

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*

Chapter 1: Columbus, Indians, and Human Progress [excerpted]

Directions: *Please read the following excerpt and answer the questions that follow. Annotate parts you feel are important.*

Arawak men and women emerged from their villages onto the island's beaches and swam out to get a closer look at the strange big boat. When Columbus and his sailors came ashore, carrying swords, speaking oddly, the Arawaks ran to greet them, brought them food, water, gifts. He later wrote in his log:

They... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things, which they exchanged for glass beads... They willingly traded everything they owned. They were well-built. They do not bear arms and do not know them, for I showed them the sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. Their spears are made of cane... They would make fine servants.... With fifty men we could [subdue] them and make them do whatever we want.

The information that Columbus wanted most was: Where is the gold? He had persuaded the king and queen of Spain to finance an expedition to the land.... The wealth, he expected would be on the other side of the Atlantic - the Indies and Asia, gold and spices. In return for bringing back the gold and spices, they promised Columbus ten percent of the profits and [leadership of the new land]....

Columbus took some [Arawaks] aboard his ship as prisoners because he insisted they guide him to the source of the gold. He then sailed to what is now Cuba. There bits of visible gold in the rivers and a gold mask presented to Columbus by a local Indian chief led to wild visions of gold fields.

On Hispaniola, Columbus built a fort, the first European military base in the Western Hemisphere. On one part of the island, he got into a fight with Indians who refused to trade as many bows and arrows as he and his men wanted. Two were [stabbed] with swords and bled to death. He took more Indians prisoner and put them aboard his ships. Columbus then set sail for Spain to report his findings. He left 39 crew members there with instructions to find and store the gold. On the open seas, when the weather turned cold, the Indian prisoners began to die.

Columbus' second expedition was given 17 ships and more than 1,200 men. The aim was clear: slaves and gold. They went from island to island in the Caribbean, taking Indians as captives. But as word spread of the Europeans' intent, they found more and more empty villages. When they returned to their fort on Hispaniola, they found the sailors left behind were killed in a battle with the Indians. Columbus' men roamed the island in gangs looking for gold, taking women and children as slaves for sex and labor.

They found no gold fields but they knew they had to fill up the ships returning to Spain with something. They went on a great slave raid, rounded up fifteen hundred Arawak men, women, and children, put them in pens guarded by Spaniards and dogs, then picked the 500 best specimens to load onto ships. Of those 500 captives, 200 hundred died en route. The rest arrived alive and were put up for sale. Columbus later wrote: "Let us... go on sending all the slaves that can be sold."

But too many slaves died in captivity. And so Columbus, desperate to make good on his promises of gold, ordered all Indian persons 14 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.

The Spaniards "grew more conceited every day" and after a while refused to walk any distance. They "rode the backs of Indians if they were in a hurry" or were carried on hammocks by Indians... Total control led to total cruelty. The Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades.... 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."

The Indians had been given an impossible task. The only gold around was bits of dust from streams. So they fled, were hunted down with dogs, and were killed. Trying to put together an army of resistance, the Arawaks faced Spaniards who had armor, muskets, swords, horses. When the Spaniards took prisoners, they hanged them or burned them to death.

Among the Arawaks, mass suicides began with cassava poison. Infants were killed to save them from the Spaniards. In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead. By 1550, there were 500 left. A report of the year 1650 shows none of the original Arawaks or their descendants left on the island.

The Indian population of 10 million that lived north of Mexico when Columbus came would ultimately be reduced to less than a million. Huge numbers of Indians would die from diseases introduced by the whites. A Dutch traveler in New Netherland wrote in 1656 that "the Indians [agree] that before the arrival of the Christians, and before smallpox broke out among them [caused by blankets laced with smallpox which were given to Indians as gifts to keep them warm], they were ten times as numerous as they are now....9/10 of them had died."

My point is not that we must accuse, judge, condemn Columbus. It is too late for that; it would be useless. But the easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress is still with us today. (Slavery to harvest the cotton to drive the national economy; the forced relocation of African-Americans to build a larger stronger United States; immigrants forced to work long hours to help make the products used in society; the dropping of the atomic bomb Hiroshima to save the lives of 2 million others and end the war; the struggle to save South Vietnam from Communism). The treatment of Columbus as a hero comes from history being told from the point of the victor, not the loser. But how certain are we that what we destroyed was inferior?

Analysis Questions

- 1) How did the Arawak Indians first react to the arrival of Christopher Columbus?

- 2) How did Christopher Columbus view the Arawaks upon his arrival?

- 3) What was Christopher Columbus seeking in the New World?

- 4) What did Columbus do to the Arawak boys that failed to bring back enough gold in a three-month period? Explain why the Spaniards felt this was an acceptable way to treat the Arawaks.

- 5) How is Zinn's description of Columbus and his crew different from what you have heard about Columbus in the past?

- 6) Do you feel it would be appropriate to stop celebrating Columbus Day and replace it with a day of mourning, or sadness, in honor of the Native Americans who lost their lives as a result of Columbus' arrival? (You'd still get the day off of school!) **Be sure to support your answer.**