WE HAVE NO REASON TO CELEBRATE AN INVASION

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Columbus was just “a man of his times.” Why are you so critical of him? Why not look at the positive aspects of his legacy?

As Native American peoples in this red quarter of Mother Earth, we have no reason to celebrate an invasion that caused the demise of so many of our people and is still causing destruction today. The Europeans stole our land and killed our people.

For people who are in survival mode, it’s very difficult to look at the positive aspects of death and destruction, especially when it is carried through to our present. There is a reason we are the poorest people in America. There is a reason we have the highest teen suicide rate. There is a reason why our people are ill-housed and in poor health, and we do not live as long as the majority population.

That reason has to do with the fact that we were in the way of Western Civilization and we were in the way of westward expansion. We suffered the excesses of “civilization” such as murder, pillage, rape, destruction of the major waterways, destruction of land, the destruction and pollution of the air.

What are those “positive” aspects of the Columbus legacy? If we’re talking about the horse, that’s good. We like the horse. Indians raised the use of the horse to high military art, especially among the Cheyenne people and the tribes of the plains states.

Was that a good result of that invasion? Yes. Is it something we would have traded for the many Indian peoples who are no longer here because of that invasion? No.

We also like the beads that came from Europe, and again we raised their use to a high art. Would we have traded those beads for the massacres of our people, such as the Sand Creek Massacre [in which U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of Native American men, women, and children at Sand Creek, Colorado in 1864]? No.

Isn’t criticism of Columbus a form of picking on the Spaniards? Were they any worse than other Europeans who came to America?

In my estimation, the Spaniards were no worse than any number of other Europeans. The economy of slavery and serfdom that existed in northern Europe — how do you measure that in cruelty and in long-term effects against the Spanish Inquisition?

I view the issue more as the oppressive nature and arrogance of the Christian religions. And that continues today.

Our Indian religions are not missionary religions. We are taught to respect other religions. It was a shock when we were met with proselytizing zealots, especially those who thought that if your soul can’t be saved, you’re better off dead — or if your soul can be saved, you should be dead so you can go to heaven. And that’s the history of that original encounter.

How does that arrogance and ignorance manifest itself today?

How? Well, for example, the Catholic Church said that 1992 [the year of the Columbus Quincentenary commemoration] was a time to enter into a period of grace and healing and to celebrate the evangelization of the Americas. My word, how can you be graceful and healing about the tens of thousands of native people who were killed because they would...
not convert to a religion they didn’t understand, or because they didn’t understand the language of those making the request?

It’s difficult to take seriously an apology that is not coupled with atonement. It’s as if they’re saying, “I’m sorry, oops, and we’ll be better in the next hemisphere.” That doesn’t cut it. We’ve had empty platitudes before.

Aren’t some of the criticisms of Columbus just substituting Native-centrism for Euro-centrism?

Oppressed people need to be centered within themselves. Racism and centrism become a problem if you are in the dominant society and are subjugating other people as a result of your centrism. I don’t accept the question. I think it’s an empty argument.

What should be the goal and perspective of teachers when telling their elementary and high school students about Columbus?

First, that no one knows the truth about Columbus. His story is a very complex history in and of itself. Too often, this history is posed as romantic myth, and the uncomfortable facts about Columbus are eliminated.

Explaning the unpleasant truths about Columbus does not take away from the fact that he was able to lurch over to these shores in three little boats. In fact, it gives the story of Columbus more dimension. It also makes it easier for kids in school to accept not only Columbus but other things.

Teachers need to respect the truth. What happens if I’m sitting in a classroom and teachers are telling me that Thomas Jefferson was one of the greatest men in the world, and I also know that he owned slaves, but they don’t tell me that? What am I going to do when I’m told “don’t use or abuse drugs or alcohol”? Will I think there may be another side to that too? What else am I being told that isn’t true?

Kids are smart. And they have not experienced enough setbacks to know that they have to be sheep. But that’s what they’re taught in the public schools — how to exercise not personal discipline, but top-down discipline. It’s the “do as you’re told” approach to the world, rather than trying to help kids understand their place in the world.

We have to inject more truth in the classroom generally. And that only comes from discussion.

What are the key struggles that native people face today?

We need, in the first instance, basic human rights such as religious freedom. Or how about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and other things that many people in the United States view as standard fare but are out of reach for Indian people?

There is also the issue of land and treaty rights. We have property that we don’t own and we should, and we have property that we own that we don’t control and we should.

We have treaties with the United States that are characterized in the U.S. Constitution as the supreme law of the land. Yet every one, without exception, of nearly 400 treaties signed between native peoples and the U.S. government has been broken. Every one of them.

A good place to start would be for the United States to live up to every treaty agreement. It’s also the way you get at resolving some of the problems of poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and poor health.

If we don’t handle the big things, we can’t get to the manifestations of the problem. We have to go to the basic human rights issues, the basic treaty rights issues.

If we don’t resolve these issues, then all people in this country are going to be complicit in the continuing effort to wipe out our Indian people. It’s as simple as that.
This lesson comes from the Rethinking Schools book, *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*. The book includes more than 80 essays, poems, interviews, historical vignettes, and lesson plans reevaluate the myth of Columbus and issues of Indigenous rights. Rethinking Columbus is packed with useful teaching ideas for kindergarten through college. Go to [www.rethinkingschools.org/RC](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/RC) to see the table of contents and to read the book’s introduction.

“The original edition made educational history by introducing a startling new view of Columbus ... In the revised edition we get even richer material, a marvelous compendium of history, literature, original sources, commentary ... an exciting treasure for teachers, students, and the general public.”

Howard Zinn (1922–2010)
Author of *A People’s History of the United States*