

COLUMBUS AND THE INDIANS: FRIEND OR FOE?

An Essay by Joseph Scafetta, Jr.

“Columbus not only symbolizes the process of conquest and genocide which eventually consumed the indigenous peoples of America, but bears the personal responsibility of having participated in it,” according to Indian activist Ward Churchill in his essay, *Confronting Columbus Day*. Along with genocide, Churchill and other foes of Columbus have charged him with slave-trading and stealing the Indians’ land. Let’s look at the facts.

COLUMBUS AS FRIEND

Initially, Columbus made many friends among the Taino Indians he met on his first voyage. In the ship’s log he kept Columbus described them as “well-made with fine shapes and faces...their eyes were large and very beautiful.” He found them so intelligent that they “could readily become Christians as they have a good understanding.”

Columbus treated the Tainos fairly as revealed in a letter he wrote to the Spanish monarchs in February 1493 on the ship taking him back to Spain. In it he said they were “trustworthy and very liberal with everything they have” and criticized his sailors for trading broken plates, pieces of glass and even shoe lace tips for the Tainos’ gold and silver. “However, I forbade that things so small and of no value should be given to them....because it was very wrong,” Columbus wrote.

Columbus himself gave the Tainos gifts so that they would be friendly to him and also so that “they might be made worshipers of Christ...and full of love toward our king, queen and the whole Spanish nation.” Clearly, **he came in peace and with the mission not only of finding gold but of bringing Christianity to the New World.**

These overtures gained their friendship and the trust of their chieftain, **Guacanagari**, one of five *caciques* or native kings who ruled Hispaniola (today’s Haiti and the Dominican Republic) when Columbus arrived there in 1492.

In his letter, Columbus wrote that Guacanagari “gloried in calling me his brother.” This was the beginning of a strong friendship between the two men. The Taino chieftain and his people helped Columbus build a fort on Hispaniola, which he named *Navidad* because it was established during the 1492 Christmas season. When Columbus sailed back to Spain in January 1493, he left behind 40 volunteers at *Navidad*.

COLUMBUS AS FOE

Columbus returned to the New World in November 1493 with a fleet of 17 ships, and 1,200 men. On one island, one of his search parties was attacked by Caribs, who killed one of his men and wounded two others. This skirmish was the first of many deadly exchanges between the natives and the Spaniards.

Back on Hispaniola, Columbus and his men found abandoned villages belonging to the Caribs, who had fled fearing the arrival of the Spaniards. In the huts they discovered human bones and partly consumed cuts of human flesh. In one village they also found two castrated boys and 12 pregnant teenage

girls, who were Taino Indians, captured by the cannibalistic Caribs, who, the girls said, planned to eat the babies.

Later on Hispaniola, Columbus found the naked bodies of two bearded men. Since the natives did not have facial hair, Columbus immediately rushed to the fort where his friend, Chief Guacanagari told him that the conduct of the 40 men in the fort angered another Taino chieftain named **Caonabo**, who hunted down and slaughtered them all. When Guacanagari and his men tried to help the Spaniards, they were also attacked. Guacanagari was wounded and his village burned to the ground.

This news angered Columbus and ended the good relations between him and the other Taino tribes. It is at this point in his life that Columbus is charged by Indian activists with genocide, slave-trading and stealing Indian land.

GENOCIDE?

During his four voyages, Columbus spent most of his time on land on the island of Hispaniola which is about 30,000 square miles in size. No one knows exactly how many Indians lived there in 1492. In his book *Columbus and the Age of Discovery* Zvi Dor-Ner estimates “about 500, 000,” a questionable figure since most of the island was dense jungle unfit for human habitation.

A Spanish census taken in 1514, ten years after Columbus’ last voyage, showed an Arawak population of 26,000 on Hispaniola. Unfortunately, by 1542, exactly 50 years after Columbus first arrived there, that number was reduced to zero. What happened?

Although Columbus’ men fought many natives, how many they killed is unknown. **It is unlikely, however, that the number reached the “tens of thousands,” as many Indian activists allege since Columbus didn’t have enough men to carry out such a massive slaughter.** The largest number to accompany him at one time was 1,200, but 600 of them contracted malaria and returned to Spain shortly after their arrival and there is no evidence that Columbus himself killed a single Indian.

Thousands of natives did die over the decades that followed Columbus’ four voyages, largely from diseases contracted from Spanish explorers. In his book *Ecological Imperialism*, Alfred W. Crosby lists smallpox, measles, typhoid fever, cholera and influenza among the most common diseases the Spaniards gave the natives.

However, genocide is the *planned* annihilation of a people. No one can reasonably argue that the Spanish deliberately infected the Indians because these men of the 16th century had no idea how disease was transmitted. As far as Columbus is concerned, no scholar has discovered how many of these diseases were actually transmitted by Columbus’ crews.

Conversely, as Crosby points out, the natives inadvertently exported to Europe syphilis, hepatitis, encephalitis, polio, tuberculosis and intestinal parasites. A month after his return to Spain, Martin Alonzo Pinzon, the captain of the *Pinta*, died from syphilis which he had contracted from a native woman. Today most of the European-borne diseases, except for measles and influenza, have been eradicated while the native diseases of syphilis and hepatitis are still worldwide problems.

