

Remembering Columbus: Blinded by Politics

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The dozens of American cities, counties, and institutions that are named after Christopher Columbus (or his literary equivalent Columbia) signify the privileged role that Columbus holds in American civic life. Early Americans depicted Columbus as America's first frontiersman, a hero who had left the comforts of Europe to search for a fresh start in a new world. They cheered him as an enlightened champion of science who upended obscurantist European ideas.

Washington Irving popularized this interpretation of Columbus in his *History of the Life and Voyages of Columbus*, published in 1837. In Irving's hands, Columbus became a man of science who liberated himself from the shackles of medieval and Catholic Europe to shape a progressive and Protestant America. Much of Irving's biography of Columbus is pure fiction, but his book defined Columbus for nineteenth century Americans. The most enduring myth that Irving promoted was the false assertion that Ferdinand and Isabella believed that the earth was flat. The geographers and astronomers that the royal couple consulted knew the earth was spherical but correctly estimated that Japan was 12,000 miles from Spain, not 2,400 miles, as Columbus calculated.¹ In 1940, Samuel Eliot Morison called Irving's story "misleading and mischievous nonsense. The sphericity of the globe was not in question. The issue was the width of the ocean; and therein the opposition was right."² Fortunately for Columbus, the Bahamas lie where he thought he would find Japan.

¹Robert Royal, *1492 and all That* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992), 13.

²Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, vol.1 (Boston:Little Brown & Co., 1942), 88-89.

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Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Italian Americans adopted Columbus as an immigrant hero whose fame could boost their status in their new nation. In 1882, the Knights of Columbus was founded to promote immigrant and Catholic interests. The Knights of Columbus began lobbying to make Columbus Day a national holiday. In 1934, Congress voted to recognize Columbus Day as a federal holiday. In 1892, at the time of Columbus's quadricentennial, American Catholics proposed that Columbus be canonized as a saint. Pope Leo XIII demurred, but he wrote, "The exploit is in itself the highest and grandest which any age has ever seen accomplished by man; and he who achieved it, for the greatness of his mind and heart, can be compared to but few in the history of humanity."³

As Columbus became an Italian Catholic hero, conservative Protestants (and not a few nativists) found in the Vikings a racial and religious alternative to Columbus.⁴ Many of those who identified strongly with America's original settlers began to incorporate Viking themes in American art and architecture, and elite Americans raised money to erect statues of Viking heroes in town squares. In 1891, Marie A. Brown wrote *The Icelandic Discoverers of America* to attack Columbus's ascendancy and to protect Americans from "the foulest tyrant the world has ever had, the Roman Catholic Power."⁵ The Reverend R. S. MacArthur, on June 13, 1893, was quoted on the front page of *The New York Times* as saying that Columbus was "a bully and a tyrant, unscrupulous and cruel, and guilty of many crimes."⁶

By Columbus's quincentennial in 1992, American politics had realigned so completely that Columbus was a hero to conservatives and a villain to progressives. For progressives, Columbus became a European imperialist whose journeys led to epidemics and wars of aggression against Native American peoples. "Columbus represents fundamentally the beginnings of modern white racism and the construction of racial identities in the United States,"⁷ wrote historian Manning Marable in 1992. In Denver, where Columbus Day was first observed, activists poured blood on the statue of Columbus. In

³Pope Leo XIII, *Quatro Abeunte Seculo*, July 16, 1892, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ENCYC/L13COL.HTM>

⁴Yoni Appelbaum, "How Columbus Day Fell Victim to Its Own Success," *The Atlantic*, October 8, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2012/10/how-columbus-day-fell-victim-to-its-own-success/261922/>.

⁵Marie A. Brown, *The Icelandic Discoveries of America* (London: Trubner, 1887), 14.

⁶Quoted in *New York Times*, June 13, 1893, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1893/06/13/109700662.pdf>

⁷Quoted in Lynne Duke, "Some Celebrate Columbus, Others See Pattern of Conquest," *Washington Post*, October 11, 1992, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/10/11/as-some-celebrate-columbus-others-see-pattern-of-conquest/d834bbf9-3b3a-4524-9c05-2628e40c113a/?utm_term=.7e52739ad2cf.

New York City, council members demanded that the city remove statues of Columbus from public spaces. A growing number of American cities have declared the second Monday in October to be “Indigenous People’s Day” instead of Columbus Day.

