

# *SHOULD WE CELEBRATE COLUMBUS DAY?*



Sebastiano del Piombo, "Portrait of a Man," Said to be Christopher Columbus (1519)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "progress" as:

*Advancement to a further or higher stage successively; growth; development, usually to a better state or condition; improvement.*

More than five hundred years after the first Spaniards arrived in the Caribbean, historians and the general public still debate Columbus's legacy. Should he be remembered as a great discoverer who brought the world closer together in the name of progress? Or should he be condemned as a man responsible for an "American Holocaust," a man who brought devastating European and Asian diseases to unprotected native peoples, who disrupted the American ecosystem, and who initiated the Atlantic slave trade? What is Columbus's legacy—discovery and progress, or slavery, disease, and racial antagonism? Is he a hero, or villain? Does he deserve a national holiday?

Directions:

Read each document carefully to understand the arguments for and against Columbus. As you read each source, complete the chart at the end of this document. Please include details and evidence to support your argument. This will be due on our first day of school. Please contact me with any questions – [Anneke.lujan@lca.edu](mailto:Anneke.lujan@lca.edu) .

# *Timeline of Spanish Colonization of the New World*

- OCT 12, 1492** Columbus arrives in the Bahamas
- JUN 7, 1494** The Treaty of Tordesillas is signed, dividing newly discovered overseas lands between Portugal and Spain.
- 1501** The *encomienda* system begins, granting Indians to Spanish *encomenderos* as slaves. The Spaniards are tasked with protecting the natives and teaching them Christianity. The system is rife with abuses.
- 1507** Mapmaker Martin Waldseemüller is first to use the name “America” to refer to newly-discovered continents, after Italian merchant, explorer, and cartographer Amerigo Vespucci. Columbus loses out on lucrative naming rights.
- NOV 8, 1519** Fall of Tenochtitlan: Hernán Cortés and approximately 100 Spaniards capture the capital of the Aztec Empire. Before the end of the year, he will have conquered the entire Aztec Empire.
- 1521** The Spanish import the first African slaves to the territory that will later become the United States.
- 1532** Francisco Pizarro invades the Incan Empire and begins the conquest of Peru. Also, the first printing press is set up in Mexico City. Printing comes to the New World.
- 1545** Silver is discovered at Potosí in Bolivia. Spain begins to reap huge financial rewards from its New World colonies.
- May 14, 1607** Jamestown is founded in Virginia, establishing the first permanent English settlement in America.

# Howard Zinn, “Columbus, the Indians, and Human Progress,” (Excerpt, 1971):

*Howard Zinn (1922 – 2010) was an American historian, playwright, social activist, and political science professor at Boston University. Zinn wrote more than 20 books, including his best-selling and influential A People's History of the United States. Zinn described himself as “something of an anarchist, something of a socialist. Maybe a democratic socialist.” He wrote extensively about the civil rights and anti-war movements, and labor history of the United States.*

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Arawak men and women, naked, tawny, and full of wonder, emerged from their villages onto the island’s beaches and swam out to get a closer look at the strange big boat. When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water, gifts. He later wrote of this in his log:

**They ... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for the glass beads and hawks' bells. They willingly traded everything they owned... . They were well-built, with good bodies and handsome features.... They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane... . They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.**

These traits did not stand out in the Europe of the Renaissance, dominated as it was by the religion of popes, the government of kings, the frenzy for money that marked Western civilization and its first messenger to the Americas, Christopher Columbus.

The information that Columbus wanted most was: Where is the gold? He had persuaded the king and queen of Spain to finance an expedition to the lands, the wealth, he expected would be on the other side of the Atlantic—the Indies and Asia, gold and spices. For, like other informed people of his time, he knew the world was round and he could sail west in order to get to the Far East.

So, approaching land, they were met by the Arawak Indians, who swam out to greet them. The Arawaks lived in village communes, had a developed agriculture of corn, yams, cassava. They could spin and weave, but they had no horses or work animals. They had no iron, but they wore tiny gold ornaments in their ears.

This was to have enormous consequences: it led Columbus to take some of them aboard ship as prisoners because he insisted that they guide him to the source of the gold. He then sailed to what is now Cuba, then to Hispaniola (the island which today consists of Haiti and the Dominican Republic). There, bits of visible gold in the rivers, and a gold mask presented to Columbus by a local Indian chief, led to wild visions of gold fields.

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 were five hundred. A report of the year 1650 shows none of the original Arawaks or their descendants left on the island.

The chief source—and, on many matters the only source—of information about what happened on the islands after Columbus came is Bartolome de las Casas, who, as a young priest, participated in the conquest of Cuba. Las Casas transcribed Columbus's journal and, in his fifties, began a multivolume History of the Indies.

