



Memorandum

TO: CITY COUNCIL

FROM: Mayor Sam Liccardo
Vice Mayor Chappie Jones

SUBJECT: SEE BELOW

DATE: October 7, 2020

APPROVED:

DATE: 10/1/20

SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' DAY

RECOMMENDATION

1. Direct the City Manager, through the Office of Racial Equity, to engage with members of the First Resident tribal and Italian-American communities regarding their perspectives on the appropriate designations and dates for the celebration of their heritage;
2. Decline to issue any City recognition of Columbus Day this year;
3. Return to Council by the summer of 2021 to:
 - a. eliminate the City's recognition of Columbus Day;
 - b. officially designate both Indigenous Peoples' Day and Italian-American Heritage Day—or other names deemed appropriate by our communities—on specific dates.

DISCUSSION

We wish to thank the leaders of the Italian-American community, and the tribal leaders of the Muwekma Ohlone, Amah Matsun, and Costanoan-Esselen communities, who have shared their views about the meaning and legacy of Columbus Day, enabling us to learn tremendously from their perspectives.

Indigenous community leaders have expressed the recurring pain experienced with the annual celebration of Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean, which they view as the inception of hundreds of years of genocide, subjugation, and dispossession of North America's first residents. In a year in which many in our nation have embraced a collective reckoning over racial oppression, the moment to halt the celebration of the commencement of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is overdue.

The leaders of various Italian-American organizations have magnanimously expressed a willingness to let go the name of "Columbus Day," despite the fact that it has been recognized by

Congress as a federal holiday for several generations. In one convening, nearly every participant graciously embraced the nomenclature of “Italian-American Heritage Day” as a substitute, despite deep concerns about the loss of an important Italian-American cultural tradition.

A key question remains: what to do with the federal holiday on the second Monday of October? The conversation thus far suggests that both groups would seek exclusive claims to that date. Additional dialogue with and among the respective communities will help to reach resolution. We can return to Council after sufficient community engagement has taken place. In the weeks ahead, the City Manager will appoint the head of the newly-created Office of Racial Equity, who can engage more fully with the respective communities, and offer a recommendation to Council for 2021. In the meantime, we will present a proclamation at the October 6th Council meeting for Indigenous Peoples’ Day in 2020.

The rationale for both holidays—Indigenous Peoples’ Day and Italian-American Heritage Day—is borne from a history of each community struggling to overcome very different—and formidable—obstacles to survive and thrive here. And both groups in our community have ample justification to have strong feelings about—for or against-- Columbus Day.

Indigenous Peoples’ Day

The imperative to celebrate the heritage and culture of our indigenous communities seems self-evident: to honor the contributions of those who built the first communities here, to respect their many descendants who remain our neighbors, and to remember their suffering under the slavery, killing, and brutal treatment by immigrating Europeans.

Many jurisdictions have used a date in mid-October—coinciding with Columbus’ arrival in North America—to designate a day to commemorate the original denizens of the Americas. Other nations throughout Latin America had varied approaches to the date; Mexico reserves it for Dia de la Raza, to celebrate the origins of Mestizo culture, while Uruguay and Belize call it “Dia de las Americas.”

In 1991, cities and states throughout the nation began responding to calls to change the name of Columbus Day out of respect for those many indigenous communities who suffered from slavery, killing, and brutal treatment upon the arrival of Europeans. Indigenous Peoples’ Day is now observed by the states of Alaska, Iowa, Maine, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, New Mexico, Nevada, North Carolina, and Vermont, as well as South Dakota, which celebrates Native Americans’ Day, and in more than one hundred cities and counties.

The Origins of Columbus Day

On March 14, 1891, the largest mass lynching in American history was inflicted in the city of New Orleans, where 11 Italian-American men were seized by a mob, and publicly executed for the alleged murder of the city’s police chief—after they were acquitted by a jury. The evidence against these men consisted of the alleged dying words of the police chief, that he was killed by “dagoes”—a derogatory term for Italian-Americans. Rather than condemning the vigilante justice, the New York Times editorial board reflected the bigotry of the age, referring to the slain victims as “desperate ruffians.” The [editorial](#) continued: “These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins...are to us a pest without mitigations.”

In a conciliatory nod to Italian immigrants outraged by [these and other lynchings](#), President Benjamin Harrison urged Americans to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' landing on October 12th the following year. [Legally sanctioned racism against Italian-Americans persisted](#), however, in various forms, including the 1924 Nationality Act, the second immigration law (after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act) to limit immigration for a specific “less worthy” ethnic group for U.S. entry.

