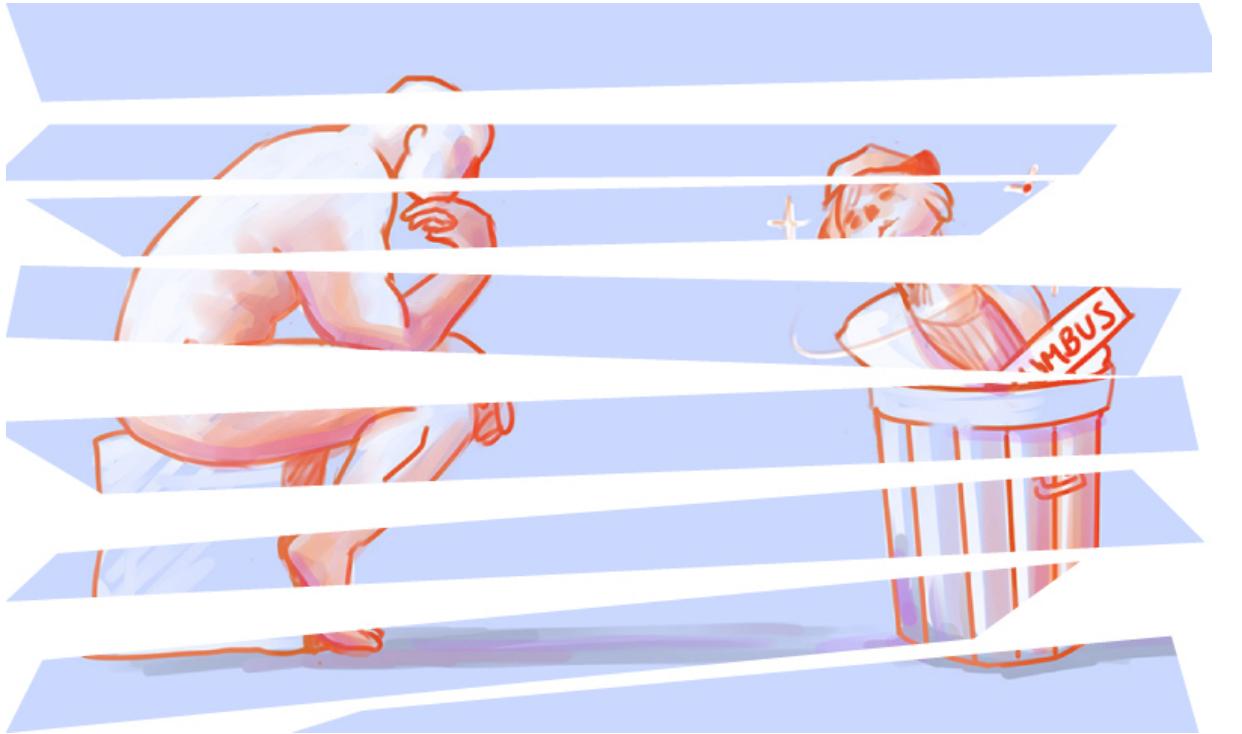


Three misconceptions about Columbus Day



ART BY ALANNA BROWDY

BY **MATTIA LANDONI** | OCTOBER 16, 2014, 1:55 AM

Spectator recently ran a spread that asked, "[What does it mean that Columbia doesn't celebrate Columbus Day?](#)" Four out of five pieces in the Spectator spread are negative on Columbus and his day, and I feel the need to restore some balance to the conversation.

Misconception #1: Columbus Day is about the Italians.

I am an Italian, born and raised in Italy. My first impression coming to America was that Columbus is a far bigger deal for even non-Italian Americans than he is in Italy for Italians. We are proud of the great things he did, and well aware of the horrible things he did. But he's just one of many Italians who left their footprint in history. I didn't even know we had a Columbus Day until recently. In the U.S., things are different. Columbus was a crucial piece of the process that caused the U.S. to come into existence in its modern form. Because of this, many things in the U.S. owe Columbus their name besides our University, including a media colossus, several cities, and the district where the federal government resides.

Misconception #2: Columbus is responsible for all of the ensuing atrocities in the Americas.

Now, before you crucify me for neglecting Columbus' actions, please hold on—I am getting there. Columbus is accused of two separate things: committing horrible crimes while a ruler in the newly founded colonies, and indirectly causing millions of natives to die by enabling the European colonization of the Americas.

Columbus is directly responsible for enough horrors that blaming him for things he didn't do is just sloppy. No one blames Einstein for spending considerable time and energy convincing his

peers that $E = mc^2$ was not sheer madness, even if, soon after, people started building atomic bombs.

Columbus did enough horrible things to earn his place in hell. His legacy is tarnished by detailed, easily available accounts of the atrocities he committed. His privileges were stripped while he was still alive—because incredibly, horrifyingly, he went too far even by the standards of the time.

Unfortunately, however, repealing Columbus Day will not restore lives or dignities lost 500 years ago, any more than renaming the month of July will do justice to Julius Caesar's murdered political enemies. Instituting an Indigenous Peoples' Day is a wonderful idea, but as a general celebration of Native American history and culture, I think it should be a complement to Columbus Day rather than a substitute. Only Columbus Day can remind us about the specific events that marked the bloody beginnings of the current era of human history.

Misconception #3: Columbus didn't do anything worth celebrating.

When explaining to children why Columbus is in the history books, we often use the convenient shorthand of saying he “discovered America.” For the nuance-challenged who like to quibble with this shorthand, here is the full version: Columbus, the son of an Italian wool weaver, convinced the queen of Spain to fund his expedition to test a crazy theory he dreamed up about India being reachable by navigating in the opposite direction. Everyone knew that the world was a ball, but no one had had the guts to get on a ship and just go west to see what happens. (Besides the Vikings.) As far as Columbus knew, there could have just as well been 13,000 miles of stormy waters in front of him.

You know who else did something like this before? Homer's Odysseus. You know what happened to him? He went to hell because of his curiosity. Did Columbus read that story? You betcha. Didn't stop him.

You know who else did something like this afterward? [Guglielmo Marconi](#). In 1902, he sailed to Nova Scotia to prove his crazy theory that radio waves could travel through the earth and not just in the line of sight. He ran into something unexpected: Radio waves travel farther and faster by night. Because of his expected and unexpected findings on radio waves, he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Risking your life to accomplish literally the stuff of epic poems and Nobel Prizes—that's something worth celebrating, and I invite everyone to continue observing Columbus Day. We deserve to be able to celebrate the young, Odysseus-like Columbus, who accomplished all his heroic feats before he even knew Native Americans existed, let alone hurt any of them—a man who could have hardly imagined what he was getting himself into. At the same time, we should condemn the later Columbus—a little man, overwhelmed by personal fatigue and external pressures, who made many horrible decisions.

Unless, of course, this level of moral nuance is too much to handle in the era of Twitter flame wars.

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