When he arrived on Hispaniola in 1508, Las Casas says, “there were 60,000 people living on this island, including the Indians; so that from 1494 to 1508, over three million people had perished from war, slavery, and the mines. Who in future generations will believe this? I myself writing it as a knowledgeable eyewitness can hardly believe it...”

Thus began the history, five hundred years ago, of the European invasion of the Indian settlements in the Americas. When we read the history books given to children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure—there is no bloodshed—and Columbus Day is a celebration.

Past the elementary and high schools, there are only occasional hints of something else. Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard historian, was the most distinguished writer on Columbus, the author of a multivolume biography, and was himself a sailor who retraced Columbus's route across the Atlantic. In his popular book *Christopher Columbus, Mariner*, written in 1954, he tells about the enslavement and the killing: "The cruel policy initiated by Columbus and pursued by his successors resulted in complete genocide." That is on one page, buried halfway into the telling of a grand romance.

To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and to de-emphasize their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves—unwittingly—to justify what was done. My point is not that we must, in telling history, accuse, judge, condemn Columbus *in absentia*. It is too late for that; it would be a useless scholarly exercise in morality. One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth.

The treatment of heroes (Columbus) and their victims (the Arawaks)—the quiet acceptance of conquest and murder in the name of progress—is only one aspect of a certain approach to history, in which the past is told from the point of view of governments, conquerors, diplomats, leaders.

I prefer to try to tell the story of the discovery of America from the viewpoint of the Arawaks.... My point is not to grieve for the victims and denounce the executioners. Those tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for the present. And the lines are not always clear. In the long run, the oppressor is also a victim. In the short run (and so far, human history has consisted only of short runs), the victims, themselves desperate and tainted with the culture that oppresses them, turn on other victims. But I do remember (in rough paraphrase) a statement I once read: "The cry of the poor is not always just, but if you don't listen to it, you will never know what justice is."

What Columbus did to the Arawaks of the Bahamas, Cortes did to the Aztecs of Mexico, Pizarro to the Incas of Peru, and the English settlers of Virginia and Massachusetts to the Powhatans and the Pequots.

# William Scheller, “Apologia Pro Columbus”

*William Scheller is co-author of Columbus and the Age of Discovery, a companion to the PBS series.*

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There are no clean hands in history. Peoples who appear innocent are invariably those whom geography, circumstance, technological acumen, or sheer force of numbers have not so far favored with the opportunity to dominate.

It is fashionable nowadays—in fact, it has become virtually requisite—to pillory Columbus as the emblem of everything wrong with European civilization, and to hold him responsible for all the woes of the native peoples of the Americas. The quincentennial year, 1992, was supposed to have been the occasion for Columbus’ celebration; instead, the anniversary of his first voyage across the Atlantic has been turned into a festival of guilt and accusation. Christopher Columbus, we are asked to believe, carried the virus that destroyed the culture and ecology of two continents.

It simply isn’t so. The Western Hemisphere was never without disease, hunger, or Aztecs ready to cut your heart out to propitiate gods at least as hideous as those of the Inquisition. There has never been a paradise on this earth; what there has been is an imbalance in the distribution of the diseases, in the circumstances that foster the growth of transportation and military technologies, and in the quotient of sheer restlessness that drives human beings from one territory to another. At the close of the fifteenth century, all of these imbalances worked in favor of Europe. It was only a matter of time before Europe, with all its immunities, technology, and nerve, inundated the lands and societies of the Americas. What happened was going to happen—regardless of whether Christopher Columbus was its agent.

Fine. But what about slavery? Didn't Columbus introduce slavery into the Americas—directly, by enslaving indigenous peoples and, indirectly, by opening the natives’ soon-to-be-depopulated homelands to plantation agriculture, requiring full scale chattel slavery and the brutal importation of millions of Africans?

Both of these allegations are true. But consider where Columbus was coming from. Slavery was the expected lot of vanquished peoples. African slavery was a somewhat different matter. It certainly wasn’t invented by Europeans, who found Africans all too ready to sell their defeated enemies. The Arabs, too, conducted a lively and brutal commerce in African lives. But there can be no doubt that Europeans introduced slavery to the sugar plantations of

their new American colonies on an unprecedented scale. It constitutes a moral failing to have done so; but the failing was humanity's, not exclusively Europe's. Any culture clever enough to develop that lucrative of a market for sugar—Aztec, Arab, Ashanti, or Arapaho—would have likely done the same.

People feel remorse over the lopsided results because we are conditioned to introspection and self-criticism by the Western tradition, which was evolving even as Columbus set sail. Its roots lay in the Greek ideal of democracy and in Judeo-Christian ethos, and it was to blossom into maturity during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Europeans and their American heirs have never mastered the art of living by the liberal traditions, but the fact is that they did devise them—a claim that cannot realistically be made for any of the indigenous societies of the Western Hemisphere.

