nation's natives
Widening the American story to include Indigenous people, their role in nation's history

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Highlight: Protesters carry signs during a silent protest at the Christopher Columbus monument in Southington in October 2017.Patrick Raycraft/Hartford Courant

Body

Increasingly, Columbus Day is giving people pause.

More and more towns and cities across the country are electing to celebrate Indigenous Peoples' Day as an alternative to - or in addition to - the day intended to honor Columbus' voyages.

Critics of the change see it as just another example of political correctness run amok - another flashpoint of the culture wars.

As a scholar of Native American history - and a member of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina - I know the story is more complex than that.

The growing recognition and celebration of Indigenous Peoples' Day actually represents the fruits of a concerted, decadeslong effort to recognize the role of indigenous people ***in the nation***'s history.

Columbus Day is a relatively new federal holiday.

In 1892, a joint congressional resolution prompted President Benjamin Harrison to mark the "discovery of America by Columbus," in part because of "the devout faith of the discoverer and for the divine care and guidance which has directed our history and so abundantly blessed our people."

Europeans invoked God's will to impose their will on indigenous people. So it seemed logical to call on God when establishing a holiday celebrating that conquest, too.

Of course, not all Americans considered themselves blessed in 1892. That same year, a lynching forced black journalist Ida B. Wells to flee her home town of Memphis. And then there was the government's philosophy towards the country's Native Americans, which Army Colonel Richard Henry Pratt so unforgettably articulated in 1892: "All the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

It took another 42 years for Columbus Day to formally become a federal holiday, thanks to a 1934 decree by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

But some Americans started to question why Indigenous people - who'd been in the country all along - didn't have their own holiday.

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In the 1980s, Colorado's American Indian Movement chapter began protesting the celebration of Columbus Day. In 1989, activists in South Dakota persuaded the state to replace Columbus Day with Native American Day.

Then, in 1992, at the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage, American Indians in Berkeley, California, organized the first "Indigenous Peoples' Day," a holiday the city council soon formally adopted. Berkeley has since replaced its commemoration of Columbus with a celebration of indigenous people.

The holiday can also trace its origins to the United ***Nations***. In 1977, indigenous leaders from around the world organized a United ***Nations*** conference in Geneva to promote indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Their first recommendation was "to observe October 12, the day of so-called 'discovery' of America, as an International Day of Solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas." It took another 30 years for their work to be formally recognized in the United ***Nations*** Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted in September 2007.

Today, cities with significant native populations, like Seattle, Portland and Los Angeles, now celebrate either Native American Day or Indigenous Peoples' Day. And states like Hawaii, Nevada, Minnesota, Alaska and Maine have also formally recognized their Native populations with similar holidays.

While Columbus Day affirms the story of a ***nation*** created by Europeans for Europeans, Indigenous Peoples Day emphasizes Native histories and Native people - an important addition to the country's ever-evolving understanding of what it means to be American.

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