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The Politics of the Columbus Celebration: A Perspective of Myth and Reality in United States Society

JAMES RIDING IN

Lakota activist Russell Means declared in October 1992 that Cristóbal Colón (better known as Christopher Columbus) "made Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent."¹ As this vehement denunciation of a powerful historical figure suggests, the five-hundred-year anniversary of Colón's first voyage to the Americas ignited intense debate, bitter feelings, and conflict. The United States witnessed much of the celebration and turmoil.

In popular sentiment and in Eurocentric thought, this country's heritage is traced back to Colón, whose "discovery" of the Western Hemisphere led to the establishment of the most just, humane, and democratic nation known to humankind. But for many individuals, especially those from non-European backgrounds, America has not been a land of freedom, justice, and equality. Along with other groups, including Chicanos,² African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and white women, Indians have suffered political, economic, and social mistreatment. Sharing a commitment to reform society, these oppressed peoples have tried, throughout American history, to transform national consciousness and affect public policy by removing biases and distortions

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from written history, educational curriculum, and popular culture. Widespread protest activities during the 1950s and the Vietnam War encouraged lawmakers and judges to end legally sanctioned discrimination and segregation in many aspects of American life, but conservative notions about race and gender fueled a white backlash movement against change. By the late 1970s, the struggle for civil rights had lost its momentum.

Although Indian voices during these years of political activism expressed many of the same concerns raised by others, their experiences and goals differed vastly from others classified as minorities because of a legal and cultural standing derived from their indigenous status as autonomous nations. As this nation's only nonimmigrant population, they had survived a foreign invasion and colonization, suffering, in the process, depopulation, dispossession, coercive assimilation, and a loss of inherent political rights. In other words, their battle entailed a host of unique issues ranging from sovereignty to religious freedom and from cultural retention to treaty rights. Moreover, in recent years, Indians have campaigned for dignity by attempting to stop the desecration of their ancestors' graves by archaeologists and pothunters and to eliminate the use of denigrating logos in sports. Native resistance also has established networks to combat the destructive elements that have harmed the environment and desecrated their sacred lands such as Mount Graham in Arizona, the Medicine Wheel in Wyoming, and the forests of the Pacific Northwest.

These resistance mechanisms have left Indians well prepared to battle the dual problems of Colón worship and Eurocentrism that shrouded the quincentennial. In addition to having gained expertise at mobilizing Indian support, they have learned how to unify interracial groups, to utilize the press, and to speak the language of the colonizers fluently. Old organizations such as the International Indian Treaty Council, an invigorated American Indian Movement, and others actively took part in the controversy, while new ones emerged.

At issue in the Colón controversy were a number of fundamental questions related to notions of discovery, native rights, historiography, multiculturalism, justice, and the place of myth and reality in educational curriculum and popular culture. Was Colón a hero or a villain? Since the historical record shows that he kidnapped, executed, and enslaved thousands of Indians, should the United States celebrate him? Or should homage be paid to the

tens of millions of natives who experienced death, dispossession, and coercive assimilation at the hands of the European invaders? What do the legacies of Colón, European colonization, and Western civilization mean to present-day indigenous peoples? Can multicultural harmony be achieved by working together to eliminate the Eurocentrism that permeates popular culture, scholarly studies, and the academic curricula of schools, colleges, and universities?

Despite the volatile nature of these questions and the fact that massive protest movements had challenged most forms of offensive racial expression, public indignation toward the maltreatment of Indians proved to be short-lived. Quincentennial promoters revealed the depth and durability of conservative attitudes by showing only scant compassion for Indian concerns. By insisting brashly that the nation had a right to celebrate and commemorate the quincentennial, intolerant Colón advocates also revealed how power wielded by certain individuals and groups with a narrow ideological bent can perpetuate resentment and protest in a multiracial society.

