

## Columbus Day: Observing closely

By Roy Cook



On this October 8, 2012 Tribal people will observe others celebrating Columbus Day. What do we Native Americans have to observe or celebrate?

In 1492 Columbus' ships appeared off the coast of San Salvador. The Taino Indians observed and greeted Columbus with unimaginable hospitality. Columbus reported to his queen: "So tractable, so peaceable, are these people that I swear to your

Majesties there is not in the world a better nation. They love their neighbors as themselves, and their discourse is ever sweet and gentle, and accompanied with a smile; and though it is true that they are naked, yet their manners are decorous and praiseworthy." Columbus soon lost sight of the generosity and kindness of the Taino people. [www.uctp.org](http://www.uctp.org) (Note 1)

[Columbus Day](#), as we know it in the United States, was invented by the [Knights of Columbus](#). The Knights are a Catholic fraternal service organization. Back in the 1930s, they were looking for a Catholic hero as a role-model their church school children 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 America thought.

There are several problems with this miss-reported history. First of all, Columbus wasn't the first European to discover America. As we all know, the Viking, [Leif Ericson](#) probably founded a Norse village on Newfoundland some 500 years earlier. But if you think about it, the whole concept of 'discovering America' is arrogant, ignorant and just plain wrong. After all, the Native Americans were in the Western Hemisphere and North America about 55,000-80,000 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 Europeans. The Indo-Pacific origins of the Polynesians are linked to Southeast Asia through the Austronesian expansion and particularly to the Lapita culture that first appears in the Pacific 3300 years before present (B.P.). Lapita colonists moved rapidly through eastern Melanesia to Samoa and Tonga by 2900 B.P. Beginning 1500–1000 B.P., the settlement of East Polynesia began, probably from Samoa, with colonization of Hawai'i by 1000 B.P., Easter Island by 800 B.P. and New Zealand by 700 B.P. Polynesians introduced dogs, pigs, rats and chickens to many of the islands they settled (8). Chicken remains first appear in Vanuatu and Tonga between 3000 and 2800 B.P., where they are associated with Lapita sites (9, 10), in Niue (11) from ≈2000 B.P. and in early occupation layers throughout most of East Polynesia (8).

Some prehistoric contact between the Americas and Polynesia is evident from the presence of South American sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) in pre-European archaeological sites in Polynesia (6, 12, 13), most notably from Mangaia, Cook Islands, where it is dated indirectly to ≈AD 1000 (13). Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggest that the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*), also from the Americas, was present in Eastern Polynesia before AD 1200 (14, 15). Voyaging from Polynesia to the Americas has been proposed (16), and debated (17) recently in relation to linguistic and archaeological evidence for the occurrence of some watercraft, namely sewn plank canoes, and fishhook forms found in southern California which resemble Polynesian types. Sewn plank canoes have also been documented in Chile by ethnographers (18) and claims have been made suggesting artifactual and linguistic evidence for Polynesian influence in the Mapuche region of south central Chile

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.

Shockingly, Columbus supervised the selling of native girls into [sexual slavery](#). Young girls of the ages 9 to 10 were the most desired by his men. In 1500, Columbus casually wrote about it in his log. He said: "A hundred castellanoes are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about [looking for girls](#); those [from nine to ten years of age are now in demand](#)."

He forced these peaceful natives 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. He simply refused 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](#).

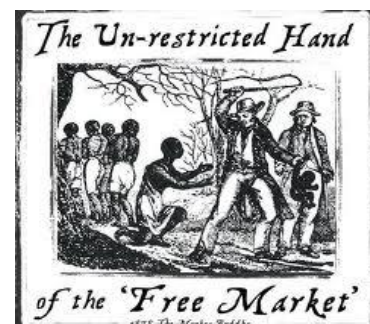


**During Columbus time in Haiti, he and his men hunted the Taino Indians for sport, beating, raping, torturing, killing, and then using the Indian bodies as food for their hunting dogs.**

Columbus' acts of cruelty were so unspeakable and so legendary - even in his own day - 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, their treasury filling up with gold, pardoned Columbus and let him go free.

In 1516, Spanish [historian Peter Martyr](#) wrote: "... a ship without compass, chart, or guide, but only following the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships could find its way from the Bahamas to Hispaniola."

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.

In contrast and contemporary to Columbus and the policy he dictated is the missionary Bartolome de Las Casas who recorded what he witnessed. Bartolome de Las Casas was born in Seville, Spain, in 1474. In 1502 he went to Cuba, and for his military services there was given an Encomienda, an estate that included the services of the Indians living on it. In about 1513 he was ordained a Christian priest (probably the first ordination in the Americas), and in 1514 he renounced all claim on his Indian serfs. During the following seven years he made several voyages to Spain to find support for a series of new towns in which Spaniard and Indian would live together in peace and equality. In 1523 he became a [Dominican](#) friar and disappeared for a time from public controversy. In 1540 he returned to Spain and was a force behind the passage in 1542 of laws prohibiting Indian slavery and safeguarding the rights of the Indians. He was made Bishop of Chiapas in Guatemala, and returned to the Americas in 1544 to implement the new laws, but he met considerable resistance, and in 1547 he returned to Spain, where he devoted the rest of his life to speaking and writing on behalf of the Indians.

He is chiefly remembered for his *Brief Report On the Destruction of the Indians* (or *Tears of the Indians*), a fervid and perhaps exaggerated account of the atrocities of the Spanish conquerors against the Indians. The book was widely read and widely translated, and the English version was used to stir up English feeling against the Spanish as a cruel race whom England ought to beware of, and whose colonies in the Americas would be better off in English hands.

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 3000 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](#).

