Christopher Columbus, The Knights of Columbus, and American Indians

43rd Annual California Native American Day 2010.

(Photo: Patricia Montes Gregory flickr CC)

When Italian mariner Christopher Columbus and his sailors "discovered" the "New World" for Spain's monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, they brought with them both ideologies and germs that would decimate the peoples living in the Americas. Estimates of the number of native people living in North America and South America in 1490 vary widely, but there were at least as many as 50 million, and possibly as many as 100 million. In the next 200 years, displacement, enslavement, war, and, especially, disease, would kill 90% of those native peoples. The destruction of America's native peoples is widely seen as the brutal triumph of western white men over those they perceived to be inferior.

It is ironic, then, that the creation of the Columbus Day holiday was an attempt to destroy the idea of America as a land of white Protestant supremacy.

In the 1920s, a resurgent Ku Klux Klan tried to create a lily-white country by attacking African Americans, of course, but also immigrants, Jews, and Catholics. This was an easy sell in the Twenties, since government leaders during the First World War had emphasized Americanism and demanded that immigrants reject all ties to their countries of origin. From there, it was a short step for native-born white American Protestants to see anyone different from themselves as a threat to the country.

A Catholic fraternal organization called the Knights of Columbus ran afoul of the Klan. Klan members spread the rumor that one became a leader of the Knights of Columbus by vowing to exterminate Protestants, and to torture and kill anyone

upon orders of Catholic leaders. To combat the growing animosity toward Catholics and other American minorities, the Knights of Columbus began to emphasize the roles minority groups had played in American history. In the early 1920s, they published three books in a "Knights of Columbus Racial Contributions" series, including *The Gift of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. The Knights of Columbus were determined to reinforce the idea that America should not be a land in which white Protestant people attacked minorities, but rather should include everyone equally.

The desire of the Knights of Columbus to honor minorities made them turn to an old American holiday. Since the late 1860s, Italian Americans in New York City had celebrated a Columbus Day to honor the heritage they shared with the famous Italian explorer; in the 1930s, the Knights of Columbus added national weight to that celebration. The Knights of Columbus joined with Generoso Pope, an important Italian American politician in New York City, to rally behind the idea of a national Columbus Day. In 1934, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, aware of the need to solidify his new Democratic coalition by welcoming all Democratic voters, proclaimed October 12 a federal holiday: Columbus Day. In 1970, the day became unfixed from a date; it is now the second Monday in October. The Knights intended for Columbus Day to honor the important contributions of immigrants – and Catholics – to American society.

But the choice of Columbus as a standard bearer reflected that even while they were trying to welcome immigrants to the country, mainstream Americans still read the original inhabitants of the American continents out of the nation. Only months after he created Columbus Day, President Roosevelt tried to correct the longstanding government policies that had taken Native American lands and destroyed their culture. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 returned control of tribal lands to Native Americans and tried to provide space for tribes to protect their cultures. But in doing so, it reinforced that government officials saw Native Americans as apart from American society.

Columbus Day reinforces that rift. Not everyone in America observes it, as Alaska, Hawaii, Oregon, and South Dakota – states with large American Indian populations – either ignore the holiday or use it differently. South Dakota celebrates "Native American Day" instead. Cities in California, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Washington have followed suit with some version of "Indigenous People's Day." Some Oklahoma tribal members simply use the day to honor their tribe.

The history and meaning of Columbus is different than the history and meaning of Columbus Day. Columbus's arrival decimated millions of people seen as "others;" Columbus Day tried to guarantee that such racial, ethnic, or religious massacres wouldn't happen in America again. But while they came from very different places, both Columbus and Columbus Day read American Indians out of American society.