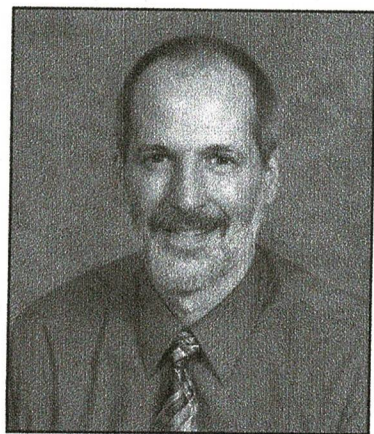




Uncovering the REAL Columbus

by Paul Basile

Christopher Columbus is a hard guy to get to know. After all, he lived more than 500 years ago, and much of his story has been told by or through others. In the end, everything depends on who's doing the telling, what they've decided to say or leave out, and why.

Much of the debate nowadays is dominated by polar extremes, with vehement critics embracing an often-false narrative in order to vilify Columbus and passionate apologists frequently downplaying the darker aspects of his legacy to paint a rosier picture.

I got caught in that trap early last year when I penned a lengthy article that relied too heavily on the apologists' point of view. The heat I took from folks who saw things differently was my wake-up call.

Resolving to see for myself, I dove headfirst into the source material as well as several modern interpretations. When I finally surfaced, one thing was clear: Columbus' worth has always been in the eye of the beholder.

Many of his own contemporaries brought biases to the table that distorted their accounts, and even quintessential modern Columbus scholar Samuel Eliot Morison overlooked overwhelming evidence to the contrary once he made up his mind that the great explorer was hell-bent on enslaving the natives from the get-go.

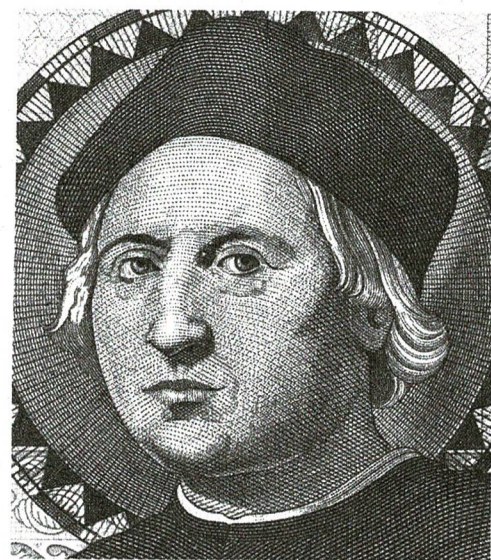
As I sifted through these sometimes wildly divergent accounts, a more complex portrait shimmered into view. The Columbus I discovered was a tragic hero who was forced by the misdeeds of others to betray his own lofty plans while nevertheless shielding the native populations from the truly egregious abuses

they suffered in his absence and after he had departed.

Another thing I discovered is that you can't get to know Columbus via sound bites and debate points. You need to view those in the context of his strife-torn eight-year tenure as governor and beyond. So climb on board, and let the quest for the real Columbus begin.

The Columbus I discovered was a tragic hero who was forced by the misdeeds of others to betray his own lofty plans while nevertheless shielding the native populations from the truly egregious abuses they suffered in his absence and after he had departed.

Christopher Columbus earned rightful renown for his prowess as a navigator, and those who knew him considered him to be a man of irreproachable moral character. He was slavishly devoted to Queen Isabella, who took a chance on his risk-fraught proposal to head west in search of the Indies. As a result, he did his best to adhere to her precepts,



▲ CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

His story can't be told in sound bites, and the complex truth of his career can't be grasped without a deep dive into the source material.

including her command early on to treat the natives well, give them gifts and protect them from abuse.

Though he was tasked with expanding Spain's dominion across the ocean, he took a radically different and mind-bogglingly humane approach to conquest from the moment he set foot in the Caribbean on Oct. 12, 1492.

(For more on the subject, turn to the sidebar on page 25.)

Columbus had a clear-eyed view of the islands' diverse tribes, praising those who were worthy and condemning those who weren't. He hailed the Tainos as gentle, generous, intelligent and well governed, and reviled the Caribs, a predatory cluster of tribes that subjected their peace-loving neighbors to cannibalism, rape, castration, torture and slavery in a campaign of systematic depopulation.

He forged a lifelong friendship with Guacanagarí after the powerful Taino king commanded his tribesmen to rescue Columbus' crew and supplies when the Santa María ran aground on Christmas Eve. Overcome with gratitude, Columbus vowed that he would put an end to the threat posed by the Caribs, either by enslavement or the sword.

Continues on page 24 ...

