

"They are the best people in the world and above all the gentlest. . . . They are so naive and so free with their possessions that no one who has not witnessed them would believe it. When you ask for something they never say no. To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone. . . . They are well-built, with good bodies and handsome features. . . . They do not bear arms, and do not know them, for I showed them a sword, they took it by the edge and cut themselves out of ignorance. . . . They would make fine servants. . . . With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."
— Columbus, from the log of his first voyage

"They spared no sex nor age; neither would their Cruelty pity Women with child, whose bellies they would rip up, taking out the Infant to hew it to pieces. They would often lay wagers who should with most dexterity either cleave or cut a man in the middle, or who could at one blow soonest cut off his head. The children they would take by the feet and dash their innocent heads against the rocks."
— Bartolomé de las Casas, from History of the Indies

The chapter heading quotations were selected by the editors.

1492-1992: A Historian's Perspective

Howard Zinn

If there's anything I detest more than another, it is that spirit of historical inquiry which doubts everything, that modern spirit which destroys all the illusions and all the heroes which have been the inspiration of patriotism through all the centuries. — Chauncey Depew, president of the New York Central Railroad and agent for the Vanderbilt fortunes, at Carnegie Hall on the 400th anniversary of Columbus.

I'm here to celebrate with you the Quincentennial of Columbus. You know, big plans are being made for this. Many states have established commissions. You probably know that President Reagan established a commission back in 1985 for the observance of the Quincentennial. It was a little embarrassing though, because he appointed this man Goudie, who was a Florida real estate developer—Who else? A natural choice. He resigned last year because some House subcommittee was investigating him. You thought only people like us are investigated. [laughter] Sometimes they investigate people like that, when they get really flagrant. He was letting out contracts to real estate friends of his, then it turns out he had trouble with the courts, and that he had lost his real estate license. Anyway, he's gone.

Of course Reagan knows a lot about American history and Native Americans. He used to listen to the Lone Ranger, [laughter] and from that he derived his knowledge of American Indians. In the last part of his presidency you may remember he visited Moscow. He had refused to meet with a number of Indian representatives to discuss the conditions of Indians in the U.S., so they followed him to Moscow and showed up at some meeting he was having at Moscow U. He was slightly embarrassed. Three of these representatives were

A transcript of a speech by Howard Zinn at Cowles Auditorium at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, April 12, 1991.

here, and they raised their hands, and I guess he was a little surprised they spoke English. [laughter] And then the moderator said:

Mr. President, I heard that a group of American Indians have come here because they couldn't meet you in the United States of America. If you fail to meet them here will you be able to improve, to correct it, and to meet them back in the United States?

Reagan: "I didn't know that they had asked to see me,"—there was a lot Reagan didn't know. [laughter] Then he says, as if to educate this Moscow audience:

"Let me tell you just a little something about the American Indian in our land. We have provided millions of acres of land for what are called 'preservations,' and then he stopped and said "I should say 'reservations.' We have done everything we can to meet their demands as to how they want to live. Maybe we should not have humored them in that." [groans] Please, a little respect for the president. [laughter] "And you'd be surprised: some of them became very wealthy, because some of those reservations were overlaying great pools of oil. And you can get very rich pumping oil. And so, I don't know what their complaint might be."

I just thought I'd start off with Reagan, and finish with Reagan as fast as I could.

All these plans are being made. One of them, a group in New York, is planning a marriage between the statue of [incredulity] . . . —there are a lot of very intolerant people around here—between the statue of Columbus, which is in Barcelona, and the Statue of Liberty. Really. I don't make these things up, even though I'm a historian. . . . [loud laughter and applause]

There was, as some of you may remember, a Quadricentennial. There was a big celebration in New York, and Chicago had a huge one. People came, and there was a big hoopla. Grover Cleveland started off the ceremonies. But there was no opposition recorded to the Quadricentennial a hundred years ago. Now, of course, what is happening around the country is that there is opposition, there is resistance, there is counter-information. . . .

Perhaps he was anticipating a hundred years beyond his time what was happening, but at the Quadricentennial there was a speech made at Carnegie Hall by Chauncey Depew. You can tell from the name he's a member of the left. Chauncey Depew, president of the New York Central Railroad, agent for the Vanderbilt fortunes, said:

If there's anything I detest more than another, it is that spirit of historical inquiry which doubts everything, that modern spirit which destroys all the illusions and all the heroes which have been the inspiration of patriotism through all the centuries.

I'm just glad he's not around to see this meeting. [laughter]

People are surprised when you begin to talk about Columbus and what happened back then in 1492, 4, 5, 8, 9, those years that Columbus and his brothers and the rest of their crew were doing their work, their wonderful work of discovery, in the New World.

It was new to them. It wasn't new to the people who were here. . . .