Most American colleges and universities have long since abandoned efforts to commemorate Christopher Columbus. A long list of colleges and universities have officially dropped Columbus Day from their school calendars and replaced it with Indigenous People’s Day.⁸ On Indigenous People’s Day, these schools host open mics to condemn colonialism, provide guest lectures on native American grievances, and stage “consciousness-raising die-ins” in honor of indigenous resistance to colonialism. Brandeis College hosts teach-ins with lectures on the oppression of Native Americans as well as presentations from “climate justice” activists.⁹ Columbia University’s Native American Council observed Indigenous People’s Day under the hashtag “Take Back Manhattan.”¹⁰ At the University of Florida, Indigenous People’s Day features Navajo food and music in addition to talks on how climate change affects Native Americans.¹¹

Americans have always projected onto Columbus our fears, anxieties, and fantasies. Yet, most Americans know very little about this enigmatic man whose voyages changed the course of history. The picture is not a simple one. Columbus was obsessed with gold, yet capable of feats of heroic asceticism. Columbus was often compassionate and gracious in his relationships with Native Americans, yet he was sometimes terribly cruel. Columbus was a mystic, consumed with the love and fear of God, yet he was a politician who obsessed over manipulating the Spanish court.

The Admiral

On October 12, 1492, Columbus had the first European encounter with Americans since the Viking voyages 500 years earlier. As Columbus’s ships approached the Bahamas, his sailors spotted naked people on the beach staring at their boats. When Columbus set foot on shore, he recited the

⁸Caleb Parke, “Columbus Day Nixed for ‘Indigenous People’s Day’ by more universities nationwide,” Fox News, October 9, 2017, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/columbus-day-nixed-for-indigenous-peoples-day-by-more-universities-nationwide>

⁹“Indigenous Peoples’ Day Teach-In: First Light screening at Brandeis College’s Upstander’s Project,” Brandeis University, <https://upstanderproject.org/screenings/indigenous-peoples-day-teach-in-first-light-screening-at-brandeis-colleges>

¹⁰Native American Council at Columbia University, post on Facebook, November 13, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/NativeAmericanCouncil/>

¹¹William Nardi, “More Universities Shun Columbus Day, Decry Colonialism,” *The College Fix*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.thecollegefix.com/universities-shun-columbus-day-decry-colonialism/>

proclamation for claiming land for the crown. Columbus called the island “San Salvador,” in hopes that the natives would soon find salvation in Christ. Columbus had found land and claimed it for the monarchs, thus earning him the title “Admiral of the Ocean Sea.”¹² On the islands Columbus visited, he acted as geographer, botanist, zoologist, and anthropologist. He described the natural beauty of the islands and their flora and fauna. He was especially fascinated by the parrots, who mimicked human speech and seemed to comprehend it.

Columbus called the Taíno Indians men of great intelligence. He described their social structures and the ingenious construction of their boats, homes, and their furnishings. He found ways of communicating with the people he met. He also delighted in watching the Taínos play raucous games with rubber balls that went on for days. American sociologist Margaret Hodgen wrote that “Columbus approached ethnological phenomena with an amount of tolerance and critical detachment unusual in his day—and possibly also in ours.”¹³

Columbus developed an affectionate and long lasting friendship with Chief Guacanagarix, of whom he wrote “in his table manners, his urbanity, and his attractive cleanliness, he quite showed himself to be of noble lineage.”¹⁴ Robert Fuson, who translated Columbus’s diary, wrote “All through the Log, Columbus expresses nothing but love and admiration for the Indians, His affection for the young chief of Haiti, and vice versa, is one of the most touching stories of love, trust, and understanding between men of different races and cultures to come out of this period in history.”¹⁵

Columbus returned from Hispaniola a national hero. He told Ferdinand and Isabella about his voyage and introduced to them the seven Indians that he had brought with him. During Columbus’s stay in Barcelona, the Indians were all baptized, with King Ferdinand and his son Prince Juan acting as godfathers. Columbus’s most faithful interpreter received the name Diego Colón, after Columbus’s first born son. His interpreter would accompany Columbus on all of his future voyages.

As time passed, Columbus became more and more driven to find a way to make his voyages profitable. As the hope of finding Marco Polo’s Asia faded, Columbus began thinking about colonization as a way to make the islands

¹²William Phillips and Carla Phillips, *The Worlds of Christopher Columbus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

¹³Margaret Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 20.

¹⁴*The Diario of Columbus's First Voyage to America*, Oliver Dunn and James Kelly, trans. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 285.