Columbus' first tour of the Caribbean was an unqualified success. Showering the peaceful tribes with gifts and demonstrations of good intention, he converted wary strangers into adoring allies throughout the Taino tribes. By the time he was ready to depart, he and his men were regarded as gods, with thousands of natives coming from miles around to trade water, food, darts, cotton, parrots and gold for red caps, glass beads, brass rings and tiny falconer's bells.

To his discredit and contrary to every other action he took during his first voyage, Columbus took two small groups of natives captive: one at the start to serve as guides and the other at the end to bring back to Spain to learn the language and serve as interpreters upon his return. Columbus' men had to resort to violence only once during their entire stay, wounding a pair of Carib warriors while fending off an assault by a much larger force.

Columbus was so convinced by accounts and evidence of ample deposits of gold on Hispaniola and nearby islands,

he set sail for Spain four months earlier than planned. Having lost the largest of his ships, he was forced to leave 39 of his men behind, instructing them to seek themselves gold and barter for it with the natives while he was gone.

On his trip back to Spain, he wrote glowingly of the Tainos and scathingly of the Caribs to the king and queen, promising the monarchs that his next voyage would yield an endless supply of slaves from the ranks of the latter, as well as plentiful gold, spices and other riches.

Following a triumphant reception in Spain, he headed back to the Caribbean with 1,200 men in 17 ships, but with far fewer provisions and supplies than he had requested due to mismanagement by those responsible for loading them up.

On board was a priest whose sole purpose was to study native traditions so he could facilitate their conversion to Christianity. Columbus also carried with him plans to create a system of commerce in which natives were dealt with as trading partners.

The size of the fleet and crew were

design to ward off possible aggression by Portugal, which was also intent on colonizing the islands. Most of the ships and men returned to Spain within a few months of their arrival.

Immediately upon his return to the Caribbean, Columbus began to make good on his promise to the Tainos, visiting islands controlled by the Caribs, destroying their boats, taking several of them prisoner and freeing dozens of Tainos that were being held captive.

Triumph dissolved into tragedy, though, when Columbus returned to his settlement on Hispaniola to find that all the men he left behind had been slaughtered at the command of Caonabó, a warlike native king with dozens of lesser chiefs under his control.

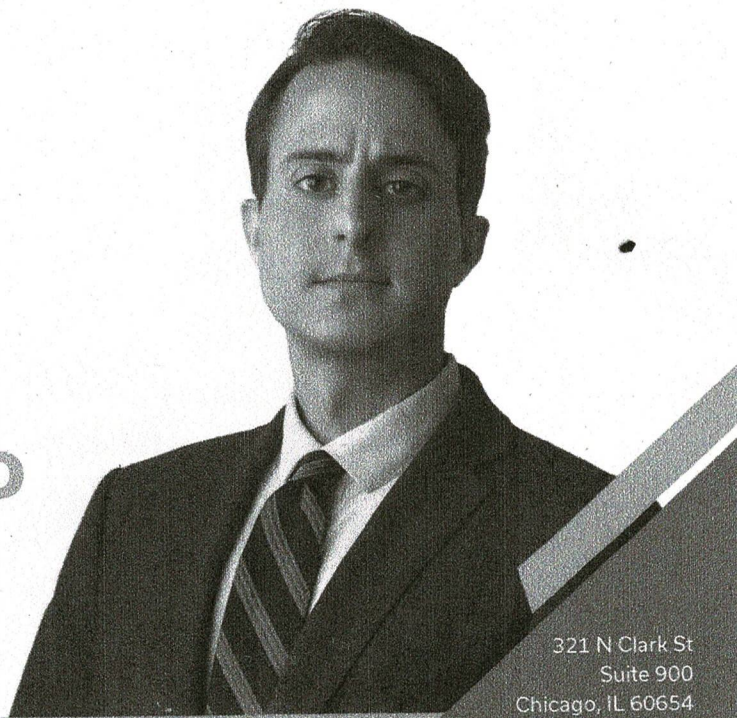
With 1,200 well-armed men, Columbus could easily have enslaved or rained death upon the tribes responsible. When he determined that the lethal assault was triggered by abuses committed by his own men while he was away, he moved to another part of the island and built a new settlement.

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In Columbus' absence, his men had turned on each other and several had fled the settlement, taking as much gold as they could carry and seizing native women as consorts along the way. An unquenchable hatred had been engendered between the Spaniards and the offended tribes, triggering events that eventually engulfed the whole island in chaos.

Gold was found in abundance in the early months of Columbus' second stay, but it was hard to access, and digging for it was put on hold. Heavy rains, diseases and dwindling supplies began to take their toll, but Columbus' main challenges came from the men themselves.

Many of them were sons of the Spanish gentry, who had no hope of an inheritance and were looking to make a quick fortune in the New World. Faced with the rigors of building a settlement in such adverse conditions, some of them plotted mutiny, and hundreds of them returned to Spain, bearing with them a host of complaints mixed with outright lies.