The Indians also unwittingly introduced Europeans to two deadly vices. Columbus found natives smoking rolled dry tobacco leaves during his first voyage and other natives chewing coco leaves in Venezuela

during his third voyage. Over the past 500 years, smoking and drug addiction have killed millions worldwide yet no one blames this tragedy on 16th century Indians.

SLAVE TRADER?

In 1494 the Taino chief Caonabo, who had led the *Navidad* massacre, united four of the five Taino tribes to exterminate the foreigners. Columbus' friend, Chief Guacanagari, however, refused to join the league. Instead, he informed Columbus of the plot and assisted him in his expedition against the Indians in 1495. For this, Guacanagari was attacked by the other Tainos. He fled to the mountains where he later died.

Columbus rounded up 500 Tainos that he had captured as a result of these hostilities and shipped them to Spain. Since the gold he had discovered in the New World did not cover what the monarchs had spent to outfit his second voyage, Columbus planned to recompense the king and queen with the money he would receive from selling these Indians as slaves. During the voyage about 200 died of exposure and another 150 of the surviving 300 natives arrived in Seville sick. Nevertheless, all were sold on the auction block.

The next year (1496), Columbus returned to Spain with 32 native prisoners of war including the Taino chief Caonabo. During the voyage Caonabo died of exposure and his body was thrown overboard. The surviving natives were also auctioned off as slaves.

In 1498, Columbus again planned to send natives captured in battle back to Spain as slaves, but the Spanish monarchs directed him not to do so and Columbus never raised the issue again.

In all Columbus was responsible for selling 331 Indians into bondage and causing the death of another 200. Unquestionably, this is a blot on Columbus' record, but it bears remembering that enslaving prisoners of war was not invented by Columbus. This has been a common practice all over the world since ancient times. The Jews reached Europe in 70 A.D. when they were defeated in battle by Emperor Vespasian and taken as slaves to Rome. The native tribes and civilizations in the New World, from the Caribs to the Aztecs, enslaved their captured enemies and some African and Far Eastern countries still practice slavery today.

These facts do not justify Columbus' actions but rather place them in the context of the time in which they occurred. **It is unreasonable to hold Columbus to a modern standard established in the United States as late as 1865 when his actions were considered acceptable in the 15th century.**

It also bears noting that Columbus did not sell innocent men, women and children into bondage. **He did not bring one single African to the New World and never kept any slaves himself.**

THIEF?

Finally, today's Indian activists charge that Columbus stole land from the natives. This accusation arises from an event that took place during his third voyage in 1498. When he arrived in Santo Domingo, Columbus found that about 220 Spaniards, led by Francisco Roldan, the chief justice of Hispaniola, were rebelling against his brother, Bartolomeo, who was the acting governor in Columbus' absence.

To end the rebellion, Columbus agreed to a number of terms Roldan proposed, including one that gave any man who wanted to settle on Hispaniola a plot of land and all the natives living on it as slaves. The native chiefs agreed to this arrangement in exchange for Columbus' promise to revoke the quarterly gold tribute that he had imposed during his second trip to Hispaniola.

This land grant agreement became the foundation of the notorious *repartimiento* system that the Spaniards later employed in settling Central and South America. **However, Columbus did not invent this system, which was first used by the Spanish on the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa nor did he suggest it as one of the terms to end the rebellion.** Nevertheless Columbus has been roundly condemned for it.

COLUMBUS IN CHAINS

Many activists today point to the fact that Columbus returned from his third voyage in chains, which they take as proof of his criminal behavior in the New World. This last allegation is a deliberate twisting of the facts.

Following the rebellion, a new chief justice named Francisco de Bobadilla was sent to Santo Domingo in 1500. When he arrived, he found seven Spanish corpses hanging from the gallows. The men had been punished for rebelling against the royal authority given Columbus by the Spanish monarchs. The executions took place while Columbus was hunting rebelling Spanish and Indian insurgents hiding in Hispaniola's interior.

A shocked Bobadilla arrested Columbus and his two brothers, Diego and Bartolomeo, impounded all their property and gave the brothers' wealth to the Spaniards in the fort. In October 1500, the three brothers were chained and placed in the hulls of two caravels headed for Spain. **Upon his arrival at the court, Columbus presented his case to Ferdinand and Isabela, who dismissed all charges and freed the three.**

THE GARDEN OF EDEN?

Today, Indian activists portray the New World as an earthly paradise. If so, this was a "paradise" where **the natives practiced cannibalism, ritual human sacrifice and slavery and suffered from syphilis, hepatitis, addictive cocaine use and cancer, caused by smoking.**

Despite some of his own questionable deeds, which as we have seen, have been greatly exaggerated, the New World was better off thanks to Columbus. **After him came millions of Europeans who brought medical science, mechanical inventions and democratic government to a continent that knew none of these benefits before 1492.**

Joseph Scafetta is a patent lawyer in Virginia who has written extensively on Columbus and other topics of interest to Italian Americans.