

The Myth of “America”

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Happy Columbus Day

Columbus sailed the ocean blue in Fourteen Hundred and Ninety Two ...

May the spirit of adventure and discovery always be with you.

Wishing you a great Columbus Day – Columbus Day greeting card

To mark Columbus Day In 2004, the Medieval and Renaissance Center in UCLA published the final volume of a compendium of Columbus-era documents. Its general editor, Geoffrey Symcox, leaves little room for ambivalence when he says, “This is not your grandfather’s Columbus.... While giving the brilliant mariner his due, the collection portrays Columbus as an unrelenting social climber and self-promoter who stopped at nothing – not even exploitation, slavery, or twisting biblical scripture – to advance his ambitions.... Many of the unflattering documents have been known for the last century or more, but nobody paid much attention to them until recently. The fact that Columbus brought slavery, enormous exploitation or devastating diseases to the Americas used to be seen as a minor detail – if it was recognized at all – in light of his role as the great bringer of white man’s civilization to the benighted idolatrous American continent. But to historians today this information is very important. It changes our whole view of the enterprise.”

But does it?

“They ... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks’ bells,” Christopher Columbus wrote in his logbook in 1495. “They willingly traded everything they owned.... They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane.... They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want. Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.”

Catholic priest Bartolome de las Casas, in the multi-volume “History of the Indies” published in 1875, wrote, “... Slaves were the primary source of income for the Admiral (Columbus) with that income he intended to repay the money the Kings were spending in support of Spaniards on the Island. They provide profit and income to the Kings. (The Spaniards were

driven by) insatiable greed ... killing, terrorizing, afflicting, and torturing the native peoples ... with the strangest and most varied new methods of cruelty."

This systematic violence was aimed at preventing "Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings. (The Spaniards) thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades.... My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write."

Father Fray Antonio de Montesino, a Dominican preacher, in December 1511 said this in a sermon that implicated Christopher Columbus and the colonists in the genocide of the native peoples:

"Tell me by what right of justice do you hold these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged such detestable wars against these people who dealt quietly and peacefully on their own lands? Wars in which you have destroyed such an infinite number of them by homicides and slaughters never heard of before ..."

In 1892, the National Council of Churches, the largest ecumenical body in the United States, is known to have exhorted Christians to refrain from celebrating the Columbus quincentennial, saying, "What represented newness of freedom, hope, and opportunity for some was the occasion for oppression, degradation and genocide for others."

Yet America continues to celebrate "Columbus Day."

That Americans do so in the face of all evidence that there is little in the Columbian legacy that merits applause makes it easier for them to avoid taking responsibility for their own actions, or the actions of their government. Perhaps there is good reason.

In "Columbus Day: A Clash of Myth and History," journalist and media critic Norman Solomon discusses how historians who deal with recorded evidence are frequently depicted as "politically correct" revisionists while the general populace is manipulated into holding onto myths that brazenly applaud inconceivable acts of violence of men against fellow humans.

For those of us who are willing to ask how it becomes possible to manipulate the population of a country into accepting atrocity, the answer is not hard to find. It requires normalizing the inconceivable and drumming it in via the socio-cultural environment until it is internalized and embedded in the individual and collective consciousness. The combined or singular deployment of the media, the entertainment industry, mainstream education or any other agency, can achieve the desired result of convincing people that wars can be just, and strikes can be surgical, as long as it is the US that is doing it.

Never has this process been as blatant and overt as in recent years when the time has come for America to legitimize the idea of global domination. A Department of Defense report titled [Joint Vision 2020](#) calls for the US military to be capable of "full spectrum dominance" of the entire planet. That means total domination and control of all land, sea, air, space and information.

That's a lot of control.

How might this become accepted as “Policy” and remain unquestioned by almost an entire population?

The one word key to that is: Myths. The explanation is that the myths the United States is built upon have paved the way for the perpetuation of all manner of violations.

Among the first of these is that of Christopher Columbus. In school we were taught of his bravery, courage and perseverance. In a speech in 1989, George H.W. Bush proclaimed: “Christopher Columbus not only opened the door to a New World, but also set an example for us all by showing what monumental feats can be accomplished through perseverance and faith.”

Never mind that the monumental feats mainly comprised part butchery, part exploitation and the largest part betrayal of host populations of the “New World.”

On their second arrival in Hispaniola, Haiti, Columbus’s crew took captive roughly two thousand local villagers who had arrived to greet them. Miguel Cuneo, a literate crew member, wrote, “When our caravels ... were to leave for Spain, we gathered ... one thousand six hundred male and female persons of those Indians, and these we embarked in our caravels on February 17, 1495.... For those who remained, we let it be known (to the Spaniards who manned the island’s fort) in the vicinity that anyone who wanted to take some of them could do so, to the amount desired, which was done.”

In 1500, Columbus wrote to a friend, “A hundred castellanoes (a Spanish coin) are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten (years old) are now in demand.”

Such original “monumental feats” as were accomplished by our nation’s heroes and role models were somewhat primitive. Local inhabitants who resisted Columbus and his crew had their ears or nose cut off, were attacked by dogs, skewered with pikes and shot. Reprisals were so severe that many of the natives committed mass suicide and women began practicing abortions in order not to leave children enslaved. The population of Haiti at the time of Columbus’s arrival was between 1.5 million and 3 million. Sixty years later, every single native had been murdered.