In one of the many ships that returned to Spain, Columbus sent several Carib men, women and children along with a proposal to extract many more from their tribes, educate and rehabilitate them, and return them to the islands as shining examples of Spanish benevolence. The queen put Columbus' proposal on hold pending further discussion.

In that same letter, Columbus offered detailed explanations for the lack of immediate gold production, which were met with sympathy and understanding by the monarchs. His request for regular supply runs from Spain were also well received, but they went largely unmet.

As Columbus shed hundreds of men due to illness, death and departures, tensions with the natives continued to rise. Forts replaced mere settlements, and he sent troops marching in formation into the forest on two separate occasions to scare off anticipated attacks by Caonabó and his allies.

During the second excursion, natives from a tribe under Caonabó's sway

pretended to help Columbus' troops across a river, only to make off with the clothing they were carrying. When their chief refused to return the items, Columbus' captain took it upon himself to make an example of them.

Without Columbus' permission, the captain had the ears of one of the thieves cut off, and brought the offending natives and their chief back to the settlement to stand trial. Columbus made a show of threatening to execute them, wringing a promise from the chief and his allies to curtail hostilities.

While this was taking place, members of the chief's tribe surrounded a group of Columbus' men who were still in their territory. The natives were preparing to capture or kill them when Columbus' men were rescued by a fellow Spaniard on horseback.

Despite massive attrition in his workforce and rapidly decaying relations with Caonabó and his allies, Columbus never once pressed a native into service against his or her will, and he continued

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Redefining Conquest

Conquest and subjugation were the order of the day in the 15th century.

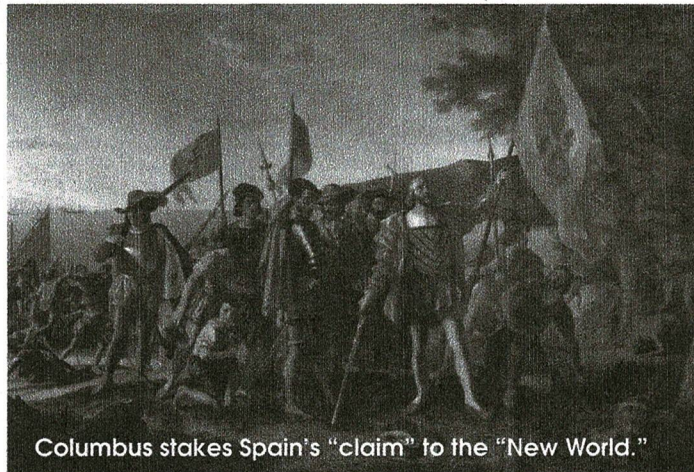
Most societies back then were ruled by monarchs who had absolute power over their people, controlling every aspect of their lives and brooking no dissent. Many of those monarchs were intent on extending their dominion to adjacent and distant lands, or on taking back lands previously seized from them. And though methods varied, none were particularly benign.

During that fractious century, the French expelled British occupiers from their soil, Spain did the same to the Muslims, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, the Mali Empire was laid low by the Songhai in Western Africa and the Aztecs subjugated Central America. The list goes on, with each of these conquests being undertaken by brutal force of arms.

In the Caribbean, the peace-loving Tainos, who Columbus first encountered, had muscled the more primitive Siboney off the islands in the hundred years prior. And had Columbus not arrived upon the scene, the sadistic Caribs most likely would have raped, castrated, enslaved and cannibalized their way through the entire Taino population in the ensuing century.

By contrast, Columbus had a mind-bogglingly humane approach to conquest. The journals from his first voyage offer ample evidence of the following:

- He gave his men strict orders to treat the natives kindly and refrain from abusing them in any way.



Columbus stakes Spain's "claim" to the "New World."

- He respected the natives' property, insisting that they be traded with fairly and adequately compensated for their efforts.
- While it's true that one of his main goals was to convert the natives to Christianity, he believed they could and should be brought freely into the fold by love, not force.
- Though he claimed the islands he landed upon for the king and queen of Spain, he considered the natives to be citizens already, with equal protection under the law.
- He envisioned establishing a vast network of trade relations with the natives upon his return.

For supporting quotes, email info@franoi.com.

to treat the new tribes he encountered with deference and respect for their traditions.

Reluctant to leave Hispaniola in such a tumultuous state, Columbus nevertheless heeded the king's directive to set out in search of the mainland, giving his men strict instructions to maintain peaceful relations with the natives.

His five-month exploration of Cuba and Jamaica was filled with positive encounters with the local tribes. Having abandoned his effort to convince the queen to neutralize the Caribs through enslavement, he was intent on wiping them out upon his return. But the stress of guiding three ships through the treacherous waters of the Caribbean left him practically bedridden, and he abandoned the plan.