The life and work of Bartolomé de las Casas, “the apostle of the Indies,” offers immediate evidence that something other than greed and smallpox came over on the Spanish ships. De las Casas and his allies spoke tirelessly against the exploitation of the Indians. Of course, their voices often went unheard. But in what native American culture, five hundred years ago, could such voices even have been raised? Did an Aztec de las Casas protest the enslavement of other Central American peoples? Was there an “Apostle of the Algonquians” among the Iroquois, asking that captive warriors not be roasted alive? More important than the work of individuals like de las Casas, though, was the eventual implantation of democratic ideals in the Americas.

Environmental depredation is invariably raised as an argument why the Americas would have been better off without Europeans. The Old World, revisionists would have it, despoiled the hemisphere whose original inhabitants held to a superior view of the relationship between man and nature. There's no arguing that the despoliation took place. But neither Europeans nor native Americans ever lived by any environmental principle other than self interest. The Indians attitude toward the environment appears to have been purer, but it was merely the attitude of people entirely dependent on hunting, gathering, and primitive agriculture. They respected the Earth in the same way Europeans respected the urban marketplace, as a giver of sustiencen. If their impact on the earth was minimal, it was because their numbers were small, and their concentration—in places like Tenochtitlan aside—far less dense.

Let's not decry what was inevitable, nor refuse to acknowledge European contributions that have been truly worthwhile. Let's even raise a glass to Christopher Columbus, a brave man and superb mariner who only happened to be history's agent.

## William McNeill, "Here's Two Cheers for Columbus," The Boston Globe (13 Oct. 1991, Excerpt)

*William H. McNeill received his PhD from Cornell University in 1947, and currently serves as Robert A. Millikan Distinguished Service Professor of History emeritus at the University of Chicago. He has written more than twenty books, of which the most important is The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community (Chicago, 1963).*

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As far as his reputation in the United States is concerned, the figure of Columbus became important after the Revolution when Americans began to look about for heroes who were not tainted by too close an association with Great Britain. By overlooking his Spanish connection and his Catholic identity, and presenting Columbus instead as an outsider who overcame obstacle by sheer force of personality and suffered more than his share of injustices at the hands of royal authority, the revolutionary generation of Americans created a heroic founder who was safely and entirely non-British. Accordingly, Kings College in New York became Columbia in 1784, while six years later, Congress made the District of Columbia into a cradle for the new capital city later to be known as Washington, thus invoking the heroic names of two founders for the new Republic.

Anyone who approaches the question of rights and wrongs, gains and losses, with an open mind will, I believe, conclude that Columbus does deserve to be celebrated for inaugurating in 1492 the interaction of all the habitable globe, with the result that human skills, knowledge and power have increased, not just in American, but all around the Earth at a pace never before equaled. No other single man or event has ever had such enormous consequences. For that alone, public commemoration of the approaching quincentenary seems entirely appropriate.



At the same time, we ought to recognize that every change and every improvement real and inescapable costs. Moreover, the cost of any and every change is not distributed equably but hurts or destroys some people (and sometimes whole species), while others experience unalloyed gain. That is the way the world is and always has been. Ecological as well as sociological relationships make it inevitable. But if we face up to these realities, we can appreciate the real accomplishments of the past and still pay due respect to the losers as well as to the winners in the history of our country and of the world across the past 500 years and, indeed, throughout recorded history. This requires imagination and sympathy as well as information, but it is not beyond the capacity of the American public if we use the approaching quincentenary wisely.

Far better, then, to emphasize the common gains, which are real enough, even for the Indians. Who would seriously wish to have the daily sacrifice of human hearts atop the temples of Tenochtitlan still in place? And who wants to use dibble sticks to plant corn? Or do without cars, radio, TV and all the other accouterments of daily life on Indian reservations as well as in our cities and towns?

I conclude that we have much to celebrate in looking back over changes of the past 500 years, and there is much to appreciate, too, in the figure of Columbus himself. The contradictions of his character and achievement offer a vivid illustration of human greatness and its limitations. For Columbus changed the history and destiny of the world on the basis of serious errors about the size of the Earth, yet accomplished what he did only after learning enough about the pattern of oceanic air circulation to know how to find favorable winds both coming and going, thus allowing others to do the same afterward with fair assurance of a safe arrival at their intended destination.

This combination of ignorance and knowledge, and the unexpected consequences of his voyages, makes Columbus an apt and unusually vivid embodiment of the human capacity to discover all manner of new things and thereby to change the world—partly through skill and knowledge, and always in ignorance of ultimate consequences and implications.

The quincentenary is well worth the celebrating if we can do so in this spirit and get over the parochial rivalries that disturb the nation and will surely mar the occasion if we fail to look for and hold fast to the things that unite us all—within the borders of the country and around the world.