During the following conquest there is documentation that Columbus felt required at least to inform the natives of the terms by which he would steal their lifestyle and life itself; though they could not understand a word he said:

“I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church and of their highnesses; we shall take you, and your wives, and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, as to vassals who do not obey, and refuse to receive their lord, and resist and contradict him; and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their highnesses, or ours, nor of these cavaliers who come with us...”

Text quoted from: "El Requerimiento" in Wilcomb Washburn, ed. *The Indian and the White Man*.

This autocratic position is known as the Requerimiento, such document of conquest ushered in the 16th century in South America. Most of the religion-professing European conquistadors: Cortes, Pizarro, de Soto, and others adopted this practice. We still see the legacy of this arrogant mindset with current English only proclamations across North America.

“To understand the connection between Christendom's principle of discovery and the laws of the United States, we need to begin by examining a papal document issued forty years before Columbus' historic voyage In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued to King Alfonso V of Portugal the proclamation or ‘bull’ Romanus Pontifex, declaring war against all non-Christians throughout the world, and specifically sanctioning and promoting the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian nations and their territories.

Under various theological and legal doctrines formulated during and after the Crusades, non-Christians were considered enemies of the Catholic faith and, as such, less than human. Accordingly, in the proclamation or ‘bull’ of 1452, Pope Nicholas directed King Alfonso to "capture, vanquish, and subdue the Saracens, pagans, and other enemies of Christ," to "put them into perpetual slavery," and "to take all their possessions and property." [Davenport: 20-26] Acting on this papal privilege, Portugal continued to traffic in African slaves, and expanded its royal dominions by making "discoveries" along the western coast of Africa, claiming those lands as Portuguese territory.

Thus, when Columbus sailed west across the Sea of Darkness in 1492 - with the express understanding that he was authorized to "take possession" of any lands he "discovered" that were "not under the dominion of any Christian rulers" - he and the Spanish sovereigns of Aragon and Castile were following an already well-established tradition of "discovery" and conquest. [Thacher: 96] Indeed, after Columbus returned to Europe, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal document, the proclamation or ‘bull’ *Inter Cetera* of May 3, 1493, "granting" to Spain - at the request of Ferdinand and Isabella - the right to conquer the lands which Columbus had already found, as well as any lands which Spain might "discover" in the future.”

To make a long story short, Columbus established a pattern that held for five centuries, this pattern set a tone in the Americas. This has also led to a dehumanizing 'objectification of a race of people' Native Americans/American Indians were spoken of in terms of Euro-Americanization. Example: There are thought of as though they had actually just come from India and did not belong here in the real America.

This Manifest Destiny, God is on the side of the USA government and military. Captain John Gregory Bourke, the US Cavalry officer who once forced the surrender of Geronimo, and who fought against Crazy Horse's Sioux, and the Northern Cheyenne, wrote, "to improve the condition of the Indians as tribes is simply an impossibility . . . they must first be crushed by the overwhelming forces of the Government, whose civilizing influences can then hope to find a free, perhaps fruitful field of labor among the new generations, treated as individuals, but never as tribes."

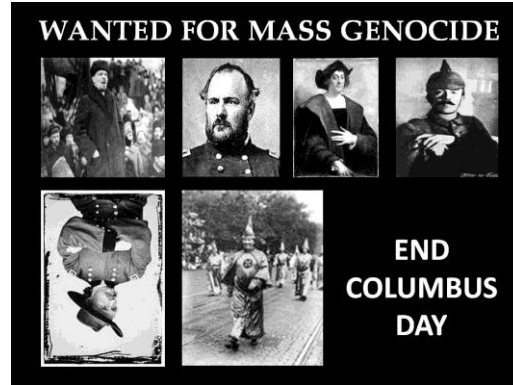
The European-Columbus introduced attitude of treating Native Americans as sub-human, even having genocide preached and practiced upon them continued and has been exhibited by the least likely people, including even L. Frank Baum, author of 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz'. Baum twice demanded the complete extermination of the Sioux Nations in editorials he wrote in his newspaper in Aberdeen, South Dakota, between 1888, and 1891.

Regardless of what the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights promises. (See article 5 on due process and just compensation.) The quest by non-Indians for personal possessions was to be, from the outset, a series of government supported raids, irresponsible and criminal, a spree, without end to it – the gold, the slaves, the timber, the pearls, the fur, the precious ores, and, later, arable land, coal, oil, and iron ore. Indeed, there is no end to it, no limit.

Therefore, on one hand we may see a thin rational for how the US continues to celebrate this process linked to Columbus and his 'discoveries' but in reviewing the realities and results upon humanity it seems remarkable that



we can still 'celebrate' these historical events and atrocities. On the other it is readily apparent why Native peoples hold a different attitude toward these events and the persistent celebration of the conquering culture if only for a day off from work and why every Columbus Day, is a Native American Tribal day of mourning and a continued call to resistance in Native American communities.



Sources and notes:

1. Bartolome de las Casas, THE DEVASTATION OF THE INDIES: A BRIEF ACCOUNT (translated by Herma Briffault) (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). ISBN 0-8018-4430-4.

Note 1. During Columbus time in Haiti, he and his men hunted the Taino Indians for sport, beating, raping, torturing, killing, and then using the Indian bodies as food for their hunting dogs.

Columbus and his men traveled to many of the Caribbean island and the Natives all suffered the same terrible fate. An astonishing 5 million Indians were killed in the West Indies during the first four years of Columbus' presence. When Columbus realized that the Indians were becoming scarce in the islands, he traveled to America and Africa to recruit slaves to work the plantations in the Islands.

Source: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-kasum/columbus-day-a-bad-idea\\_b\\_742708.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-kasum/columbus-day-a-bad-idea_b_742708.html)