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Editorial : Shifting national culture toward inclusion and apology

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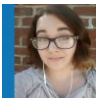
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Editorial: Shifting national culture toward inclusion and apology

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Sarah Allisot (<https://mainecampus.com/author/sallisot/>)

Opinion (<https://mainecampus.com/category/opinion/>) | September 18, 2017

Portland, Maine will decide on Monday, Sept. 18 whether to transition from celebrating Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day. Bangor voted for the switch in August this year, and Belfast first changed recognition in 2015. Several states and independent cities across the U.S. have also made the choice to change this celebration as well.

This decision is not a light one for cities to make. Columbus Day has been a federally recognized holiday since 1937, though it had been celebrated unofficially for years prior. The holiday is described as a recognition and celebration of the voyager, Christopher Columbus, who most famously discovered North America in 1492. Except history has corrected the accounts of what really happened. Columbus landed in the Caribbean islands, Bahamas and South American mainland. He never set foot in North America.

Furthermore, Columbus brought disease and devastation to any community he met. He took hundreds of slaves throughout his voyages. Near the end of Columbus' life, he needed a pardon from Spain for the horrendous conditions in a colony he raised in South America. This begs the uncomfortable, but necessary question — is this a man we should be federally recognizing?

We can argue that any nation is built on atrocities at some level. There have been wars, plagues and defeated foes. This is the dark side of history. Learning and understanding what's been done in the past is just as important for the bad things as the good. However, there is a clear difference between acknowledging and celebrating.

America should think critically about the messages we send with our federal holidays, monuments, documents and images. What values are we taking pride in? Moving forward, do we celebrate the doers of atrocity, or do we pay respects to those affected in our nation's formation?

No history is being lost in the transition from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day. All versions of the Columbus stories remain in textbooks, documentaries and everyday people who sing the Columbus rhyme to kindergarteners. What's happened in the past cannot be changed by something as inconsequential as a holiday's name. The same can be said for other federal changes facing America in the coming years.

Earlier this summer, Americans were up in arms about the removal of certain Confederate statues. Opponents of statue removal claim that history is being erased, lost or disrespected. But history doesn't need to be tangible to be real, and statues that honor pro-slavery are racist and have no place in the American public. Confederate statues honor soldiers and generals who fought to secede from the U.S. — something that is as anti-American as you can get. Yet these monuments are framed as vital to U.S. pride and nationalism.



In 2016, former Treasury Secretary Jack Lew announced that the \$20 bill would someday display an image of Harriet Tubman, rather than former President Andrew Jackson — another character of American history with questionable values. Jackson was known to be violently racist against indigenous people and a proud slaveowner. In August this year, the current Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin stated that this transition was not one of his concerns. Mnuchin cited anti-counterfeit measures as more pressing: a fair excuse for a man responsible for all financial and monetary management for the government.

The timeline for placing Harriet Tubman's photo on the \$20 bill is understandably delayed, at the moment. Responses to this change, however, reflect the same pushback against changing to Indigenous Peoples' Day. "This is how things have always been," is a common argument. But the desire to freeze in place and change nothing will only harm our country. Clinging to the old way won't grow relationships, strengthen the country or heal old harms.

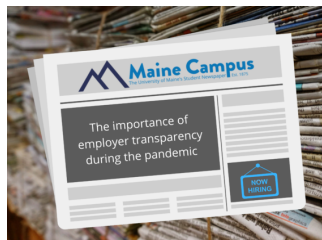
Jennifer Wright wrote for Harper's Bazaar concerning the Tubman bill change: "History can't be changed. But culture — and the way we look at history — can be. That's why there should be memorials to women like Harriet Tubman. Their history existed, too."

Wright has put into words a truth often forgotten and deliberately ignored — that the experiences of Americans other than white men exist, continue to exist and should be honored. It's time for the U.S. to think critically about the values and lives we're celebrating — and those we are not.

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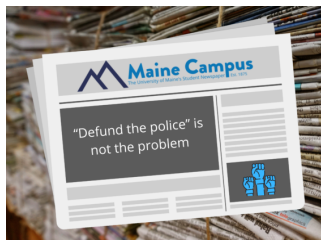
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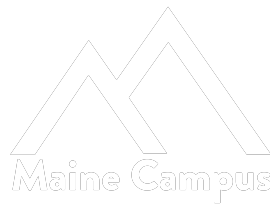
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