Understanding the intellectual predisposition of Indians, the Colón partisans, and the American public is crucial for comprehending the controversy. Although a growing body of historical literature has found that Colón and subsequent generations of Euro-Americans committed atrocities against humanity, quincentennial advocates pushed Eurocentric themes that blended historical facts with myth and fantasy. Essentially, pro-Colón campaigners adopted the concept of reality found in biased history books, school curricula, and popular culture that simultaneously enshrined the deeds of European colonists and vilified Indians who fought to defend their homeland. By the 1990s, millions of Americans had been taught that Colón had not only discovered a new world but had also planted the seeds of Western civilization and democracy that sprouted in the United States. By these means, patriotism became inseparable from the quincentenary.

As a result, many Americans apparently felt a commonality with Colón and his heroic legacy. To many of them, the end justified the means. Accordingly, since the virtues of Western civilization vastly overshadowed those of Indian civilization, the nation should celebrate the enormous benefits that arose and blossomed from the Colón experience. Because educational and cultural processes had generally inculcated Americans with these

erroneous notions, quincennial promoters enjoyed overwhelming amounts of public support. A concomitant feature of this attitude was the disturbing idea that individuals had a moral imperative to distort the past, if doing so somehow enhanced the national image.

This Eurocentric conduct evoked an impassioned Indian response. Thus the divisions fell mostly, but not exclusively, along racial lines, pitting vastly outnumbered Indian contingents and their supporters against a largely insensitive society.

Even before the line had been drawn, United States organizations, cities, universities, museums, and a host of other entities began soliciting large amounts of public and private funding to commemorate Colón and the triumphs of Western civilization. Other countries followed suit. As a result, the year 1992 was filled with hype, hoopla, and pro-Colón events. In New York City, for example, more than one million people assembled along the banks of the Hudson River on July 4 to see some 250 tall ships from twenty-eight countries sail past the Statue of Liberty and to watch a fireworks display. Although numerous intellectual circles sponsored symposiums and speaker series to discuss Colón, the organizers of these events, perhaps fearful of eliciting testimony that would taint Colón's image, usually denied Indians any meaningful participation. Spain even sponsored a controversial sea voyage that traced, in replica ships, one of the routes possibly taken by Colón in 1492. In other words, the best Indians could expect from Colón partisans was tokenism, paternalism, and humiliation.

For concerned Indians, as we have seen, Colón was no hero and the politics of Eurocentrism had no place in a multicultural society. They wanted it known that Colón's voyage had unleashed a devastating physical and biological invasion that resulted in dispossession, subjugation, and the death of over 90 percent of their ancestors. In this sense, Colón symbolized the harsh oppression that followed the arrival of the Europeans and became sanctioned by colonial institutions, religious dogma, expansionistic ideology, and economic exigencies. Referring to the number of deaths caused by diseases imported from Europe, Tewa anthropologist Alfonso Ortiz noted that Colón's voyage set in motion "the most unprecedented demographic disaster in our species on this planet."⁷³ To Indians, the celebratory tone of the quincennial denigrated their beloved ancestors, glorified past crimes against them, and ignored present conditions.

Indians uniformly equated the contemporary problems plaguing their people with the Colón legacy. Even having survived and begun to recover from the holocaust, a vast majority of Indians in the early 1990s could expect a quality of life diminished drastically by the ill effects of disease, poverty, and oppression. More specifically, unemployment, alcoholism, and teenage suicide plagued many of their communities. Conditions such as these existed among Indians in virtually every nation of the Western Hemisphere, including the United States.

Angered by the parochial ambiance that enveloped the quincentennial, natives and their allies organized events to confront the Colón mania directly. Anti-Colón forces had two objectives in mind: First, they set the elimination of all future Columbus Day celebrations as their primary goal. In 1991 a Texas chapter of the American Indian Movement issued a statement reflecting this objective, saying, "We will not rest until Columbus Day and its attendant racism is abolished because it denies dignity to us and our children as a race."⁴ Second, they seized the moment to address ongoing initiatives in the struggles for curriculum reform, religious freedom, and elimination of discriminatory sports logos.

