

Columbia

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¡Columbia! No nation is complete without a female personification wearing a loose-fitting robe, and the United States of America has Columbia.

Much has been named after Ms Columbia, including a space shuttle, a movie studio, and a ten mile by ten mile parcel of land carved out of Maryland and Virginia. But there isn't much ambiguity. When talking about NASA, we simply say *the Columbia*; when talking about a new movie, we'd just say *it was made by Columbia*; and when referring to that parcel of land—wait, I suppose there's *always* ambiguity when referring to the land, because we refer to it as *the District of Columbia* every single time. Referring to the area just by its name, Columbia, is a rarity indeed.¹

We don't do this with any other territory. We say things like *the State of Maryland* for added formality or bit of color, but it's mostly just referred to as *Maryland*, and it's left to context for people to work out that the word refers to a state and not the residence of some gal named Mary.

Other things that are not states don't remind us at every single usage. We don't talk about the *Commonwealth of Virginia* all the time, or the *Territory of Guam*. No, we just have this one linguistic glitch of referring to one and only subdivision of the U.S.A. by that verbose the-division-of-name format.

By a crazy coincidence, this is the one subdivision that is trying to change its status, from the District of Columbia to the State of Columbia. That word *District* has bite, because it means that the over half a million residents of Columbia have no Senators, no Representative, and that the federal government can routinely overturn their votes on local issues in manners that would be unconstitutional if the word *District* were not attached to Columbia's name.

Names do matter. As the marketing people would say, Columbia is heavily branded as a district, not as a state. Every time anybody refers to *the District of Columbia*, they effectively say *Columbia, which I will once again remind you is a district and not a state*. This is not helpful.

Maybe you think concerns over nomenclature are silly, and won't affect Columbia's chances of becoming a state. Well, great then: soon enough, the term *District of Columbia* will actually be incorrect, so you might as well change now and start calling it Columbia.

I myself dislike great efforts to rewrite nomenclature, and tire of people who cut me off mid-sentence to correct my usage. But I'm talking about the Columbia issue

¹Thanks to Ms SEG, of the City of Baltimore, State of Maryland, for suggestions. And a PS: the country is *Colombia*, named after the explorer Cristobal Colón.



Figure 1: Columbia, holding a torch. From an older stock certificate for Columbia Pictures.

because the *District of* habit just so darn easy to fix. It's like when people say *I typed my PIN number into the ATM machine*. It's just an I-didn't-think-about-it habit that's easy to re-habit into something better.

There are ways to introduce a term without inducing confusion. E.g., use *District of Columbia* once, and then *Columbia* thereafter.

Or I suppose you could just refer to Washington. At inception, Columbia included a few distinct cities—Washington, Alexandria, Georgetown—and some unincorporated wilderness, but now Washington and Columbia are identical in scope. Politically, I don't like this option because in the system of the U.S. government, land votes, which is why Wyoming—253,000 square kilometers, 523,000 people—has two senators, while Columbia—177 sq km, 588,000 people—has none. Half a million people in a state deserve representation, while half a million people in a city do not. And anyway, there *is* annoying ambiguity with the State of Washington.

Or, there's the ol' acronym trick. Kentucky Fried Chicken is KFC, National Cash Register is NCR, Volkswagon is VW, and you don't notice that they were originally the product of a fascist enterprise to fry cash registers. Thus, *dee cee*, which doesn't mean anything at all, and could just as easily be the name of a soul singer as of a region. This is even correct, in the sense that Columbia's postal abbreviation is indeed DC. So you yuksters who always call Kentucky *K-Y* are entirely consistent in calling Columbia *D-C*.

So, dear reader, that's all I have today. If you believe that taxation without representation is tyranny, and you believe that Columbia should be a state and not a district, then drop the references to the district's second-class status, and start referring to it simply by its name: *Columbia*.