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The Real Story of Three American Holidays: Columbus Day, Martin Luther King Day, and Juneteenth

How Three Very Different Holidays Became National Symbols — and Why Their Origins Still Shape the Debate Today



William Spivey Follow 6 min read · 2 days ago

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To understand how Columbus Day came into existence, you must appreciate David Hennessy, Jr.'s role. He was as integral to Columbus Day as George Floyd was to Juneteenth.

Hennessy was born in 1858 in New Orleans, Louisiana, to Irish Catholic parents. His father, David Sr., fought for the Union during the Civil War and later served in the Metropolitan Police, a Reconstruction-era force that protected the rights of freedmen. David Sr. was murdered in 1869 by another policeman, leaving a mark on young Hennessy's life.

Hennessy, Jr., joined the New Orleans Police Department as a messenger boy in 1870. As a teenager, he gained attention for single-handedly capturing two thieves. By the age of 20, he had been promoted to detective.

In 1881, he made national headlines by capturing Giuseppe Esposito, a notorious Sicilian bandit wanted for kidnapping and extortion. This

cemented his reputation as a tough, capable officer.

In 1882, Hennessy was tried (and acquitted) for the killing of a rival police official during a feud over promotions. In 1888, Hennessy became the superintendent and chief of police of New Orleans. He modernized the force and was widely respected in the city, except in the Italian or Black communities, where he was feared. Hennessy got his backing from "the Ring", the Regular Democratic Organization tied to ward bosses, immigrant groups, and Creole elites. He became known for his aggressive stance against organized crime, particularly targeting Italian immigrant groups suspected of Mafia activity. Hennessy was New Orleans' Bull Connor or Willis V. McCall.

On the night of October 15, 1890, Hennessy was ambushed near his home and fired at with shotguns. He died the next morning, reportedly whispering that "the *Dagos* did it." His murder shocked the city and inflamed anti-Italian sentiment.

In New Orleans, Hennessy himself had built his reputation partly on targeting Sicilian immigrants, especially the Matrangas family, whom he accused of Mafia ties. Before Hennessy's assassination, Italians in New Orleans were already viewed as racial outsiders, economic threats, and criminal suspects. They occupied a precarious position — not entirely accepted as white, yet not Black, and therefore vulnerable to violence from both law enforcement and mobs.

When Hennessy was killed in 1890, his whispered accusation that "the *Dagos* did it" tapped directly into these prejudices. The lynching of eleven Italians in 1891 was not an isolated outburst, but the culmination of decades of anti-Italian sentiment in Louisiana.

Eleven Italian immigrants — many of them Sicilian — were killed by a mob after being accused (and in some cases acquitted) of involvement in the murder of Police Chief David Hennessy. A mob of thousands stormed the Orleans Parish Prison, dragged the men out, and executed them. The killings were fueled by anti-Italian prejudice, portraying Italians as criminal outsiders and "not fully white."

International Fallout

Italy was outraged. The victims were Italian nationals, and the lynching sparked a diplomatic crisis between the U.S. and Italy. Italy recalled its ambassador, and rumors of war circulated. To calm tensions, the U.S. government eventually paid reparations to the families of three victims.

In 1892, as the U.S. prepared to mark the 400th anniversary of Columbus's 1492 voyage, President Benjamin Harrison saw an opportunity: he proclaimed a national day of observance on October 21, 1892, to honor Columbus.

The celebration was meant to appease Italian Americans and signal goodwill to Italy. It also served a political purpose: Harrison was facing reelection and wanted to rally immigrant communities, especially Catholics, into the American fold.

The First Columbus Day

The 1892 Columbus Day was framed as a celebration of patriotism, unity, and inclusion of immigrants. Italian Americans embraced Columbus as a symbol of their heritage and contribution to America. Over time, Italian American organizations, especially the Knights of Columbus, pushed to make it a recurring holiday.

From a One-Time Event to a Federal Holiday

After decades of lobbying, Franklin D. Roosevelt made Columbus Day a federal holiday in 1937, largely in response to pressure from Italian American groups. In 1971, Congress fixed it to the second Monday in October.

The lynching of the 11 Italians was the catalyst: it forced the U.S. government to acknowledge Italian Americans at a time when they were marginalized. Columbus Day became a political olive branch, transforming a moment of racial violence into a national holiday.

Yet, the holiday has always carried tension: while it symbolized acceptance for Italian Americans, it also glorified Columbus, whose voyages initiated centuries of colonization and Indigenous suffering.

Public holidays in the United States are often presented as tributes to justice, unity, or shared values. Yet the origins of several key observances reveal something more complicated: they honored principle less than appeased constituencies whose exclusion or anger threatened the political order. Columbus Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Juneteenth each emerged not as spontaneous affirmations of justice, but as calculated responses to pressure, designed to quiet dissent and absorb marginalized groups into the national narrative.

