

# Human Rights Watch

## Indigenous Peoples' Rights

**<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/14/us-columbus-day-holiday-celebrates-shameful-past>**

## Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Its My Day Off, But Lets Not Forget Why

@BillFrelick

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I wont be seeing this article go live on our website today, October 14, because Ill be off work for Columbus Day. But like many other Americans, I will be questioning this holiday, which in the past I have mostly associated with shopping sales.

Christopher Columbus, who never set foot on the mainland of North America, instead oversaw the colonization of Hispaniola, a Caribbean island that would become the Dominican Republic and Haiti. There, according to David Treuers *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, published earlier this year: Columbus was regularly shipping Indians back to Spain, where they were sold in Andalusian markets. In addition to trafficking in slaves, Columbus and his brothers maintained colonial rule, according to Treuers book, through such brutality as cutting off the noses of thieves and the tongues of those who dared to criticize them.

So, in one holiday, Americans encounter our two most shameful and discomfoting historical legacies: the genocide of the American Indian and slavery, not to mention the scourge of torture.

Here, in Washington, DC, our city council voted last week to rename Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples Day. Similarly, many Americans have recently been asking why so many Confederate statues populate our parks or thinking twice about the iconic presidents on our currency and their slave-owning or Indian-killing pasts.

When Im not on holiday, my job involves documenting human rights abuses worldwide. I have interviewed hundreds of refugees fleeing ethnic cleansing from Bosnia to Burma, have heard the accounts of victims trafficked into modern forms of slavery, and have taken testimonies of far too many torture survivors.

I wonder if the torturers and persecutors of todays refugees will be honored and celebrated by generations to come.

While we can acknowledge that historical figures lived at times when different norms applied, and that customary standards of acceptable behavior have evolved, we should not be parties to myth-making that revises history to explicitly or implicitly glorify conquest, enslavement, and persecution. It is long past time to set the record straight.

I personally am looking forward to enjoying Indigenous Peoples Day, a holiday celebrating the resilience and dignity of Native American peoples.

Human Rights Watch / ACLU Joint Submission Regarding the United States Record Under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

Asylum Seekers Abused in the US and Deported to Harm in Cameroon

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