and much blame for the horrors of the Columbian Exchange — the vast transfer of people, animals, and plants between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres. In his wake, the “New World” suffered smallpox, starvation, the cruel subjugation of the indigenous peoples, and the establishment of that most dastardly spawn of the West: America.

\*      \*      \* Writing in The Atlantic in 1992, in the run-up to the 500th anniversary of Columbus’s landfall on the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. noted that the “great hero of the nineteenth century seems well on the way to becoming the great villain of the twenty-first.” The accusations were heavy. “Columbus, it is now charged,” Schlesinger continued, “far from being the pioneer of progress and enlightenment, was in fact the pioneer of oppression, racism, slavery, rape, theft, vandalism, extermination, and ecological desolation.”

The Internet is full of condemnation of Columbus: the Daily Dot: “8 Reasons to Hate Columbus Day”; the Huffington Post: “Columbus Day? True Legacy: Cruelty and Slavery”; and snarky Columbus Day e-greeting cards: “Columbus: A Real Illegal Alien.” In June, a statue of Columbus in Boston’s North End was vandalized with red paint and the phrase “Black Lives Matter.” In September, the Graduate Student Senate at the University of Oklahoma, my alma mater, passed a resolution (unanimously) renaming Columbus Day “Indigenous Peoples Day.” San Francisco, Seattle, and Minneapolis, among other American cities, have extirpated their Columbus Day parades. Even Columbus, Ohio, has ditched its official celebration. “We proposed this to give everyone a day of healing,” said Jesse Robbins of Indigenize OU after the vote to boot Columbus from Oklahoma’s flagship public university. The implication being that we all carry wounds inflicted at Columbus’s hands.

But what are we to make of this Genoese sailor and his appointed day? Should we celebrate the man who led three little wooden ships across an ocean and changed the course of history? Or was Columbus a greedy psychopath who today would be vilified as a genocidal war criminal?

First, to dispel a myth, Columbus Day is actually not the Italian-American equivalent of St. Patrick’s Day for Irish-Americans — although Italian-Americans have (and rightly so) long taken pride in Columbus’s Italian origins. There were celebrations in New York City commemorating the 300th anniversary of his journey in 1792, long before Italians had settled in the city in any numbers. In fact, Columbus has been celebrated on this continent and in this country for over two centuries. King’s College in Upper Manhattan became Columbia College in 1784, and the nation’s capital was established in the District of Columbia in 1791. “Hail Columbia” competed with “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the nation’s unofficial national anthem until 1931. And, for a brief period after the American Revolution, there was even a movement to name the new country simply “Columbia.” For most of American history, Columbus Day was associated with a celebration of the American experience. President Benjamin Harrison, in 1892, proclaimed “the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, as a general holiday for the people of the United States.” “On that day,” President Harrison continued, “let the people, so far as possible, cease from toil and devote themselves to such exercises as may best express honor to the discoverer and their appreciation of the great achievements of the four completed centuries of American life.” President Roosevelt unashamedly credited Columbus and his men as “harbingers” of the great movement of people from the Old World to the New. In the midst of a world war, Roosevelt asked the American people to “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,” but knowing “we can revitalize our faith and renew our courage by a recollection of the triumph of Columbus after a period of grievous trial.” Ronald Reagan, on the approach to the quincentennial, did not hesitate to root Columbus firmly in the American family, remarking that he “was a dreamer, a man of vision and courage, a man filled with hope for the future and with the determination to cast off for the unknown and sail into uncharted seas for the joy of finding whatever was there.” “Put it all together and you might say that Columbus was the inventor of the American dream,” Reagan said. “Yes, Columbus Day is an American holiday, a day to celebrate not only an intrepid searcher but the dreams and opportunities that brought so many here after him and all that they and all immigrants have given to this land.” That’s a hell of an endorsement. But what of the accusations of disaster and genocide brought against Columbus? Should we indict the man, his voyages, and, in turn, ourselves and our country for the all that followed from contact between the Old World and the New? Arthur Schlesinger thought we should have a bit of perspective: “Revisionism redresses the balance up to a point; but, driven by Western guilt, it may verge on masochism.” Columbus, Schlesinger believes, might have benefited from a bit of perspective as well: “Had Columbus foreseen even a portion of all the sins he would be held accountable for five centuries later, he might never have bothered to discover America.” Let us dispense with any pretense that the indigenous peoples of the Americas lived in a peaceful idyll in harmony with their neighbors and with nature, and that the advent of Columbus destroyed a noble paradise. The great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere were indeed advanced, and yet, like Europeans, Asians, and Africans, the American peoples used their technology to subjugate. Anyone familiar with the expansionist and warlike cultures of the Aztec and Inca Empires should know that the tables would have been turned had it been the New World that “discovered” the Old and possessed the power to conquer it. Human nature, tainted with original sin, is what it is and has been — of that we can be certain. Europeans, beginning with Columbus, treated the Indians pitilessly — that should not be whitewashed or forgotten — but, in the same way, we should not ignore the genuine good that has come down to us as a result of the course of human events — namely, the space for a unique idea to grow and flourish: the self-government of a free people, with an ever-expanding idea of who can partake of that promise. How much is Columbus personally responsible for all of this — for the good and the ill? Only as much as any one man can be. How much is Columbus personally responsible for all of this — for the good and the ill? Only as much as any one man can be. As the historian William J. Connell has written, “What Columbus gets criticized for nowadays are attitudes that were typical of the European sailing captains and merchants who plied the Mediterranean and the Atlantic in the 15th century. Within that group he was unquestionably a man of daring and unusual ambition.” Connell concluded that “what really mattered was his landing on San Salvador, which was a momentous, world-changing occasion such as has rarely happened in human history.” Unlike Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Columbus Day marks an event — landfall in the New World — not one man’s birthday. As such, it is akin to the greatest American holiday, Independence Day. The two serve as important markers in our journey as a people: the opening act and, then, the promissory note of our long and complicated struggle. A great and complicated people should not shirk its history on a date meant for the commemoration of a great man and his great achievement. — Mark Antonio Wright is an assistant editor at National Review.

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