Christopher Columbus: Hero or Villain?

Student Name

Course

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In October 2014, Seattle became one of a number of cities in the United States to reject Columbus Day, adopting “Indigenous People’s Day instead.”[[1]](#footnote-2) Different cities and states have celebrated Columbus’s arrival in the ‘New World’ individually since colonial times, but the United States first celebrated Columbus Day as a country in 1892 to mark his ‘discovery of America’ 400 years after he initially landed in the Bahamas. October 12 became an official federal holiday in 1934, and the U.S. government named the second Monday in October Columbus Day in 1970. Since then, some have criticized this celebration. In 2011, University of Washington students marched in the streets holding signs that read: “Columbus didn’t discover America. He INVADED it.” Berkeley was the first city to take action, replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous People’s Day in 1992. Minneapolis eventually followed suit. Portland celebrates both Indigenous People’s Day and Columbus Day.

Why would anyone want to take Columbus off his pedestal? According to the history textbook *A People and a Nation*, Columbus was a “self-educated son of a wool merchant . . . [and] an experienced sailor and mapmaker.”[[2]](#footnote-3) He managed to convince King Philip and Queen Isabella of Spain to give him three ships, which he sailed halfway around the globe to what is now known as the Caribbean. He was not the first European in that region, but he was the first to publish details about it, the first to bring back natives and goods, and the first to set up a longstanding colony. The textbook suggests that Columbus gave one of the indigenous populations, the Tainos, an impossible task (i.e., to find gold on San Salvador) and explains that he believed the indigenous populations would be easy to conquer and would make “good and skilled servants.”[[3]](#footnote-4) That characterization does not sound too bad. Sure, he mistook the Americas for the East Indies, and he, like most other European explorers of the time, was searching for land, people, and raw materials Europe could exploit, but he was a product of his times. No one can dispute that he expanded the known world, bringing into the fold previously unheard-of populations and cultures.

The question is, is Columbus someone we should admire? Do his accomplishments outweigh his so-called crimes? And what were his crimes exactly? A different chronicle of American history, one that no school district in the country would ever dare to use in its high school curriculum, Howard Zinn’s *A* *People’s History of the United States*, paints a much richer portrait of Columbus, including details *A People and a Nation* conspicuously omits. To begin, Columbus promised that the first person among his crew to sight land once they left Africa would get a yearly stipend of 10,000 maravedis for life. That person’s name was Roderigo.[[4]](#footnote-5) Columbus, of course, reneged, claiming the prize for himself. Before he set foot in the Caribbean, he had already proved himself a liar and a thief. That was how he treated a fellow European and Catholic. But he treated the indigenous populations he encountered much, much worse. For the moment ignoring the countless indigenous people he enslaved (his seizure of human beings is well known), let us look at his attempt to find gold on Haiti.

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.[[5]](#footnote-6)

By the end of the second year after he set up shop in Haiti, one quarter of a million natives had died. That is just a taste of the kind of man he was.

What are we to make of this? Columbus was a greedy, brutal man and ignorant to boot (until the day he died, he believed he had found a sea route to the East). Perhaps this was the kind of person society admired 523 years ago, but I hope society has evolved to the point that this is no longer the case. Schools should stop using textbooks that downplay the brutality of the explorers, and cities throughout the nation should follow Berkley, Minneapolis, and Seattle’s example, rejecting Columbus Day in favor of Indigenous People’s Day.

1. Emanuella Grinberg, “Instead of Columbus Day, Some U.S. Cities Celebrate Indigenous People’s Day,” *CNN*, last modified October 13, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/12/living/columbus-day-indigenous-people-day. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Mary Beth Norton, Carol Sheriff, David Blight, Howard Chudacoff, Frederik Logevall, and Beth Bailey, *A People and a Nation* (New York: Cengage Learning, 2012), 19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)