The big problem with history is not that people tell you lies, although of course sometimes they do, but most of the time the big problem with history is what is left out. And what is left out can be so important as to cast the entire story into a great lie, even though you've been told some true things. And so, I confess to you that I did not know anything about Columbus beyond what school kids know until after I had my Ph.D. in history. Really. I'm a trained historian, whatever it means to "train" a historian, [laughter] and I'd gone all through my historical education right up through the doctorate at Columbia University and no one ever corrected the story of Columbus that I had got at elementary school. What I got later on was a more sophisticated, slightly more detailed, slightly more polysyllabic version of what I had learned in elementary school. And . . . this is a real confession: it wasn't until I started doing work on this *People's History of the United States* that I learned about Columbus. . . .

It's not that I was astonished, because by this time I was not astonished by things that I learned about people who were supposed to be important and famous and great. . . . I wasn't astonished in the general sense, but I was astonished very specifically. It was new material for me.

So I'm not surprised now that the overwhelming number of reactions to this *People's History* are about Columbus. The mail that I get from around the country starts off with Columbus. This may mean that's all they read of the book. [laughter] I don't like to think that. What's more likely is that it's the most startling thing. It's just that people do not learn this, people do not know this. It's only very recently, in the last few years, that people have begun talking about this, that a literature has begun to appear. . . .

Hans Koning wrote a book called *Columbus: His Enterprise*. It's a small book, very neat, and a very vivid account of Columbus. And there's a new book by Kirkpatrick Sale, called *The Conquest of Paradise*, which is a very detailed account of Columbus's voyages and also of all the hoopla that has followed Columbus through the centuries down to the present day.

So what did I learn? I learned that when Columbus arrived he was greeted by the Indians on this island in the Bahamas. You know there's a lot of controversy over exactly where Columbus landed. This is a big thing. This is the kind of thing that makes the front pages of the newspapers. (I saw on) the front page of the *Boston Globe*: "New Discovery About Columbus." I thought, wow, finally they're gonna come out with it. [laughter] The new discovery was: that Columbus landed 60 miles to the south of where people thought he had landed. The *New York Times* had an editorial on Columbus. I thought: an

editorial on Columbus, maybe now . . . The editorial was about how nobody knows what Columbus looked like.

This is the kind of history that makes the front pages or the editorial pages. We're accustomed to that by now.

I remember reading a front page story in the *New York Times*. You know, historians are always looking to see if they'll put something on the front page that's in [their] field. A front page story in the *New York Times* revealed the disease that Martin Van Buren had before he died.

Who was Martin Van Buren? A little research discloses that he was president of the United States.

What has not made the front pages of the newspapers, and what I have not seen yet on television . . . is the fact that when Columbus arrived he was greeted by the Taino Indians—I called them Arawak Indians in my book. It's really embarrassing after you've written something and you discover that you didn't get the name right.

They came out and greeted Columbus, these strange creatures alighting from these boats wearing these funny things and these odd looking implements. They went up and greeted them with gifts. Columbus talked about this a number of times in his journal, about what the Indians were like that he encountered. He wrote a letter to one of his patrons back in Aragon just after he returned from his first voyage:

As soon as they see that they are safe and have laid aside all fear they are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all that they have, rather than refusing anything that he may possess when he is asked for it, but on the contrary inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves, they also give objects of great value for trifles and content themselves with little or nothing in return. I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them, but on the contrary men of great deference and kindness.

And at another point in his journal:

They are the best people in the world, and above all the gentlest. They are without knowledge of what is evil, nor do they murder or steal. They love their neighbors as themselves and they have the sweetest talk in the world and are always laughing.

In the very entry in his journal where he talks about how nice they are he says, "With fifty men we could subdue them and make servants of them." And of course that's what they did. And more.

Las Casas described it—he saw with his own eyes what the Spaniards did while he was there: dashing of babies against rocks by Spanish soldiers, atrocities they committed, the rapes, the disembowelments. Columbus

said they were gentle and nice people, but they weren't treated as people; they were treated as inanimate objects . . .

Hans Koning in his book writes:

We are now in February 1495. Time was short for sending back a good "dividend" on the supply ships getting ready for the return to Spain. Columbus therefore turned to a massive slave raid as a means for filling up these ships. The brothers rounded up 1500 Arawaks—men, women, and children—and imprisoned them in pens in Isabela, guarded by men and dogs. The ships had room for no more than 500, and thus only the best specimens were loaded aboard.

Of the 500 slaves, 300 arrived alive in Spain, where they were put up for sale in Seville.

Of course Columbus was looking for gold. He saw little bits of gold in their noses and their ears, and he was very anxious to please. I love it when I hear people talk—mostly important people in the government or in business—about the sanctity of the profit motive . . . The profit motive operated very strongly with Columbus. And for it he sent the Indians out in quest of gold so he could have gold to bring back to his sponsors in Spain. They had a quota of gold that they had to get in three months, this is for everybody over 14. If they didn't bring back this quota their arms were hacked off with axes so they could bleed to death as an example to everybody else . . .

