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Columbus Day is a U.S. holiday that commemorates the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Americas in 1492, and Columbus Day 2020 will be tomorrow. After being unofficially celebrated in a number of cities and states, it became a federal holiday in 1937. For many, the holiday is a way of both honoring Columbus's achievements and celebrating Italian-American heritage. For Columbus was Italian, even though he sailed under the Spanish flag.

But I know that Columbus never landed on North America, no less than on land which became the United States, and I know that, in his quest for gold for Queen Isabella, he was extremely cruel to the people he found on the islands on which he landed, enslaving them and sometimes cutting off their hands if they did not supply him with gold.

And I know that he didn't discover America, that the land he found, as well as parts of what is now the United States, was already inhabited. And so, he, like so many after him, stole the land on which he took foot. He was not even the first European to land on the Americas: Leif Erickson did so 500 years earlier.

Columbus's exploits began the plunder of Indigenous land in the western hemisphere.

Claudio Saunt, a professor, author, and historian of early America, the United States south, and Native American studies and Associate Director of the Institute of Native American Studies tells us:

As late as 1750...Native Americans constituted a majority of the population in North America....Even a century later, in 1850, they still retained formal possession of much of the western half of the continent.

And Sophie Weiner says:

Since most land was "ceded" using treaties, it may appear that Native Americans gave up their land willingly and peacefully, but in many cases they had no other options, and handed over the land through bribery or force. The government used federal legislation and executive order to take land from natives. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, presidents like Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Grover Cleveland created small reservations for tribes that once controlled vast areas. The government used federal legislation and executive orders to take land from natives. [This] is a stark demonstration of how quickly these legal fictions were used to erase people, and just how much what was once their land we now claim as our own.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, professor emerita of ethnic studies at California State University, Hayward, was the featured speaker at the 2020 UUA General Assembly. I am using her address, which is printed in the current issue of The UU World, as a reference for the next section of my talk.

A papal bull issued shortly after Columbus's first voyage allowed Spain to colonize the western hemisphere. This was part of the European Doctrine of Discovery, one of the first principles of international law that Christian European monarchies and the papacy promulgated to legitimize, investigate, map, and claim lands belonging to non-Christian people outside of Europe.

In 1791, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson claimed that the Doctrine of Discovery...was international law applicable to the new U.S. government as well. In the 1830s, the Doctrine of Discovery was engraved in constitutional law by the U.S. Supreme Court under John Marshall in decisions regarding the Cherokee nation.

The United States has used this doctrine to rationalize its colonial dominion over Indigenous people throughout its history, citing the Marshall court precedent as recently as 2005 in the Supreme Court case of *Sherrill v. Oneida Nation of Indians*.

And the Doctrine of Discovery is still a fundamental law of our land—the legal framework that informs the U.S. colonial system in controlling Indigenous nations today.

Professor Dunbar-Ortiz tells us that the Native Termination Act in 1953 did away with Native American status and the land base for many tribes. I learned that this act was the attempt of the U.S. government to terminate tribes, assimilate Native Americans into the United States, subject them to the same laws as other citizens, and give the state governments authority over their land and resources.

This policy lasted until the mid-60's.

The Professor says that the United States was founded as a European settler colonial expansionist entity, whose economy was grounded in the violent theft of land and racial slavery, and that our settlers have been armed to the teeth throughout our history.

Native American Heritage says:

From 1774 until about 1832, treaties between individual sovereign American Indian nations and the U.S. were negotiated to establish borders and prescribe conditions of behavior between the parties. The form of these agreements was nearly identical to the Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War between the U.S. and Great Britain. The negotiations ended in a mutually signed pact which had to be approved by the U.S. Congress. Non-tribal citizens were required to have a passport to cross sovereign Indian lands.

From 1832 until 1871, American Indian nations were considered to be domestic, dependent tribes. Negotiated treaties between tribes and the U.S. had to be approved by the U.S. Congress.

In 1871, the House of Representatives ceased recognition of individual tribes within the U.S. as independent nations with whom the United States could contract by treaty, ending the nearly 100-year-old practice of treaty-making between the U.S. and American Indian tribes.

The African American Policy Forum reports:

The United States frequently signed and committed itself to treaties with Native Americans that they repeatedly broke, a practice that has been present in American policy since its inception. For instance under the removal act of 1830 the US government bought land from Native Americans east of the Mississippi and offered to give them land in the west that would be “theirs forever.” However, this treaty was not honored by the US government. In two crucial court decisions in 1902 and 1903, the Supreme Court held that Congress has the power to modify or terminate Native American treaties without the Native Americans’ consent. Native Americans were taken advantage of and systematically deprived of their lands and ability to govern themselves.

Tribes ultimately must depend upon the federal government’s willingness to honor its agreements, which in many cases is the same government that took the tribe away from their ancestral lands and that has maligned them for centuries. Under this regime, tribes are extremely vulnerable. If their treaties are not honored by the U.S. government, there is little that they can do about it.

Citizenship was extended to all Native Americans by an act of Congress through the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. They are also, in many cases, citizens of the tribe they were born into. Each tribe, much like other governments abroad, has its own rules about citizenship.

I hope that I’ve made clear why we should not honor Columbus with his day, as well as why we should honor our Indigenous citizens with their day. Not only have the lands of Native Americans been stolen, but they have given us so much in terms of weavings, pottery, music, dance, religion, agriculture, medicine, and even government. Notably, the Iroquois Confederacy influenced many of the democratic principles incorporated into the U.S. constitution.

The purpose of Indigenous Peoples’ Day is:

- To bring an awareness of the ongoing struggles of Indigenous Peoples;
- To honor all that Indigenous Peoples bring to the nation through their culture, language, arts, knowledge, and values.

Some states, such as New Mexico, already have an Indigenous People’s Day instead of one honoring Columbus. I hope that you will work to see that we have a national Indigenous People’s Day instead of one honoring Columbus.