*Charles Mann, 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus (Excerpt, 2006):*

*Charles C. Mann is an American journalist and author, specializing in scientific topics. His 1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus won the National Academies Communication Award for best book of the year. He is the coauthor of four books, and contributing editor for Science, Atlantic Monthly, and "Wired" magazines. He is a three-time "National Magazine Award" finalist and a recipient of writing awards from the American Bar Association, the American Institute of Physics, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and the Lannan Foundation.*

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Faced with such stories, historians have long wondered how many people lived in the Americas at the time of contact. "Debated since Columbus attempted a partial census on Hispaniola in 1496," William Denevan has written, this "remains one of the great inquiries of history."

The first scholarly estimate of the indigenous population was made in 1910 by James Mooney, a distinguished ethnographer at the Smithsonian Institution. Combing through old documents, he concluded that in 1491 North America had 1.15 million inhabitants. Mooney's glittering reputation ensured that most subsequent researchers accepted his figure uncritically.

That changed in 1966, when Henry F. Dobyns published "Estimating Aboriginal American Population: An Appraisal of Techniques With a New Hemispheric Estimate," in the journal *Current Anthropology*. Despite the carefully neutral title, his argument was thunderous, its impact long-lasting. In the view of James Wilson, the author of The Earth Shall Weep (1998), a history of indigenous Americans, Dobyns's colleagues "are still

struggling to get out of the crater that paper left in anthropology." Not only anthropologists were affected. Dobyns's estimate proved to be one of the opening rounds in today's culture wars.

He burrowed into the papers of the Lima cathedral and read apologetic Spanish histories. The Indians in Peru, Dobyns concluded, had faced plagues from the day the conquistadors showed up—in fact, before then: smallpox arrived around 1525, seven years ahead of the Spanish. Brought to Mexico apparently by a single sick Spaniard, it swept south and eliminated more than half the population of the Incan empire. Smallpox claimed the Incan dictator Huayna Capac and much of his family, setting off a calamitous war of succession. So complete was the chaos that Francisco Pizarro was able to seize an empire the size of Spain and Italy combined with a force of 168 men.

Smallpox was only the first epidemic. Typhus (probably) in 1546, influenza and smallpox together in 1558, smallpox again in 1589, diphtheria in 1614, measles in 1618—all ravaged the remains of Incan culture. Before Columbus, Dobyns calculated, the Western Hemisphere held ninety to 112 million people. Another way of saying this is that in 1491 more people lived in the Americas than in Europe.

His argument was simple but horrific. It is well known that Native Americans had no experience with many European diseases and were therefore immunologically unprepared—"virgin soil," in the metaphor of epidemiologists.

So many epidemics occurred in the Americas, Dobyns argued, that the old data used by Mooney and his successors represented population nadirs. From the few cases in which before-and-after totals are known with relative certainty, Dobyns estimated that in the first 130 years of contact about 95 percent of the people in the Americas died—the worst demographic calamity in recorded history.

In 1966 Dobyns's insistence on the role of disease was a shock to his colleagues. Today the impact of European pathogens on the New World is almost undisputed. Nonetheless, the fight over Indian numbers continues with undiminished fervor. Estimates of the population of North America in 1491 disagree by an order of magnitude—from 18 million, Dobyns's revised figure, to 1.8 million, calculated by Douglas H. Ubelaker, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian.

Perhaps Dobyns's most vehement critic is David Henige, a bibliographer of Africana at the University of Wisconsin, who published *Numbers From Nowhere* (1998). "It's an absolutely unanswerable question on which tens of thousands of words have been spent to no purpose," Henige says.

To Elizabeth Fenn, the smallpox historian, the squabble over numbers obscures a central fact. Whether one million or 10 million or 100 million died, she believes, the pall of sorrow that engulfed the hemisphere was immeasurable. Languages, prayers, hopes, habits, and dreams—entire ways of life hissed away like steam.

## *Should We Celebrate Columbus Day?*

	<b>Zinn</b>	<b>Scheller</b>	<b>McNeill</b>	<b>Mann</b>
<i><b>Source</b></i> (What do you know about this author? When is the text written? Do you think it's a trustworthy source? Whose perspective does he write on behalf of (Columbus? Indians?))				
<i><b>How does the author view the death of Native Americans?</b></i> (Genocide? Unfortunate, but unremarkable?)				
<i><b>Did Columbus bring progress?</b></i>				
<i><b>Is the author pro or anti-Columbus?</b></i> (Do you think he would advocate for Columbus Day?)				
<i><b>Find two quotes as evidence for your</b></i>				

<i>claims for the above statement.</i> Write them here.				
<i>Other main points of this argument:</i>				
<i>Your Thoughts and Reactions:</i>				

