

## Is Columbus a Hero?

1. Read the following views of Christopher Columbus' impact on history.
2. In 200 words, explain whether you believe Columbus is a hero or not?

### A. Excerpt From "Howard Zinn on History"

In his quest for gold, Columbus, seeing bits of gold among the Indians, concluded that there were huge amounts of it. He ordered the natives to find a certain amount of gold within a certain period of time. And if they did not meet their quota, their arms were hacked off. The others were to learn from this and deliver the gold.

Samuel Eliot Morison, the Harvard historian who was Columbus' admiring biographer, acknowledged this. He wrote:

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Whoever thought up this ghastly system, Columbus was responsible for it, as the only means of producing gold for export... Those who fled to the mountains were hunted with hounds, and of those who escaped, starvation and disease took toll, while thousands of the poor creatures in desperation took cassava poison to end their miseries.

So the policy and acts of Columbus for which he alone was responsible began the depopulation of the terrestrial paradise that was Hispaniola in 1492. Of the original natives, estimated by a modern ethnologist at 300,000 in number, one-third were killed off between 1494 and 1496. By 1508, an enumeration showed only 60,000 alive... in 1548 Oviedo [Morison is referring to Fernandez de Oviedo, the official Spanish historian of the conquest] doubted whether 500 Indians remained.

Columbia History of the World wrote:

The determination of the Crown and the Church to Christianize the Indians, the need for labor to exploit the new lands, and the attempts of some Spaniards to protect the Indians, resulted in a very remarkable complex of customs, laws, and institutions which even today leads historians to contradictory conclusions about Spanish rule in America... Academic disputes flourish on this debatable and in a sense insoluble question, but there is no doubt that cruelty, over-work and disease resulted in an appalling depopulation. There were, according to recent estimates, about 25 million Indians in Mexico in 1519, slightly more than 1 million in 1605.

Despite this scholarly language—"contradictory conclusions... academic disputes... insoluble question"—there is no real dispute about the facts of enslavement, forced labor, rape, murder, the taking of hostages, the ravages of diseases carried from Europe, and the wiping out of huge numbers of native people. The only dispute is over how much emphasis is to be placed on these facts, and how they carry over into the issues of our time.

## B. Warren Carroll "Honoring Christopher Columbus"

Let us begin, therefore, by defining the word "discovery" in the context of history. A discovery is made when an individual or a nation finds something or someone or some people or some places of special importance, not previously known to them. When any previously unknown people is first found by another people, that people may be said to have been discovered. People as well as places can be discovered. The fact that people live in places unknown to another people does not mean that they, and the places where they live, cannot be discovered.

It is for the boldness of his conception and his magnificent courage in laying his life on the line to carry it out that Christopher Columbus is most rightly honored. It was these qualities that Queen Isabel of Spain recognized in him, that caused her to override the cautious advice of counsellors doubtful that such an unprecedented enterprise could succeed. Isabel knew nothing of navigation and little of world geography, but she was a superb judge of men and women. It was to Columbus the man and to Columbus the devoted Catholic that she gave her support. She believed in him — believed that he could achieve the goal to which he was so passionately committed.<sup>4</sup>

She was right. He did achieve it. In his epochal voyage from August to October 1492, he did strike directly across the unknown Atlantic to reach the previously unknown shore beyond.

But they were not destined to remain in their Eden-like situation for long, even if Columbus and the Spanish had not come. Advancing steadily northward from the long chain of Caribbean islands called the Antilles was one of the most ferocious people in recorded history, the Caribs. They were savage conquerors who practiced cannibalism, not as an occasional cultic ritual, but as a regular diet. Captured prisoners were immediately eaten. Conquered peoples were systematically devoured. On every island they seized, the Caribs soon exterminated every Taino. On no island did the two tribes coexist.<sup>9</sup>

That the conversion (to Catholicism) of the people he found was a central purpose of Christopher Columbus is made unmistakably clear by an entry in his log book written November 6, when he was exploring the coast of Cuba. It is addressed directly to Isabel and Fernando:

I have to say, Most Serene Princes, that if devout religious persons know the Indian language well, all these people would soon become Christians. Thus I pray to Our Lord that Your Highnesses will appoint persons of great diligence in order to bring to the Church such great numbers of peoples, and that they will convert these peoples. . . . And after your days, for we are all mortal, you will leave your realms in a very tranquil state, free from heresy and wickedness, and you will be well received before the Eternal Creator.<sup>12</sup>