

It isn't all about Columbus

By James Reston Jr.

Columbus Day is the most ignored, the most embarrassing, the least significant of all our national holidays. The solution is simple: Just as the birthdays of Lincoln and Washington have been consolidated into one Presidents' Day in February, so Columbus Day should be broadened to celebrate all discovery. The pantheon of our heroic discoverers should be expanded from Leif Ericsson to our modern astronauts, from Lewis and Clark to Adm. Robert E. Perry, from the scientific discoveries of DNA to the glorious discoveries of the Hubble Space Telescope.

It is time to move this holiday into the new millennium.

The country did not get the message of the quincentennial disaster of 1992. Then, the plans to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' "discovery" were met with widespread contempt, boycott and protest. In the mind of many in this country, the negatives of the Columbus legacy far outweigh the positives:

What we know

► Columbus did not discover the Western Hemisphere (for Europe) at all. Leif Ericsson had done so 492 years earlier. Scientific carbon-dating of the Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland has proven that the Vikings were there in the year A.D. 1000.

► When 40 million people already lived here, Columbus "discovered" America only for European colonizers and exploiters.

► His departure for America was bound up with expulsion of Spanish Jews from Spain, with the Inquisition of Tomas Torquemada, and with the defeat of the Islamic Moors of Grenada. But for those events, Columbus' voyage would never have been authorized.

► Columbus was the First Conquistador. He came for gold and to Christianize the natives. He found little gold; he baptized only a few benighted souls; and when the gold proved to be scarce, he turned to the "black gold" of enslavement. His natural successors then were Francisco Pizarro and Hernando Cortes, but no cities in Peru are named after Pizarro, and there is no national holiday in Mexico to honor Cortes.

► His arrival in the New World began a process of genocide. The Taino peoples of the Caribbean who welcomed him openly on the island he named Hispaniola numbered 300,000 when Columbus arrived. After the tuberculosis, small pox and measles that his fellow explorers brought with them, the Taino population was cut in half in four years. In 1508, only 60,000 were left, and by the mid-16th century, the Tainos were exterminated.

► His second voyage of colonization was financed partly by gold that was confiscated by the Spanish Inquisition from the estates of expelled Jews.

His crew called him a fool and a madman. So poor an administrator of his colony was he that he was relieved of command and brought back in chains from his Third Voyage. At best, the myth of Columbus is, therefore, a mixed blessing. He cannot and should not, however, be held

The explorer's vision and bravery are well-known, but by sticking to a stale and inaccurate script, we're missing the real history of discovery in America. There's much more to the myth.

and accomplishment are beyond question.

For more than 12 years, he persisted in his obsession about a Western passage to the Orient. Head unbowed, he suffered countless rebukes from quacks and pseudo-scientists to press his vision, and he experienced many rejections from the Spanish monarchs and others. He braved the unknowns of the "Gloomy Sea," weathered storms and near mutiny, and vastly expanded European knowledge of the world. His return home from the First Voyage is a triumph of navigation and leadership. But that is not the whole story.

For a country that might be a quarter Hispanic and half minority by the year 2050, our national celebration in October requires a radical makeover.

Discovering the whole story

In our cultural life, Columbus needs to be officially diminished, and in the new pantheon in the new millennium, he needs to be joined by other great discoverers of American history. If that were to happen, American educators would rejoice. They would be liberated from the embarrassing constraints of the Columbus legend, just as they could vastly expand the range of their teaching. The stories about the geographical exploration of the continent are rich and fascinating, yet under-appreciated.

For example, how many Americans know that, beside his quest for the fountain of youth, Ponce de Leon was a crewmember on Columbus' second voyage (the one that endeavored to bring back 550 slaves, half of whom died at sea) or that he founded the first permanent settlement on Puerto Rico?

How many Americans know that John Cabot, the erstwhile "discoverer" of North America, was actually Italian — Giovanni Caboto was his real name — and that he carried both the English and the Venetian flags on his voyage? By rights, Newfoundland should be half-Venetian.



By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

achieve a far greater awareness of how the American continent was "discovered." There could be a much more honest debate about who benefited and who suffered from a process that often had greed and rapine at its core. Native Americans could take their rightful place in the narrative of our evolution as a nation. The pioneers of the laboratory and the telescope could join the pioneers of American settlement because in the new millennium, science — not geography — presents us with our frontiers.

Every community in the USA, not just the Italian-Americans, could join in this new celebration of American discovery, invention, pioneering spirit, ingenuity and industry, across the expanse of human endeavor, and make of this long weekend in October something more than an annual enjoyment of autumn leaves.

James Reston Jr.'s new book is titled *Dogs of*