

Tim Williams ([00:03](#)):

The wave of protests in June following the high profile killing of George Floyd have reignited the conversation about the statues and public displays. We choose to maintain around the country, including in New York, which celebrate historical figures and arrows that can range from problematic to racist. And while the movement has already prompted some change, it has not changed, Governor Andrew Cuomo's mind about a controversial statue of Christopher Columbus in Manhattan.

Governor Andrew Cuomo ([00:28](#)):

Uh, Christopher Columbus. I understand the dialogue has been going on for a number of years. The Christopher Columbus statue represents in some ways the Italian American legacy in this country and the Italian American contribution in this country. I understand the feelings about Christopher Columbus and some of his acts, which nobody would support, but the statue was, has come to represent and signify an appreciation for the Italian American contribution to New York. So on that, for that reason, I support it

Tim Williams ([01:10](#)):

To discuss this broader issue, including the governor's comments. We're joined by Betty Lyons, a citizen of the Onondaga nation and head of the American Indian Law Alliance. Welcome to the show, Betty, thank you for having me. So before we address the governor's remarks, can you give us a brief history of Christopher Columbus, which could help for our listeners shed light on why Indigenous people are so often offended by statues celebrating his life and legacy?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([01:36](#)):

Yes. Um, Christopher Columbus, um, under the direction of the Spanish King and queen came in search of gold and mining material a long time ago and back in 1400's. But first that directive was given by the Pope who, um, Pope Alexander the V, in 1452, it started with an edict saying that basically that any lands that were discovered by, the Christians, they arrived and it feels lands were and how to design non-Christians,, then they would then be allowed to declare them for themselves. If they didn't then themselves think into Christianity or covert,, they could be enslaved or killed to do that. And so this kind of said about, um, you know, many different problems that, that culminated from the transatlantic slave trade, all the way to like this endless mining that we even see today. So all of those things, even Indigenous land law is based on that. So it was, it was the very start of what I say is the very beginning of racism as we know it today in this country.

Tim Williams ([02:56](#)):

Until after high school that I really began to the full picture of Columbus's legacy. Was this something you grew up aware of?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([03:04](#)):

Yes. I think that indigenous people have a different kind of awareness about history, right? So we're taught in our home, the factual history and unfortunately in schools, through acts of eraser, you're taught a different kind of notion of history. Columbus never even landed in the United States or what is now known in North America. He started in The Bahamas. I mean, it's really, quite concerning that people wants to ignore the truth and the facts about who he was and what he did. You know, he not only started the slave trade, he also, engaged in the sex trafficking of, a nine-year-old children and this is all written in his own hand. And although I understand what some was saying about wanting to have,

you know, someone that they could revere, but, you know, an Italian American. I'm quite sure that once people understand the true history, cause that they would want to find a better representation for themselves.

Tim Williams ([04:11](#)):

So you don't think it's a valid argument to say that the statue means more than just whatever he did in his lifetime. And that he is now just a overall symbol of pride for Italian Americans. And therefore, because it's so meaningful for them, it should be allowed to stand.

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([04:30](#)):

No, not at all because it symbolizes the embedded, systematic racism that we've been derived for over 500 years. And I always go back to our peacemaker, you know, there's so many other things that we could certainly lift up, in this area. You know, our peacemakers seem to the shores of Onondaga Lake bringing our five warring nations together. And it was the birthplace of democracy. And why isn't that story told? You know what I'm saying? Instead, we're still stuck in telling this false story about this horrible awful man that did all of these terrible things. And that's the people that they wanted to revere and I get that they want to lift somebody up, but I'm quite sure, you know, all of the Italian Americans that have given so much to the United States, there is someone that they could certainly raise up for that effort instead of Christopher Columbus.

Tim Williams ([05:31](#)):

I'm curious aside from this issue, how has the governor, from your perspective, at least been at addressing policy concerns and priorities of native Americans living in New York?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([05:42](#)):

I mean, honestly I'm being very honest. Like I, want to applaud him because, you know, for this COVID-19 effort, because I feel like I don't want it to come across to him that I'm constantly hammering on him. You know, his relationship with Indigenous peoples in New York state has been not a good one. He refuses to meet with any traditional leader leaders from our Confederacy. We have yet to meet with him. You know, as far as policy goes, I've been trying to work on even getting a house clinic in New York city, for Indigenous people, there are over 120,000 people living in the city of New York. All of that has kind of fallen by the wayside. There was no one in his administration that is, is helping to move that forward. I think that that's really concerning.

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([06:37](#)):

We again are still invisible. Um This again goes back to the doctrine of discovery and how, you know, everything was a hierarchal system and that's how it was introduced. And so our wants and needs were not even seen as human, you know, right from the inception of that doctrine of discovery. We were the flora and fauna. And unfortunately still today, I think that that's how we're seen and therefore invisible. We're not exactly considered to be human or on the same level, because if we were that statue, would've never went up in the first place.