News reports in 1992 indicated the divisiveness of the Colón celebration. Throughout the hemisphere, native groups and their supporters expressed their opposition by disrupting events such as parades and statue unveilings. United States public officials and event coordinators responded cooperatively in several ways. For example, in the days before the annual Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, California, organizers attempted to compromise in response to criticism of their announcement that a direct descendant of Colón would serve as grand marshal of the parade. To counter the objections, they invited an American Indian politician from another state to serve as the parade's co-grand marshal. Many Indians, nonetheless, refused to be swayed by this gesture.

Officials also used the power of the state to suppress opposition. In Pasadena, for example, a force of Los Angeles County deputy sheriffs, sporting batons, firearms, and helmets with glass shields, was deployed to deal with several hundred peaceful protesters who had congregated along the parade route. In Phoenix, Arizona, police allowed about one hundred Indians to delay a Columbus Day parade for half an hour before threatening to employ force to disperse the protesters. In Denver, Colorado,

when scores of Indians blocked the parade route, city officials relented by calling a halt to the parade and vowing to ban future celebrations of this nature.

Scholarship confronting the related evils of Colón worship, colonialism, and Eurocentrism became a key instrument in the struggle. *The State of Native America* (1992), edited by M. Annette Jaimes, Lenore A. Stiffarm, Rebecca L. Robbins, Tom Holm, Glen T. Morris, and others, presented critical articles dealing with the effects of colonization on Indians. These studies sought to move beyond "the euphemistic academic sterility that has plagued so much literature about the native people of this hemisphere."⁵

In addition, Indians, joined by African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and others, organized separate events. Audiences attending alternative forums at the University of California, Los Angeles, and other universities heard speakers assail Colón and the processes of racial injustice, ecological transformation, and depopulation he had helped set in motion.

It should be noted that significant numbers of non-Indian Americans and Europeans also worked to deconstruct the Columbian myth. Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise* exposes the true character of Colón and the savage nature of European colonization in terms of human and environmental destruction.⁶ In Genoa, Italy, the birthplace of Colón, thousands gathered to condemn Colón and the cruelties of European expansion, vowing that the mistakes of the past would never be repeated. Their actions continued the trend toward a pluralistic view of the world that had surfaced during the 1950s, when a few scholars, teachers, and documentary filmmakers, among others, began to employ an inclusive approach to study the diverse experiences of the American people. Although methodological and conceptual problems frequently occurred, these efforts constituted remarkable improvements over treatments marred by Eurocentrism. More studies are needed that draw from oral tradition, that critically analyze written sources, and that shed new light on the dynamics of Indian-white interaction. Educational curricula must also address the vast contributions that Indians and other non-Europeans have given the world, including political ideas, agricultural products, technology, and entertainment.

In preparing this volume, we asked American Indians from a variety of academic disciplines, professions, and nations to offer their views of the Colón legacy. As a result, the eight articles presented here span vast periods of time and space. Themes of

Indian cultural differences and struggles to preserve their separate identities and to receive justice bind these contributions together in a manner that should enrich our perspectives of Indian-white relations. Additionally, these studies stress that scholars must begin to rethink the conventional wisdom about the nature of native culture and the dynamics of interracial relations. Cumulatively, the articles demonstrate that Indians did not simply roll over and die when confronted by Europeans and Euro-Americans who claimed preemptive rights to Indian land and sacred knowledge. Rather, natives have continued to fight for their rights and dignity.

The first two articles address the initial contact period. Religious studies scholar Johnny P. Flynn, a Potawatomi, offers a disturbing coyote story as a way of illustrating what Colón's voyage may have meant to Indians of the time. Through this traditional literary means of conveying values, knowledge, and understanding, he shows how the coyote's greed, duplicity, and arrogance created an ecological and demographic disaster for Indians. Historian Donald L. Fixico, of Sac, Fox, Shawnee, and Seminole ancestry, explores reasons why the cultural differences that separated Indians and Europeans led to conflict. Fixico argues that scholars need to pay greater attention to Indian perspectives of Europeans in historical encounters. The Indians' understanding of the environment, he states, influenced their view of the newcomers more than any other factor. Because Indian nations came from a variety of ecological settings, they had disparate views, values, and beliefs.

