

Columbus Day? True Legacy: Cruelty and Slavery

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Once again, it's time to celebrate Columbus Day. Yet, the stunning truth is: If [Christopher Columbus](#) were alive today, he would be put on trial for crimes against humanity. [Columbus' reign of terror](#), as documented by noted historians, was so bloody, his [legacy so unspeakably cruel](#), that Columbus makes a modern villain like Saddam Hussein look like a pale codfish.

Question: Why do we honor a man who, if he were alive today, would almost certainly be sitting on Death Row awaiting execution?

If you'd like to know [the true story](#) about Christopher Columbus, please read on. But I warn you, it's not for the [faint of heart](#).

Here's the basics. On the second Monday in October each year, we celebrate Columbus Day. We teach our school kids a cute little song that goes: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." It's an American tradition, as American as pizza pie. Or is it? Surprisingly, the true story of Christopher Columbus has very little in common with the myth we all learned in school.

[Columbus Day](#), as we know it in the United States, was invented by the [Knights of Columbus](#), a Catholic fraternal service organization. Back in the 1930s, they were looking for a Catholic hero as a role-model their kids could look up to. In 1934, as a result of lobbying by the Knights of Columbus, Congress and President Franklin Roosevelt signed Columbus Day into law as a federal holiday to honor this courageous explorer. Or so we thought.

There are several problems with this. First of all, Columbus wasn't the first European to discover America. As we know, the Viking, Leif Ericson probably founded a Norse village on Newfoundland some 500 years earlier. So, hat's off to Leif. But if you think about it, the whole concept of discovering America is arrogant. After all, the Native Americans discovered North America about 14,000 years before Columbus was even born! Surprisingly, DNA evidence now suggests that courageous [Polynesian adventurers](#) sailed dugout canoes across the Pacific and settled in South America long before the Vikings.

Second, [Columbus wasn't a hero](#). When he set foot on that sandy beach in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, Columbus discovered that the islands were inhabited by friendly, peaceful people called the Lucayans, Taínos and Arawaks. Writing in his diary, Columbus said they were a handsome, smart and kind people. He noted that the gentle Arawaks were [remarkable for their hospitality](#). "They offered to share with anyone and when you ask for something, they never say no," he said. The [Arawaks had no weapons](#); their society had neither criminals, prisons nor prisoners. They were so kind-hearted that Columbus noted in his diary that on the day the Santa Maria was shipwrecked, the Arawaks labored for hours to save his crew and cargo. The native people were so honest that not one thing was missing.

Columbus was so impressed with the hard work of these gentle islanders, that he immediately [seized](#) their land for Spain and enslaved them to work in his brutal gold mines. Within only two years, 125,000 (half of the population) of the original natives on the island were dead.

Columbus forced these peaceful natives to work in his gold mines until they died of exhaustion. If an "Indian" worker did not deliver his full quota of gold dust by Columbus' deadline, soldiers would **cut off the man's hands** and tie them around his neck to send a message. Slavery was so intolerable for these sweet, gentle island people that at one point, 100 of them committed **mass suicide**. Catholic law forbade the enslavement of Christians, but Columbus solved this problem by simply refusing to baptize the native people of Hispaniola.

On his second trip to the New World, Columbus brought **cannons and attack dogs**. If a native resisted slavery, he would cut off a nose or an ear. If slaves tried to escape, Columbus had them burned alive. Other times, he sent attack dogs to hunt them down, and the **dogs would tear off the arms and legs** of the screaming natives while they were still alive. If the Spaniards ran short of meat to feed the dogs, Arawak babies were **killed for dog food**.

Columbus' acts of cruelty were so unspeakable that Governor Francisco De Bobadilla arrested Columbus and his two brothers, slapped them into chains, and shipped them off to Spain to answer for their crimes against the Arawaks. But the King and Queen of Spain, with their treasury filling up with gold, pardoned Columbus and let him go.

One of Columbus' men, Bartolome De Las Casas, was so mortified by Columbus' brutal atrocities against the native peoples, that he quit working for Columbus and became a Catholic priest. He described how the Spaniards under Columbus' command cut off the legs of children who ran from them, to test the sharpness of their blades. According to De Las Casas, **the men made bets** as to who, with one sweep of his sword, could cut a person in half. He says that Columbus' men poured people full of boiling soap. In a single day, De Las Casas was an eye witness as the Spanish soldiers dismembered, beheaded, or raped 3,000 native people. "Such inhumanities and barbarisms were committed in my sight as no age can parallel," De Las Casas wrote. "My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature that now I tremble as I write."

De Las Casas spent the rest of his life trying to protect the helpless native people. But after a while, there were no more natives to protect. Experts generally agree that before 1492, the population on the island of Hispaniola probably numbered above **3 million**. Within 20 years of Spanish arrival, it was reduced to only 60,000. Within 50 years, **not a single original native inhabitant could be found**.

Christopher Columbus derived most of his income from slavery, De Las Casas noted. In fact, Columbus was the first slave trader in the Americas. As the native slaves died off, they were replaced with black slaves. Columbus' son became the first African slave trader in 1505.

Are you surprised you never learned about any of this in school? I am too. Why do we have this extraordinary gap in our American ethos? Columbus' reign of terror is one of the darkest chapters in our history. The REAL question is: Why do we celebrate a holiday in honor of this man?

Call me crazy, but I think holidays ought to honor people who are worthy of our admiration, true heroes who are positive role models for our children.

Let me ask you a question: Would we celebrate Columbus Day if the story of Christopher Columbus were told from the point-of-view of his victims?