Columbus Day: A Salve for Anti-Italian Violence

The first Columbus Day proclamation in 1892 came directly after the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans — the largest mass lynching in U.S. history. The killings sparked a diplomatic crisis with Italy and inflamed tensions with Italian Americans, who were treated as racial outsiders. President Benjamin Harrison declared a one-time national celebration of Columbus to soothe Italian anger, signal goodwill to Italy, and fold Catholic immigrants into the American story. The holiday was not born of admiration

for Columbus's voyages alone, but as a political olive branch to a community reeling from violence. When Franklin Roosevelt made it a federal holiday in 1937, Italian American groups again urged it, seeking legitimacy. Columbus Day thus functioned less as a celebration of discovery than as a bargain: recognition in exchange for quieting grievance.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day: A Concession to Civil Rights Memory

The campaign to honor Martin Luther King Jr. with a holiday began soon after his assassination in 1968. Yet Congress resisted for fifteen years, citing cost and political controversy. Only after sustained pressure — including petitions with millions of signatures, labor strikes, and the symbolic weight of Coretta Scott King's advocacy — did Congress relent in 1983. Even then, the holiday was framed as a gesture of unity rather than a reckoning with King's radical critique of militarism, capitalism, and racism. Many states resisted adopting it, with Arizona and New Hampshire holding out until the 1990s. The holiday's eventual passage was less about embracing King's full legacy than about appeasing Black Americans and their allies who refused to let his memory be erased. It was a compromise: recognition of a sanitized King in exchange for defusing unrest. MLK becoming a federal holiday had as much to do with reaction to the police killing of Arthur McDuffie in Miami in 1980 and the ensuing riots, the Atlanta Child Murders from 19079–1981, and the Howard Beach assaults on Black people in 1982 as it did with any love for Martin.

Juneteenth: A Response to Modern Protest

Juneteenth, long celebrated locally by Black communities, became a federal holiday only in 2021 — after the nationwide protests following George Floyd's murder in 2020. For decades, Congress ignored calls to recognize it. Only when mass demonstrations forced a reckoning with systemic racism did lawmakers act, passing the holiday bill with unusual speed. Yet the gesture was largely symbolic: while Congress elevated Juneteenth, substantive

reforms on policing, voting rights, and economic justice stalled. The holiday served as a pressure valve, offering recognition to Black communities while sidestepping more profound structural change.

Conclusion

Columbus Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Juneteenth illustrate how American holidays often emerge not from pure ideals but from political necessity. Each was created to appease groups whose exclusion or anger threatened the status quo — Italians after lynching, Black Americans after King's assassination, and protesters after George Floyd. These holidays remind us that recognition is often granted not as honor, but as concession. The challenge is to push beyond symbolic appeasement toward the justice these observances claim to represent

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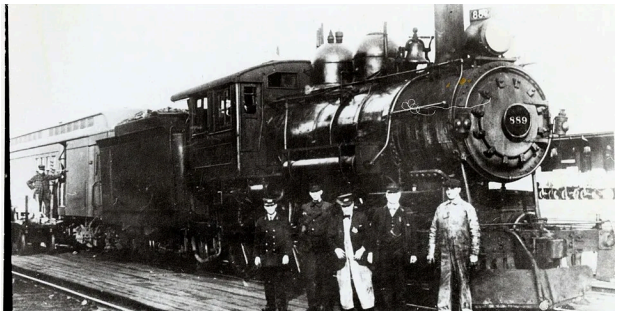
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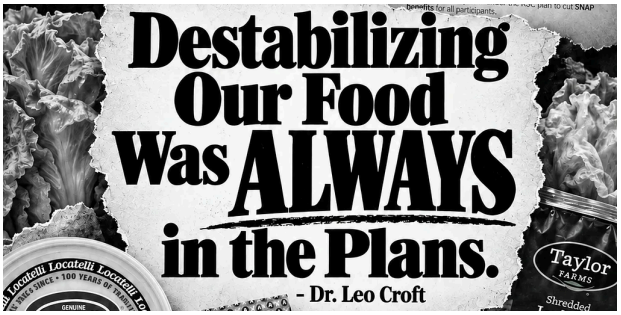


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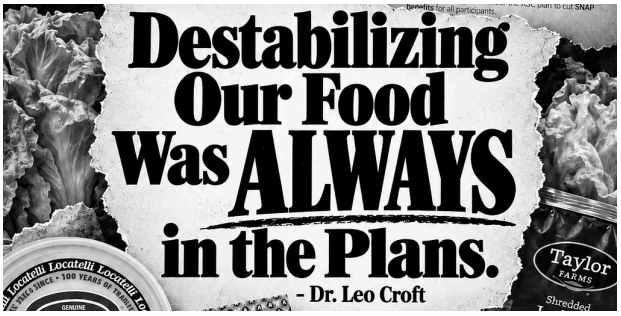
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