This week we take time out from our series on "the meaning of sustainability" -- or perhaps merely extend it in a new direction -- to celebrate Columbus Day. I use "celebrate" in the dictionary sense of "to proclaim or broadcast for the attention of a wide public." Examining the nation's heroes may tell us something fundamental about our goals and values. Christopher Columbus has been a genuine American hero since at least 1792 when the Society of St. Tammany in New York City first held a dinner to honor the man and his deeds.

Columbus Day -- first observed as a U.S. national holiday in 1892 and declared an annual day of national celebration in 1934 -- commemorates the re-discovery of North America, by Christopher Columbus and his band of 90 adventurers, who set out from Palos, Spain just before dawn on August 3, 1492 intending to find Asia by crossing the Atlantic Ocean in three small ships.

Columbus made four voyages to the New World.[1] The initial voyage reveals several important things about the man. First, he had genuine courage because few ship's captains had ever pointed their prow toward the open ocean, the complete unknown. Secondly, from numerous of his letters and reports we learn that his overarching goal was to seize wealth that belonged to others, even his own men, by whatever means necessary.

Columbus's royal sponsors (Ferdinand and Isabella) had promised a lifetime pension to the first man who sighted land. A few hours after midnight on October 12, 1492, Columbus left behind Leones Bermeos, a lookout on the Pinta, cried out -- in the bright moonlight, he had spied land ahead. Most likely Bermeo was seeing the white beaches of Watling Island in the Bahamas.

As they waited impatiently for dawn, Columbus let it be known that he had spotted land several hours before Bermeo. According to Columbus's journal of that voyage, his ships were, at the time, traveling 10 miles per hour. To have spotted land several hours before Bermeo, Columbus would have had to see more than 30 miles over the horizon, a physical impossibility. Nevertheless Columbus took the lifetime pension for himself.[1,2]

Columbus installed himself as Governor of the Caribbean islands, with headquarters on Hispaniola (the large island now shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic). He described the people, the Arawaks (called by some the Tainos) this way:

"The people of this island and of all the other islands which I have found and seen, or have not seen, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, except that some women cover one place only with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for that purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them, although they are well-built people of handsome stature, because they are wondrous timid....[T]hey are so artless and free with all they possess, that no one would believe it without having seen it. Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts; and whether the thing be of value or of small price, at once they are content with whatever little thing of whatever kind may be given to them.[3,pg.63;1,pg.118]

After Columbus had surveyed the Caribbean region, he returned to Spain to prepare his invasion of the Americas. From accounts of his second voyage, we can begin to understand what the New World represented to Columbus and his men -- it offered them life without limits, unbridled freedom. Columbus took the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea and proceeded to unleash a reign of terror unlike anything seen before or since. When he was finished, eight million Arawaks -- virtually the entire native population of Hispaniola -- had been exterminated by torture, murder, forced labor, starvation, disease and despair.[3,pg.x]

A Spanish missionary, Bartolome de las Casas, described first-hand how the Spaniards terrorized the natives.[4] Las Casas gives numerous eye-witness accounts of repeated mass murder and routine sadistic torture. As Barry Lopez has accurately summarized it, "One day, in front of Las Casas, the Spanish dismembered, beheaded, or raped 3000 people. Such inhumanities and barbarisms were committed in my sight," he says, 'as no age can parallel....' The Spanish cut off the legs of children who ran from them. They poured people full of boiling soap. They made bets as to who, with one sweep of his sword, could cut a person in half. They loosed dogs that 'devoured an Indian like a hog, at first sight, in less than a moment.' They used nursing infants for dog food."[2,pg.4] This was not occasional violence -- it was a systematic, prolonged campaign of brutality and sadism, a policy of torture, mass murder, slavery and forced labor that continued for CENTURIES. "The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world," writes historian David E. Stannard,[3,pg.x] Eventually more than 100 million natives fell under European rule. Their extermination would follow. As the natives died out, they were replaced by slaves brought from Africa.

To make a long story short, Columbus established a pattern that held for five centuries -- a "ruthless, angry search for wealth," as Barry Lopez describes it. "It set a tone in the Americas. The quest for personal possessions was to be, from the outset, a series of raids, irresponsible and criminal, a spree, in which an end to it -- the slaves, the timber, the pearls, the fur, the precious ores, and, later, arable land, coal, oil, and iron ore-- was never visible, in which an end to it had no meaning." Indeed, there WAS no end to it, no limit.