The next two articles focus on the struggle for religious freedom. Walter R. Echo-Hawk, a Native American Rights Fund attorney and Pawnee Indian, presents a historical and legal overview of the battle waged by American Indians to obtain, through congressional legislation, the right to practice religions that predate the creation of the United States and its Constitution. Echo-Hawk shows that two recent United States Supreme Court decisions, in the *Lyng* and *Smith* cases, have dramatically limited native spiritual expression. Among other things, the proposed legislation would protect and grant Indians access to sacred sites.

D. Michael Pavel, an assistant professor of education, along with G. Bruce Miller of the Skokomish tribe and Mary J. Pavel, an attorney, provide a case study of religious oppression. They discuss several ways in which American colonization has undermined the religious and cultural fabric of their people, the

Skokomish of Washington State. A sacred bond exists between the Skokomish and Cedar, but persistent and destructive logging operations have hampered the ability of Skokomish elders to educate young tribal members about their ancient culture. Thus the Skokomish have a vested interest in maintaining the integrity of the remaining stands of old-growth Cedar.

Clifford E. Trafzer, a historian of Wyandot descent, also stresses that non-Indian scholars have generally failed to comprehend the relationship of Indians with the plants, animals, and earth. Consequently, their writings, Trafzer asserts, lack critical assessments and understandings of Indian culture and perspectives. Focusing on several Plateau Indian nations and their leaders' motivations in attending the Walla Walla Treaty Council of 1855, Trafzer's study offers a model for other scholars to use when interpreting native culture.

Carol Chiago Lujan, a Diné/Pima sociologist, examines tourism—an industry that has become an economic mainstay of Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico—and the tenuous relationship between the pueblo and the neighboring town of Taos. Drawing from interviews with Taos Indians, Lujan demonstrates how these people have been able to maintain their traditional religion despite the presence of scores of tourists. Lujan also finds that tourism has made the Indians more aware and appreciative of their culture.

Anthropologist Beatrice Medicine, a Standing Rock Sioux and the dean of Indian scholars, discusses issues of social injustice involving Indian women in such areas as child welfare, law enforcement, and involuntary sterilization. Pointing out that the Western patriarchal model of gender relations has weakened the role of women in Indian society, Medicine explains how some Indian women have been able to maintain a power base in their communities and families, while others have gained influence by becoming attorneys and judges.

Choctaw historian Devon A. Mihesuah addresses the pressing issue of research ethics, arguing that immoral and offensive data-gathering procedures are a legacy of Colón. Some non-Indian scholars feel that they have a right to obtain information by whatever means possible, without respect to Indian wishes, while others employ more respectful methods of gathering data. The former, Mihesuah stresses, have created problems that ultimately result in Indian mistrust, suspicion, and avoidance of academicians. Espousing the cooperative principle that Indian-related

research should be monitored by universities and Indian nations themselves, Mihesuah offers guidelines to remedy problems associated with "the imperialistic tenets of academic freedom."

In sum, these Indian voices offer new information, research models, and conceptual frameworks for scholars to use in their efforts to present a more comprehensive and insightful picture of Indian people and their interaction with non-Indians. This volume can be perceived as a small volley fired in the war against the mythical aspects of the Colón legacy, Eurocentrism, and the politics of offensive celebrations. Critical scholars, irrespective of their race, have a moral obligation to work toward eradicating all vestiges of Eurocentrism from history, educational curricula, and popular culture. Perhaps accomplishing that objective will be the greatest contribution we can make to ourselves, our children, and our society.

NOTES

1. *The Arizona Republic*, 6 October 1992.
2. Within the context of this paper, *Chicanos* refers to Mexican-Americans who recognize and promote their Indian heritage.
3. *The Arizona Republic*, 6 October 1992.
4. American Indian Movement, Texas Chapter, press release, 15 July 1991.
5. M. Annette Jaimes, ed., *The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization, and Resistance* (Boston, MA: South End Press 1992), 10.
6. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Penguin Books USA Inc., A Plume Book, 1991).