

## **Opinion Piece on Columbus Day**

Columbus, whatever flaws he may have had, was a man of boldness, courage, leadership and vision. To venture out into the unknown is one of the traits that make us human and leads to discoveries in all areas of life. These are qualities to be admired and celebrated. Even Columbus' critics view him as a skilled sea captain of the highest order. He skillfully navigated his way to the Caribbean and recorded the voyage in a way that enabled others to repeat the achievement. He opened a route that could be sailed again by himself and others.

Whatever we may think of the man himself, his voyage was a turning point in world history. He made the New World known to Europe, which led to an important exchange of foods and raw materials and eventually provided the opportunity to millions of people to come here for a better life.

The acts of barbarism were committed by Columbus' men, not by Columbus himself. To get rid of Columbus Day would be holding him to the standards and morals of our own day. He lived in a world in which acts we consider barbaric were common across the globe, even among Native Americans.

We can still celebrate Columbus' better qualities while not ignoring his flaws and moral failures.

From Howard Zinn's, A People's History of the United States, HarperPerennial, 1980 pp. 3-7

Now, from his base on Haiti, Columbus sent expedition after expedition into the interior. They found no gold fields, but had to fill up the ships returning to Spain ...In the year 1495 they went on a great slave raid, rounded up fifteen hundred Arawak men, women and children...and then picked five hundred to load onto ships. Of these five hundred, two hundred died en route. The rest arrived in Spain and were put up for sale.

In the province of Cicao on Haiti, where he and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist, they ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death.

Trying to put together an army of resistance, the Arawaks faced Spaniards who had armor, muskets, swords and horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners, they hanged them or burned them to death. Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began, with cassava poison. Infants were killed to save them from the Spaniards. In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead.

When it became clear that there was no gold left, the Indians were taken as slave labor on huge estates, known later as *encomiendas*. They were worked at a ferocious pace, and died by the thousands. By the year 1515, there were perhaps fifty thousand Indians left. By 1550, there five hundred. A report of the year 1650 shows none of the original Arawaks or their descendants left on the island.

Bartolomeo de Las Casas (a Spanish priest who tried to help the Indians)writes:  
"but our(Spaniards) work was to exasperate , ravage, kill, mangle and destroy; The admiral it is true, was blind as those who came after him, and he was so anxious to please the king that he committed irreparable crimes against the Indians..." (Las Casas, History of the Indies)

Total control led to total cruelty. The Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades... they suffered and died in the mines and other labors in desperate silence, knowing not a soul in the world to whom they could turn for help." (Las Casas, History of the Indies)

After each six or eight months' work in the mines...up to a third of the men died.

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William J. Bennet, *America: The Last Best Hope*, Nelson Current, 2006

To the modern complaint that Columbus brought slavery to the New World and that the European diseases wiped out indigenous peoples, a response is due. Slavery was a pervasive fact of life among the Europeans, but also particularly among the Arabs, the Africans, and the Indians themselves. In Asia, slavery had always existed. It seems hard to credit an attack on Columbus that singles him out for what was then a fairly universal practice. ...A counter challenge might be offered: Who in Columbus' time, did not practice slavery?

**Bartolomeo de Las Casas**

**A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies**

After determining that Spain's treatment of Native Americans was cruel and unjust, Las Casas became a catholic monk and preacher and argued that the Spanish king should intervene to protect Native populations.

..if the commonwealth suffers from some evil, the reason can only be that the ruler[king of Spain] is unaware of it; once the matter is brought to his notice, he will work with diligence to set matters right.

From the very first day they [the Spaniards] clapped their eyes upon them [the natives] the Spanish fell like ravening wolves upon the fold. Or like tigers and savage lions who have not eaten meat for days... the Spaniards still do nothing except tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly...

There are two main ways in which those who have traveled to this part of the world pretending to be Christians have uprooted these pitiful peoples and wiped them from the face of the earth. First, they have waged war on them; unjust, cruel, bloody and tyrannical war. Second, they have murdered anyone and everyone who has shown the slightest sign of resistance, or even of wishing to escape the torment to which they have subjected him. ..It has led to the annihilation of all adult males, whom they habitually subject to the harshest and most iniquitous and brutal slavery that man has ever devised for his fellow men, treating them in fact worse than animals...

The reason the so-called Christians have murdered on such a vast scale and killed anyone and everyone in their way is purely and simply greed...Their insatiable greed and overweening ambition know no bounds...

Socratic Seminar  
Grade 7 Social Studies  
Unit: Exploration

**Should we celebrate Columbus Day?**

- Are Columbus' achievements worthy of celebration? To what can you point to support your claim?
- Should Columbus' brutal treatment of Native-Americans disqualify him from being celebrated? What specifically would disqualify him?
- Most human beings are a mix of honorable and flawed characteristics. Are we saying an historical figure must be perfect or morally pure to be worthy of celebrating?
- Do you agree with the position that we should judge a person only according to the values of his/her time? In other words, if racism and oppression of other peoples was widely accepted in Europe at the time, can we really be so critical of Columbus?
- Is Bartolomeo de las Casas more worthy of celebrating than Columbus?
- Maybe we shouldn't celebrate anyone! Take down all statues and memorials and don't celebrate anybody! Do we need to celebrate individuals? Why or why not?
- Do human beings need examples and models to inspire them?