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Editorial: Why do we still need to defend Indigenous Peoples Day?

Liz Theriault

October 7, 2019
Indigenous Peoples Day is approaching, yet we are still discussing the man who committed mass genocide who is incorrectly credited for discovering America. There were already millions of people living in North America when the Europeans crossed the Ocean in 1492, and common logic could argue that replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day is a way to recognize history. However, since Gov. Janet Mills signed a bill into law on April 26 replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. With the holiday rapidly approaching controversy surrounding it has been ignited once more.

On Tuesday, Oct. 1, Waterville Mayor Nick Isgro proclaimed Oct. 14 as “Columbus Day” at a Waterville City Council meeting. Immediately after his proclamation, citizens of Waterville stood to protest and comment on Isgro’s decision. Elizabeth Leonard, an emerita professor of American history at Colby College, stated that claiming Oct. 14 as “Columbus Day” seemed “to be an effort to elevate and celebrate the importance of what Columbus’ arrival did for white Europeans while simultaneously dismissing as irrelevant the devastating consequences of European imperialism for indigenous peoples,” according to an article by Central Maine News.

The state should hardly look to Waterville for rational reasoning to keep Columbus Day. Isgro himself has a long history of controversial public statements. In a Facebook live video uploaded to the Restore Maine’s Future page, Isgro stated that “everything that we love and hold dear as Mainers is under attack and this influx of immigrants is all part of the plan to continue to do that, to undermine our ability to band together and put an end to what’s going on.” Further, the Maine Beacon has reported that Isgro has frequently posted comments on social media with terminology associated with the “alt-right,” and has shared posts attacking Muslim and Somali immigrants on numerous occasions.

Arguments from a racist politician should never be entertained, especially when they come in connection to the discussion of a holiday that attempts to right some of the wrongs of Maine’s, and the nation’s, violent historical treatment of indigenous peoples.

The argument in support of Columbus Day is not far from home for students at the University of Maine. The UMaine College Republicans commended Nick Isgro for his actions in a Facebook post and stated that the U.S. “must not forget the brutal societies that Christopher Columbus and other explorers discovered in America. These societies were corrupted by rampant ritual sacrifice and cannibalism.” The post has now been replaced, stating that “human rights abuses” were committed by “some indigenous groups in Mesoamerica.”

This group and Isgro are behind the times. Maine has taken the appropriate and necessary steps to recognize the indigenous peoples in our history. In September of 2017, the town of Orono voted to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. Before Orono, Bangor and Belfast had made the same decision. Further, this year, UMaine added Penobscot language to signs across campus in an effort to recognize and celebrate the relationship between the university and the Wabanaki people, whose land houses the UMaine campus.

Gov. Janet Mills said it best in her statement released in conjunction with the bill renaming Columbus Day; “there is power in a name and in who we choose to honor. Today, we take another step in healing the divisions of the past, in fostering inclusiveness, in telling a fuller, deeper history and in bringing the State of Maine’s tribal communities together to build a future shaped by mutual trust and respect.”

In short, arguments made by those who oppose Indigenous Peoples Day are often straw-man arguments. Claims of erasing history toe the line of irony, as the switch to Indigenous Peoples Day actually widens the scope of historical recognition and includes more truth than erasure. The desire to recognize Columbus for “finding” America falls short since Columbus was not the first European to reach the Americas, and Columbus himself never set foot on the continental United States.

This coming Monday, Oct. 14 will be recognized as Indigenous Peoples Day, as it should be. As many college students wait anxiously for the long weekend, they should take the time to pause and recognize the previous mistreatment of indigenous peoples and support the future efforts of fostering peace, interconnection and proper treatment between our state and its indigenous peoples.
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Andy  a year ago
It needs defending because Native Americans played NO role at all in the founding of this country, whereas, if it weren't for Columbus' vision, courage, and boldness, this country would likely never have even existed. Also, it is unfair, and racist to be truthful, to single out and condemn Columbus and other Europeans for "genocide," slavery, and conquest, while ignoring the genocide, slavery, and conquest of the Native Americans (research the Aztec, the Mayan, and the Incan Empires, among others). I, for one, am grateful for Columbus, and celebrate his greatness every year!
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