After extensive lobbying by the Knights of Columbus seeking compensatory action to elevate the status of Italian-Americans, [President Roosevelt declared Columbus Day a national holiday in 1937](#). That performative act did little to address discriminatory laws, however: five years later, [thousands of Italian-Americans were driven from their homes by the U.S. government—and hundreds interned in camps as “enemy aliens”--during World War II](#), while hundreds of thousands more had their travel severely restricted. Even Joe DiMaggio's elderly father—a fisherman by trade-- famously had his fishing boat seized. Mayor Liccardo's grandfather was instructed by the U.S. government to leave his kids and wife in San Jose, and to work in a Japanese-American internment camp in Utah. Italian-Americans appeared to fare better than our Japanese-American neighbors, however: official maltreatment of Italian-Americans was [terminated by President Roosevelt when it was determined that Allied troops would invade Sicily](#)—and the U.S. government needed to [ensure the allegiance of the nearly 1 million Italian-Americans then serving in the U.S. military](#), many of whom would be needed for the invasion.

In short, for many generations of Italian-Americans, Columbus Day served as a day to honor their struggle to overcome [decades of discrimination](#) to become fully accepted members of the American community. While these aspirations seem virtuous enough, the same cannot be said of Christopher Columbus' ambitions.

The Problem with Columbus

Some decry efforts to change the name of Columbus Day as “politically correct” attacks on Western history, or mere “virtue-signalling.” Close scrutiny of the historical record reveals much that appears irrefutably repulsive, however, regardless of anyone's political bias.

By his own admission, Columbus founded the transatlantic slave trade. Columbus' journal entry for October 12, 1492 describes how [he took six indigenous people on board his ship to return to Spain during his first journey, to offer them as slaves to the Crown, for whom “they ought to make good and skilled servants.”](#) [On his return to Spain from his second voyage, Columbus' log records that they took 30 enslaved native people with him.](#) His Third and Fourth trips brought several hundred members of the Arawak, Ciguayo, and Taino tribes back to Spain, many of whom died before they reached Europe.

Columbus' record as a ruler wasn't much better. As part of the original 1492 agreement with the Spanish crown, Columbus became Vice-Roy and Governor of the colonized lands on the island of Hispanola. His seven-year tenure as governor, however, gave rise to several first-person accounts of intense cruelty—including the mutilation, dismemberment, and killing of indigenous people—that resulted in his arrest by the Spanish Crown in 1500. Columbus was brought back to Spain in chains, jailed, and put on trial. The credibility of many of those accusers appears debatable, however, as several were political opponents, fueled by rival Francisco de Bobadilla's efforts to supplant Columbus as governor.

In 2006, documents describing the testimony of 23 witnesses at Columbus' trial were unearthed from the archive of Simanacas and translated by archivist Isabel Aguirre. Spanish historian Consuelo Varela published research describing accounts presented at that 1500 trial, accusing Columbus and his brothers of inflicting slavery, severe punishment that included bodily dismemberment, and tyranny. Nonetheless, Columbus successfully pleaded with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to acquit him, and to allow him to return for a final voyage, yet Columbus was stripped of his rule as Governor.

Judging Columbus

In short, Columbus was an incredibly important historical figure—but a severely flawed one. Some would assert that we should simply honor what was great about him—as a courageous voyager, a brilliant navigator, and a history-changing pioneer, and let history be the judge. Yet reserving a day to honor Columbus would provide only part of the truth—a “lie by omission,” in the words of former New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu—omitting the very part of the truth that we should universally find abhorrent.

Others argue that “Columbus should be judged by the standards of his age, and not of ours.” Here's the problem: Columbus didn't fare terribly well by the moral and legal standards of his own era—one that included the Spanish Inquisition and rampant colonization. Regardless of how one views the motives of Francisco de Bobadilla, Columbus' successor as Hispanola's governor, this contemporary openly condemned Columbus and his brothers for their alleged use of mutilation and torture to control indigenous residents. De Bobadilla's [investigation, which included extensive interviews of witnesses—23 of whom testified at Columbus' trial](#)—suggested that the morality of the time would not have granted Columbus a “pass.” Indeed, the historian, Bartolome de las Casas—who once “owned” land and slaves in Hispanola as early as 1503—[condemned the treatment of indigenous tribes by Columbus and his progeny](#) in his writings.

We should reserve city holidays for those whose lives represent the values we can collectively embrace. Let's leave the rest for the history books.