Today, “perseverance and faith” allow us to accomplish much more and with far greater impunity. The US continues to liberate Iraq and Afghanistan with 2,000-pound bombs in civilian areas and purge Pakistan via drone attacks on weddings.

Neither case is of isolated whimsy. It was and remains policy.

In “A People’s History of the United States,” celebrated historian Howard Zinn describes how Arawak men and women emerged from their villages to greet their guests with food, water and gifts when Columbus landed at the Bahamas. But Columbus wanted something else. “Gold is most excellent; gold constitutes treasure; and he who has it does all he wants in the world, and can even lift souls up to Paradise,” he wrote to the king and queen of Spain in 1503.

Rather than gold, however, Columbus only found slaves when he arrived on his second visit with seventeen ships and over 1,200 men. Ravaging various Caribbean islands, Columbus took natives as captives as he sailed. Of these he picked 500 of the best specimens and shipped them back to Spain. Two hundred of these died en route, while the survivors were

put up for sale by the archdeacon of the town where they landed.

Columbus needed more than mere slaves to sell, and Zinn's account informs us, "... desperate to pay back dividends to those who had invested, (he) had to make good his promise to fill the ships with gold. In the province of Cicao on Haiti, where he and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist, they ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death.

"The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold around was bits of dust garnered from the streams. So they fled, were hunted down with dogs, and were killed."

As a younger priest, the aforementioned De las Casas had participated in the conquest of Cuba and owned a plantation where natives worked as slaves before he found his conscience and gave it up. His first-person accounts reveal that the Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades. They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual's head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet and, ripping them from their mothers' breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks. Others, laughing and joking all the while, threw them over their shoulders into a river, shouting: 'Wriggle, you little perisher.' They slaughtered anyone on their path ..."

Full Spectrum Dominance

In a letter to the Spanish court dated February 15, 1492, Columbus presented his version of full spectrum dominance: "to conquer the world, spread the Christian faith and regain the Holy Land and the Temple Mount."

With this radical ideology, Las Casas records, "They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burned them alive thirteen at a time, in honour of our Saviour and the twelve Apostles."

About incorporating these accounts in his book, Zinn explained to Truthout, "My point is not to grieve for the victims and denounce the executioners. Those tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for the present ... but I do remember a statement I once read: The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is."

Author journalist Chris Hedges believes that glorification of (the atrocities of) Columbus is one of several myths that sustain the illusions that justify the imperial visions of the United States.

In conversation with Truthout, he said, "It's really easy to build a holocaust museum that condemns Germans. It's another issue to build a museum that confronts our own genocide,

the genocide that was perpetrated by our own ancestors towards Native Americans or towards African-Americans. I am all for documenting and remembering the [World War II] Holocaust, but the disparity between the reality of the [World War II] Holocaust or the reality of the genocide as illustrated in the [World War II] Holocaust museum and the utter historical amnesia in the Native American museum in Washington is really frightening and shows a complete inability in a public arena for us to examine who we are and what we've done."

Noam Chomsky holds a similar view. "We have [World War II] Holocaust museums all over the place about what the Germans did," Chomsky told Truthout. "Do we have one about what we did? I mean about slavery, about the Native American population? It's not that the people involved didn't know about it. John Quincy Adams, a great grand strategist, who had a major role in these atrocities, in his later years when he reflected on them, referred to that hapless race of North Americans, which we are exterminating with such insidious cruelty. They knew exactly what they were doing. But it doesn't matter. It's us."

Explaining how the mythology of a country becomes its historic reality, Chomsky stated, "If you are well-educated, you can internalize that and it. That's part of what a good education is about, enabling people to live with those contradictions. And you see it very consistently. In the case of, say, the Iraq war, try to find somebody who had a principled objection. Actually you can, occasionally, but it's suppressed."

Historical revisionism and amnesia are critical for nation-building, opines Paul Woodward, the writer and author of the blog "[War In Context](#)". He elaborates, "Every nation is subject to its own particular form of historical amnesia. Likewise, imperial powers have their own grandiose revisionist tendencies. Yet there is another form of historical denial particular to recently invented nations whose myth-making efforts are inextricably bound together with the process of the nation's birth ...

"Whereas older nations are by and large populated by people whose ancestral roots penetrated that land well before it took on the clear definition of a nation state, the majority of the people in an invented nation – such as the United States or Israel – have ancestry that inevitably leads elsewhere. This exposes the ephemeral link between the peoples' history and the nation's history. Add to that the fact that such nations came into being through grotesque acts of dispossession and it is clear that a psychological drive to hold aloft an atemporal exceptionalism becomes an existential necessity. National security requires that the past be erased."

Robert Jensen is an author and teaches media law, ethics and politics at the University of Texas. In an [essay](#) where he justifies his decision to not celebrate Thanksgiving as a holiday, he says, "Imagine that Germany won World War II and that a Nazi regime endured for some decades, eventually giving way to a more liberal state with a softer version of German-supremacist ideology. Imagine that a century later Germans celebrated a holiday offering a whitewashed version of German/Jewish history that ignored that holocaust and the deep anti-Semitism of the culture. Imagine that the holiday provided a welcomed time for families and friends to gather and enjoy food and conversation. Imagine that businesses, schools and government offices closed on this day. What would we say about such a holiday? Would we not question the distortions woven into such a celebration? Would we not demand a more accurate historical account? Would we not, in fact, denounce such a holiday as grotesque?"

Of course we would.

But our story is different, and once again this year, on October 12, we will once again “Hail Columbus.”

Bhaswati Sengupta contributed to this report.

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