As Hans Koning has observed, "There was no real ending to the conquest of Latin America. It continued in remote forests and on far mountainsides. It is still going on in our day when miners and ranchers invade land belonging to the Amazon Indians and armed thugs occupy Indian villages in the backwoods of Central America."[6,pg.46] As recently as the 1980s under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush the U.S. government knowingly gave direct aid to genocidal campaigns that killed thousands of Mayan Indian people in Guatemala, El Salvador, and elsewhere.[7] The pattern holds.

Unfortunately, Columbus and the Spaniards were not unique. They conquered Mexico and what is now the Southwestern U.S., with forays into Florida, the Carolinas, even into Virginia. From Virginia northward, the land had been taken by the English who, if anything, had even less tolerance for the indigenous people. As Hans Koning says, "From the beginning, the Spaniards saw the native Americans as natural slaves, beasts of burden, part of the loot. When working them to death was more economical than treating them somewhat humanely, they worked them to death. The English, on the other hand, had no use for the native peoples. They saw them as devil worshippers, savages who were beyond salvation by the church, and exterminating them increasingly became accepted policy."[6,pg.14]

The British arrived in Jamestown in 1607. By 1610 the intentional extermination of the native population was well along. As David E. Stannard has written, "Hundreds of Indians were killed in skirmish after skirmish. Other hundreds were killed in successful plots of mass poisoning. They were hunted down by dogs, 'blood-Hounds to draw after them, and Mastives [mastiffs] to seaze them.' Their canoes and fishing wells were smashed, their villages and agricultural fields burned to the ground. Indian peace offers were accepted by the English only until their prisoners were returned; then, having lulled the natives into false security, the colonists returned to the attack. It was the colonists' expressed desire that the Indians be exterminated, rooted 'out from being longer a people upon the face of the earth.' In a single raid the settlers destroyed corn sufficient to feed four thousand people for a year. Starvation and the massacre of non-combatants was becoming the preferred British approach to dealing with the natives."[3,pg.106]

In Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey extermination was officially promoted by a "scalp bounty" on dead Indians. "Indeed, in

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many areas it [murdering Indians] became an outright business," writes historian Ward Churchill.[5,pg.182]

Indians were defined as subhumans, lower than animals. George Washington compared them to wolves, "beasts of prey" and called for their total destruction.[3,pgs.119-120] Andrew Jackson -- whose portrait appears on the U.S. $20 bill today -- in 1814 "supervised the mutilation of 800 or more Creek Indian corpses -- the bodies of men, women and children that [his troops] had massacred -- cutting off their noses to count and preserve a record of the dead, slicing long strips of flesh from their bodies to tan and turn into bridle reins."[5,pg.186]

The English policy of extermination -- another name for genocide -- grew more insistent as settlers pushed westward. In 1851 the Governor of California officially called for the extermination of the Indians in his state.[3,pg.144] On March 24, 1863, the ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS in Denver ran an editorial titled, "Exterminate Them." On April 2, 1863, the SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN advocated "extermination of the Indians."[5,pg.228] In 1867, General William Tecumseh Sherman said, "We must act with vindictive earnestness against the [Lakotas, known to whites as the Sioux] even to their extermination, men, women and children."[5,pg.240]

In 1891, Frank L. Baum (gentle author of the WIZARD OF OZ) wrote in the ABERDEEN (KANSAS) SATURDAY PIONEER that the army should "finish the job" by the "total annihilation" of the few remaining Indians. The U.S. did not follow through on Baum's macabre demand for there really was no need. By then the native population had been reduced to 2.5% of its original numbers and 97.5% of the aboriginal land base had been expropriated and renamed the land of the free and the home of the brave. Hundreds upon hundreds of native tribes with unique languages, learning, customs, and cultures had simply been erased from the face of the earth, most often without even the pretense of justice or law.

Today we can see the remnant cultural arrogance of Christopher Columbus and Captain John Smith shadowed in the cult of the "global free market" which aims to eradicate indigenous cultures and traditions world-wide, to force all peoples to adopt the ways of the U.S. Global free trade is manifest destiny writ large.

But as Barry Lopez says, "This violent corruption needn't define us... We can say, yes, this happened, and we are ashamed. We repudiate the greed. We recognize and condemn the evil. And we see how the harm has been perpetuated. But, five hundred years later, we intend to mean something else in the world." If we chose, we could set limits on ourselves for once. We could declare enough is enough. So it is always good to celebrate Columbus on his day.

--Peter Montague(National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)