



Why Autonomous AIM Opposes Columbus Day and Columbus Day Parades ©

by Glenn Morris and Russell Means

See also, Transform Columbus Day

When Taino Indians saved Christopher Columbus from certain death on the fateful morning of Oct. 12, 1492, a glorious opportunity presented itself. The cultures Europe of and the Americas could have merged and the beauty of both races could have flourished.

Unfortunately, what occurred was neither beautiful nor heroic. Just as Columbus could not, and did not, "discover" a hemisphere that was already inhabited by nearly 100 million people, his arrival cannot, and will not, be recognized as a heroic and celebratory event by indigenous peoples.

Unlike the Western tradition, which presumes some absolute concept of objective truth, and consequently, one "factual" depiction of history, the indigenous view recognizes that there exist many truths in the world and many legitimate recollections of any given historical event, depending on one's perspective and experiences.

From an indigenous vantage point, Columbus' arrival was a disaster from the beginning. Although his own diaries indicated that he was greeted by the Taino Indians with the most generous hospitality he had ever known, he immediately began the enslavement and slaughter of the Indian peoples of the Caribbean islands. As the eminent Columbus

biographer Samuel Eliot Morison admits in his book, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, Columbus was personally responsible for enslavement and murder of indigenous peoples. He was personally responsible for the design and operation of the encomienda system that tied Indians as slaves to the lands stolen from them by the European invaders.

As detailed in the *American Heritage Magazine* (October, 1976), Columbus personally oversaw the genocide of the Taino Indian nation of what is now Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Consequently, this murderer, despite his historical notoriety, deserves no recognition or accolades as a hero; he deserves no respect as a visionary; and he is not worthy of a state or national holiday in his honor.

Defenders of Columbus and his holiday argue that indigenous peoples unfairly judge Columbus, a 15th century actor, by the moral and legal standards of the late 20th century. Such a defense implies that no moral or legal constraints applied to individuals such as Columbus, or countries, in 1492. As Roger Williams details in his book, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought*, not only were there European moral and legal principles in 1492, but they largely favored the rights of indigenous peoples to be free from unjustified invasion and pillage by Europeans.

Unfortunately, the issue of Columbus and Columbus Day is not easily resolvable with a disposition of Columbus, the man. Columbus Day as a national, and international, phenomenon reflects a much larger dynamic that promotes myriad myths and historical lies that have been used through the ages to dehumanize Indians, justifying the theft of our lands, the attempted destruction of our nations, and the genocide against our people. Since the 15th Century, the myth of Columbus' discovery has been used in the development of laws and policies that reek of Orwell's doublespeak: theft equals the righteous spread of civilization, genocide is God's deliverance of the wilderness from the savages, and the destruction of Indian societies implies the superiority of European values and institutions over indigenous ones.

Columbus Day is a perpetuation of racist assumptions that the Western Hemisphere was a wasteland cluttered with savages awaiting the blessings of Western "civilization." Throughout the hemisphere, educational systems perpetuate these myths - suggesting that indigenous peoples have contributed nothing to the world, and, consequently, should be grateful for their colonization and their microwave ovens.

As Alfred Crosby, Kirkpatrick Sale, and Jack Weatherford have illustrated in their books, not only was the Western Hemisphere a virtual ecological and health paradise prior to 1492, but the Indians of the Americas have been responsible for such revolutionary global contributions as the model for U.S. constitutional government, agricultural advances that currently provide 60 percent of the world's daily diet, and hundreds of medical and medicinal techniques still in use today.

If you find it difficult to believe that Indians had developed highly complex and sophisticated societies, then you have been victimized by an educational and social system that has given you a retarded, distorted view of history. The operation of this view has also enabled every country in this hemisphere, including the U.S., to continue its destruction of Indian peoples. From the jungles of Brazil to the highlands of Guatemala, from the Chaco of

Paraguay to the Supreme Court of the United States, Indian people remain in a perpetual state of danger from the systems that Christopher Columbus began in 1492.

Throughout the Americas, Indian people remain at the bottom of every socioeconomic indicator, we are under continuing physical attack, and are afforded the least access to economic, political, or legal redress. Despite these constant and unbridled assaults, we have resisted, we have survived, and we refuse to surrender any more of our homeland or to disappear into the romantic sunset.

To dignify Columbus and his legacy with parades, holidays and other celebrations is intolerable to us. As the original peoples of this land, we cannot, and will not, countenance social and political festivities that celebrate our genocide. We are embarking on a two-pronged campaign in the quincentenary year to confront the continuing racism against Indian people.

First, we are advocating that the divisive Columbus Day holiday should be replaced by a celebration that is much more inclusive and more accurately reflective of the cultural and racial richness of the Americas. Such a holiday will provide respect and acknowledgement to every group and individual of the importance and value of their heritage, and will allow a more honest and accurate portrayal of the evolution of the hemisphere. It will also provide an opportunity for greater understanding and respect as our societies move ahead into the next 500 years. Opponents to this suggestion react as though this proposal is an attack on ancient time-honored holiday, but Columbus Day has been a national holiday only since 1971 - and in 1991, hopefully, we can correct the errors of the past, moving forward in an atmosphere of mutual respect and inclusiveness.

Second, and related to the first, is the advancement of an active militant campaign to demand that federal, state, and local authorities begin the removal of anti-Indian icons throughout the country. Beginning with Columbus, we are insisting on the removal of statues, street names, public parks, and any other public object that seeks to celebrate or honor devastators of Indian peoples. We will take an active role of opposition to public displays, parades, and celebrations that champion Indian haters. We encourage others, in every community in the land, to educate themselves and to take responsibility for the removal of anti-Indian vestiges among them.

For people of goodwill, there is no better time for the re-examination of the past, and a rectification of the historical record for future generations, than the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival. There is no better place for this re-examination to begin than in Colorado, the birthplace of the Columbus Day holiday.

Russell Means and Glenn Morris wrote this position statement in 1991 on behalf of the American Indian Movement of Colorado, 1574 South Pennsylvania St., Denver, CO

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Relinquishing A Legacy of Hatred,