¹⁵Robert Fulson, *The Log of Christopher Columbus* (Camden, ME: International Marine Publishing, 1992), 32.

profitable. He remarked on how easy it would be for Spain to govern the *indios*. “These people have no religious beliefs, nor are they idolaters. They are very gentle and do not know what evil is; nor do they kill others nor steal; and they are without weapons . . . So that Your Highness ought to resolve to make them Christians; for I believe that if you begin, in a short time you will end up having converted to our Holy Faith a multitude of peoples and acquiring large dominions and great riches and all of their peoples for Spain.”¹⁶

Columbus insisted that the Taíno Indians on Hispaniola be paid for their labor, but he also believed that it was legal and moral to enslave the cannibals from neighboring islands. Columbus wrote that in Castile, cannibals would “abandon their cruel custom of eating flesh. And in Castile, by understanding the language, they can soon receive baptism and save souls.”¹⁷ Slowly, Columbus’s vision for the islands shifted from a trading-post model to a settlement model. Unfortunately, Columbus began to think that he would have to engage in slavery and slave-trading to make this settlement profitable.

In 1495, Columbus sent four boats loaded with 550 slaves to Spain, under the command of Antonio de Torres. On board were Italian navigator Michele da Cuneo and Christopher’s brother, Diego Columbus. “When we arrived in Spanish waters,” wrote Michele da Cuneo, “about two hundred Indians died, I believe because the air was colder than they were used to. They were thrown into the sea. Soon afterward we arrived in Cádiz, where we unloaded the slaves, all more or less sick. . . [They] did not live long.” The survivors were put up for sale in Seville. The archbishop’s chronicler Andrés Bernáldez wrote, “They were not a good buy because they all died since the country did not suit them.”¹⁸

Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who compiled Columbus’s Log Book, wrote “I have no doubt that if the Admiral had believed that such dreadful results would follow and had known as much about the primary and secondary effects of natural and divine law as he knows about cosmography and other human learnings, he would never have introduced or initiated a practice (slavery) which was to lead to such terrible harm. For no one can deny that he was a good and Christian man.”¹⁹

¹⁶Phillips and Phillips, 166.

¹⁷Laurence Bergreen, *Columbus: The Four Voyages* (New York: Penguin, 2011), Kindle Book, Loc. 2847.

¹⁸Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Columbus: The Great Adventure*, Farina and Beckworth, trans., (New York: Orion Books, 1991), 178.

¹⁹Bartolomé de Las Casas, “Digest of Columbus’s Log-Book,” *The Four Voyages*, J.M. Cohen, trans. (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1969), 59.

The Governor

Columbus's second voyage was clearly a mission to colonize. Columbus brought 1,200 men and seventeen vessels on his second voyage. They brought with them horses and cows, goats and sheep, wheat and seeds for planting, and orange, lime, and apple trees. Colonization would require European methods of agriculture as well as management and administrative talents. Columbus lacked these abilities, and he was uninterested in developing them.

Columbus biographers William and Carla Phillips write, “Now that his initial adventure had been successfully completed, he was called upon to master several other skills. He had to command a mixed complement of sailors, merchants, soldiers, farmers, clerics, and gentlemen-adventurers . . . He had to plan settlements and govern them. Columbus was always more interested in continued exploration than in . . . administration, and the new tasks constituted a challenge he was unwilling or unable to meet.”²⁰

Columbus instructed the settlers to make sure that the Taínos on Hispaniola “receive no injury, suffer no harm, and that nothing is taken from them against their will; instead make them feel honored and protected as to keep them from being perturbed.”²¹ The settlers did not obey Columbus’s instructions. On his frequent absences from the island, groups of settlers would go on rampages through native villages, robbing, raping, and enslaving. Columbus’s brothers, Bartholomew and Diego, tried to discipline the lawless settlers, and the settlers responded by openly revolting against Columbus’s rules of chastity and civility. Anti-Columbus agitator Francisco Roldán rallied to his side about half of the island’s settlers. The rebels stormed the storehouses stashed with weapons. They slaughtered cattle, stole horses, and settled in Xaraguá, on the eastern side of the island. Roldán gave the rebels permission to plunder native villages and rape native women.

Upon returning to Hispaniola, Columbus learned about Roldán’s rebellion, and he immediately tried to send the rebels back to Spain. The rebels demanded that they each be able to bring one slave home with them. Columbus did not want to agree to these humiliating terms, but he felt that this was the only way he could avoid civil war on the island. The settlers who returned from the second voyage reported that Columbus’s colony was a joke, that there was no gold on Hispaniola, and that the colony would never turn a profit.

²⁰Phillips and Phillips, 194.

²¹Carol Delaney, *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem* (London: Free Press, 2012), 145.

When Queen Isabella heard that the disgruntled rebels had returned to Spain with slaves, she was furious, “What right does My Admiral have to give away My Vassals to anyone?” she asked.²² Isabella did not know that Columbus was forced to agree to Roldán’s demands under duress. Isabella ordered that the slaves be returned to Hispaniola on the next ship. She also sent an investigator (Francisco de Bobadilla) to report on Columbus.