So, butchery took place in Hispaniola. The Spaniards were armed with things that these Indians had never seen, had no notion about. They marched through the island to put down any signs of . . . non-compliance with their demands or resistance to their enslavement. Horses, dogs, crossbows. The Tainos did not know what a sword was when the Spaniards first came. Columbus notes that they didn't know that these were weapons and so they reached out to touch the swords and they cut themselves because they didn't know it was sharp.

Las Casas describes having seen the Spaniards just sharpen their swords, they went out looking for a group of Indians to [test their sharpness] on, and there follows a massacre that horrifies them. And Las Casas became a strong protester against this and demanded that something be done.

Of course reform laws were passed which were meaningless, as many reform laws are.

But when you tell people this they are surprised.

Every semester for about the last eight years I get about 25 letters from a high school in Tigard, Oregon, from a class taught by this teacher who apparently forces these kids to read my book. [laughter]

He probably also forces them to write letters to me after they've read my book, in which they ask me questions. Half of them say, "Wow, I never knew

this stuff," and others say, "Who are you?" "What's wrong with you?" [laughter] One writer said, "Do you believe in God? I noticed that in your whole book, your whole 600 pages of American history, you don't mention God once." I'm gonna correct that, of course. [laughter]

One wrote:

You say that Columbus physically abused the Indians that didn't help him find gold. You've said that you gained a lot of this information from Columbus's own journal. I'm wondering if there is such a journal; and if so, why isn't it part of our history? Why isn't any of what you say in my history book or in history books people have access to each day. [applause]

Now, it could mean two things, right? He could be writing in indignation: "Why don't they tell us these things in our history books?" Or he could be saying: "Come on now. Nobody else has told me this. Where did you make this up?"

But you can't blame him. You can't blame people being surprised and shocked. . . [Is] the media, with all of its power, capable, in this country of free expression, of hiding one of the most fundamental facts about the genesis of western society in this hemisphere? It's not surprising. This is what people get, from kindergarten up through college.

The main biography of Columbus is written by Samuel Eliot Morison, the "distinguished"—every time I use the word "distinguished" I want to put quotation marks around it—Harvard professor who was enamored with Columbus—so much so that he sailed across the Atlantic trying to follow Columbus's traces. And he wrote this great long history of Columbus in which he mentions genocide—it's there, it's just there, somewhere, you know. It's as if you wrote a book about Hitler and you wrote about his great accomplishments. He solved the unemployment problem in Germany, he built tremendous architectural works, and a fantastic highway system, and he was a magnificent orator, and then somewhere in this book about Hitler you have a few lines about how he was responsible for the deaths of many millions of people.

Morison was a flamboyant writer. This endeared him to a lot of people because a lot of historians are sort of dry as writers. Some of you may have noticed. . . [laughter]

He [wrote]:

Never again may mortal men hope to recapture the amazement, the wonder, the delight of those October days in 1492 when the New World gracefully yielded her virginity to the conquering Castilians.

It's interesting from the standpoint of the argument that goes on among historians about presentism; some of you may be familiar with that. The argument involves someone saying to someone else: "Now look . . . if you're writing about the past, you shouldn't write it from your present point of view, you should try not to impose the present and present values on this period." You're writing about a period in which people butchered one another, you really have to put yourself back in that time. The mores were different.

The mores were different? Then people butchered one another. It's amazing how that argument goes on. You mustn't look at Columbus from the standpoint of today, you see. But what defeats that argument is that if you go back to that day there are people who criticize and speak. Obviously, Columbus's values were not the only values present in the world in 1492. Las Casas had his values—and of course the Indians had their values.

Here's las Casas taking a different point of view:

I believe that because of these impious, criminal, and ignominious acts God will visit His wrath and His ire upon Spain, for her share in the blood-stained riches obtained by threat and usurpation accompanied by such slaughter and annihilation of those peoples.

There was a German historian in the 1960s who wrote a cultural history of the modern age, taking a long view of the history of human culture, and judging the 500 years since Columbus. He says: "The 500 years of this modern age is one of the most rudimentary, childish, and primitive periods in the history of the human experience."

The only word I object to is childish.

But he caught something there, something about the culture of these 500 years which troubles him.

By the way, if you look in the *Columbia Encyclopedia* and you look at the entry on Columbus—which is a long entry, naturally—you will not find a word about atrocities, about killings, about enslavement—nothing. . . Of course it's the "*Columbia*" *Encyclopedia*.

The importance of all this, I guess, is not simply to set the record straight on Columbus and what happened in the 1490s on Hispaniola. . . Some people think that this is what history should be doing. History should be constantly setting and resetting the record straight on some past period of history just to get the facts right about what happened. But there's no real point, in my opinion, in getting the facts right, unless there's some important purpose behind it. . . There must be some meaning to this. There must be a reason why it's important to bring these things out about Columbus.

It's not to denounce Columbus. It's too late for that. It's not to have an imbroglio about Columbus Day and have a big battle about what really happened then, and was Columbus a good guy or a bad guy. Who cares? It's