Tim Williams ([07:12](#)):

Side of the American museum of natural history in New York city stands a statue of former president Teddy Roosevelt flanked by a Native American man, which has come under scrutiny for depicting a real

racial hierarchy. What are your thoughts on that statue? And do you think it's overdue for that statue to come down?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([07:30](#)):

It is definitely long overdue and I was happy to hear that they are going to take that down. We received a message that they are going to take that statue down. It is long overdue. All of these symbols of racism that we face on a daily basis, you know, keep us oppressed, it's that hand of oppression. So in one way, they're always saying no, no here take my hand in friendship and with the other, they're still holding us down. So you can't say that you're against racism or that they don't believe in that kind of thing or they want to change it. And yet continue to have all of these symbolisms of racism surrounding New York City and Albany.

Tim Williams ([08:13](#)):

It seems like the examples we're touching on are pretty clear cut examples of what should be done in society today. What about, some gray areas? I mean, we've got monuments up to presidents like Washington and Jefferson who were slave owners in their time. How do you think we should approach those? Do you think those are more nuanced questions or do you think it's not a gray area and that things like that should be taken down as well?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([08:40](#)):

Well, for Indigenous people, it's not a gray area when you're talking about George Washington, you know, for our people, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, you know, he, ordered the Clinton Sullivan campaign on us, to raid all of our villages. So 40 of our villages were burned to the ground. All of our food resources were also burned. Our people still survive. So when you talk about, heroes, you know, they may pose as heroes to some, but not to all. And then I question, it isn't reflective of a hero for everyone, what are you trying to accomplish with that? Like, are you continuing to want to demean people and keep them oppressed by them having to see that all the time? I know that it's not as clear cut for some people, they see George Washington as a hero as the father of this country. For us it's a totally different scenario. Our reality is very different. I always also think about how, our Confederacy gave democracy to the United States. They patterned their system of government after ours, of course, leaving out, two of the most important elements, women and the natural world. I mean, until all of those things change, I don't believe that there's going to be peace that comes to anyone until all of those things are addressed.

Tim Williams ([10:11](#)):

So sticking with Washington then would you want to see the monument in DC taken down?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([10:17](#)):

Of course I would. I mean, most indigenous people would. I would say that I understand, the connection to George Washington as being a founding father. He is certainly not our founding father. It's very problematic. I always recall my son, he is now 19, but he was seven years old and he refused to do this school report on George Washington. And he got sent to the principal's office. And after explaining why, you know, he had told the story of the Clinton Solvan campaign which his teacher didn't even believe. All these acts of eraser, Like these acts of eraser, they have made it impossible for anyone to know the real truth. And so the Cicada came out a couple of years ago and that's what our people had lived on their 17 years Cicada.

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([11:12](#)):

And at that time, the Cicada presented themselves as a food source for us. And so every 17 years we celebrate the Cicada, we eat them and celebrate them. And so my son at the time he was, he was incensed. To think that they would ask him to make this picture of George Washington when he did the horrendous things to our ancestors. That's the reality that our kids live in all they're faced with this all the time. Every time they have to go to school, they're learning something. It's a constant reminder.

Tim Williams ([11:46](#)):

How did you cope with that as a parent, when your son told you about that incident?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([11:51](#)):

It can be very emotional and heartbreaking. You have to really support your child and understand that, you have to fight for them and make them understand that this happened to them, but that we have survived it and that we're still here and we're still continuing, our responsibilities as Creator has set forth for us. We have to continue to do so. People will sometimes call us activists and I really wince at that word. Activists, like we aren't born activists, we're born Indigenous. We don't have a choice. There is no choice, it's unfortunate, but there isn't. And I tell my children that all the time. Is our road a hard road? Yes, it is. But as long as we do right in the eyes of Creator, I feel that it's gonna be okay. And it's about relationships and making friends too, you're not going to get anywhere, you're not going to educate anyone, when you're in an adversarial position, You have to reach out your hand, extend your hand. And it's a lot of work.

Tim Williams ([13:01](#)):

The governor doesn't really seem to be moving on this issue, but others are, I mean, New Haven took down a statue of Columbus. And I think the general populace is more receptive now to this conversation. What do you think about the trend that's happening? Do you feel encouraged by this or have you seen it before and are pessimistic in the long run?

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([13:22](#)):

Hope is something that, you know, we always carry, it's kind of funny, all of the atrocities that have happened to us and yet we're still hopeful. We have to have hope because without it what's the point. We are hoping that this trend will continue, across the United States, and all the other countries too as well. That they take down their forms and symbols of oppression. I'm hoping that we can move this forward. I know in Syracuse, we're having some dialogue with the mayor. You know it's taken a long time for this racism to be so systematic and indoctrinated into everything. It's gonna take a long time for us to get it out.

Tim Williams ([14:11](#)):

We've been speaking with Betty Lyons, a citizen of the Onondaga nation and head of the American Indian Law Alliance. Betty, thank you so much for making the time

Betty Lyons (Gaeñ hia uh) ([14:19](#)):

So much for having me have a great day day.