Bobadilla was shocked to see two Spaniards hanging from a freshly built gallows as his ship pulled into Santo Domingo’s harbor. These were men whom Columbus had punished for sedition and for committing atrocities against the Indians. Columbus biographer Carol Delaney writes, “Columbus intended [these executions] to serve as an example to the rest of the colonists, but also to show the Indians that the rule of law applied to his own men.”²³ Bobadilla was uninterested in these explanations. He put Columbus and his brothers in chains and sent them back to Spain.

Bobadilla sent to the King and Queen a damning report based on the testimony of the rebels against Columbus. Columbus was never given the chance to refute the accusations against him. Ferdinand and Isabella stripped Columbus of many of his hereditary titles, of his share in the profits of his venture, and of his governorship of Hispaniola. He was able to return to the Americas on a fourth voyage, but he was forbidden to ever set foot in Hispaniola again.

Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casa portrays a frightening picture of Bobadilla and his supporters. With Columbus gone, Bobadilla released the rebel prisoners and ingratiated himself with the colonists who remained. He told the settlers to “take as many advantages as you can since you don’t know how long they will last.”²⁴ Not only did the settlers take native women as concubines, they also gratuitously murdered. Las Casas wrote, “Two of these so called Christians met two Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys.”²⁵

Las Casas wrote that Anacaona, the tribal chief of the Jaragua district of Hispaniola, held a big feast to welcome Ovando, the Spanish governor whom Queen Isabella chose to replace Columbus. Anacaona invited the island’s many tribal chiefs (caciques) to meet the new governor. The Spaniards responded by murdering the caciques. “Over three hundred local dignitaries were summoned to welcome the then governor of the island. The governor duped the

²²Delaney, 180.

²³*Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴Bartolomé de Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, Andréé Collard, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 79.

²⁵Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, 80.

unsuspecting leader of this welcoming party into gathering in a building made of straw and then ordered his men to set fire to it and burn them alive.”²⁶

Legacy

Today, Columbus is either a saint who represents all that is noble in America or an avaricious villain who fomented genocide. Our polarized opinions would have had a familiar feel to Columbus. He returned from his first voyage a national hero. He returned from his third voyage disgraced and in chains, his governorship of Hispaniola usurped by the ruthless Francisco de Bobadilla.

Columbus spent his final years fruitlessly attempting to reclaim his property, titles, and reputation. Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican priest who preserved and edited Columbus’s Log Book, wrote, “The man who had, by his own efforts, discovered another world greater than the one we knew before and far more blessed, departed this life . . . dispossessed and stripped of the position and honors he had earned by his tireless and heroic efforts.”²⁷

Las Casas’s father and several of his uncles made the second voyage with Columbus, and in 1501, Bartolomé and his father accompanied governor Ovando to Hispaniola. After Las Casas’s ordination as a Dominican, he devoted his life to defending the Indians from the abuse and exploitation of the Spanish. Las Casas sent reports to Rome that helped shape *Sublimis Deus*, the 1537 papal encyclical that forbids the enslavement of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In this encyclical, the pope rehearsed Las Casas’s argument that the Indians are fully rational human beings who have rights to freedom and private property, even if they are heathen.

Las Casas presents us with a balanced view of Columbus that could inform contemporary debates. He calls Columbus “a gentle man of great force and spirit, of lofty thoughts and naturally inclined to undertake worthy deeds and signal enterprises; patient and longsuffering, a forgiver of injustices.”²⁸ Las Casas believed that Columbus had been chosen by God for his learning and his virtue to bring the Christian Gospel to the New World. He nonetheless describes how Columbus’s obsession with finding gold distorted his judgment and compromised his mission: “His extravagant desire to serve his Sovereigns, and to seek to please them with

²⁶Bartolomé de Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, Nigel Griffin, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 22.

²⁷Bergreen, Loc. 6435.

²⁸Full text of "Bartholomew de Las Casas : his life, his apostolate, and his writings," Toronto Public Library, https://archive.org/stream/bartholomewdelas00macnuoft/bartholomewdelas00macnuoft_djvu.txt

gold and wealth, as well as his great ignorance, has been the mightiest cause of . . . all that he has done against these people.”²⁹

Columbus was alternatively greedy and generous, courageous and timid, forgiving and spiteful, magnanimous and petty, a genius at sea, yet maddeningly obtuse on land. He had neither the humility to be a saint nor the ruthlessness to be a successful conquistador. Columbus, nonetheless, possessed the tenacity and fortitude to surmount the formidable obstacles that stood in the way of completing his voyages. By the end of his short life, Columbus had turned the world upside down.

²⁹Gustavo Gutierrez, *In Search of the Poor in Christ* (Wipf and Stock Pub., 2003), 25.