In that debilitated state, Columbus returned to find Hispaniola at a tipping point, with egregious abuses by his men leading to violent reprisals by the offended tribes. His dear friend and ally, Chief Guacanagarí, was caught in the crossfire. One of his wives was murdered

and another kidnapped by enraged tribal leaders in retribution for the settlers' misdeeds.

To head off the major native offensive that was sure to follow, Columbus had hundreds of noncombatant natives from the retaliating tribes seized and 500 sent to Spain. After a review by theologians, the queen accepted them as a consequence of the strife with the natives and allowed them to be sold into slavery.

Columbus' attempt to terrify the natives into submission backfired, leading to an uprising by many of the tribes on the island. With countless thousands of native warriors massed and ready to strike, Columbus quelled the assault with a force of about 200 armed men with attack dogs. Many natives who were caught in the crossfire fled to the mountains to escape.

As was customary in both native and European societies at the time, Columbus exacted a tribute from the vanquished tribes, requiring what he considered to be small quantities of gold from those who had access to it and cotton from

those who did not, and meting out moderate punishments to those who didn't meet their quotas. The natives initially agreed to the terms, but when the gold quota proved too high, Columbus halved it.

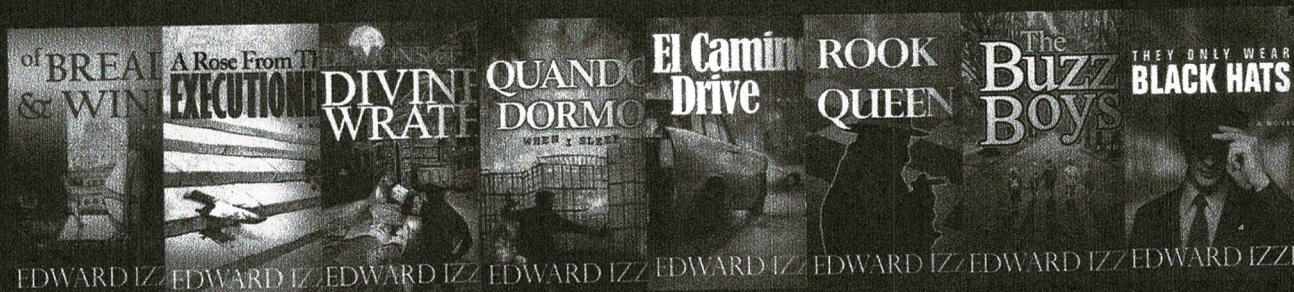
Columbus continued his assault on Caonabó and his allies until the native king was captured, after which an uneasy peace descended upon the island. But Columbus' dream of a utopian world in which natives and Europeans worked in harmony to draw riches from the earth lay in ruin.

Instead, most of his resources were poured into building forts, patrolling the island and collecting tributes from tribes that were primed at any moment to erupt into violence. All efforts to convert the natives to Christianity were abandoned. At that point, they so hated the Spaniards that any such attempt would have been futile.

While touring the island after the capture of Caonabó, Columbus discovered widespread famine triggered by the decision of many of the chiefs to compel their tribes to tear up their own crops in a

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misguided attempt to starve out the settlers.

In two short years, Columbus' letters to the king and queen had devolved from joyous celebrations of the vast potential of his endeavors to plaintive efforts to

explain the lack of gold production, justify the vast expense of the enterprise and seek reassurances that he still held their favor. Reading between the lines of those letters and judging by the outcomes of his trips back to Spain, he was on firm footing with the crown.

With supplies running desperately low, Columbus left his brothers in charge of the island and returned to Spain, bringing Caonabó and a couple dozen of his tribesmen with him to stand trial. He was also intent on combating the criticisms that had flowed across the Atlantic in the previous months. Caonabó perished during the crossing. With the ships approaching Spain and the larders nearly empty, the crew proposed eating the remaining natives or throwing them overboard, but Columbus refused to permit either.

Hearing Columbus' side of the story upon his return to Spain, the king and queen renewed their commitment to him. They authorized the release of supply ships to return to Hispaniola directly, giving Columbus additional vessels to continue his search for the continent. But his first two voyages had drained the royal treasury, simultaneously ruining his once stellar reputation and earning him bitter enemies in the court.

As a result, the launch of his supply ships was delayed a full year, and his own expedition didn't depart until 10 months after that. Because funds were so scarce, Columbus was forced to swell the ranks of his crew with felons who were offered their freedom in exchange for a period of free labor working the gold mines.

Columbus was finally able to make landfall on the continent, but during his explorations, the supply ships were still wandering the Atlantic. Both groups of vessels arrived at Hispaniola at around the same time to find the island consumed by chaos.

With starvation and dissatisfaction running rampant among Columbus' men, one of his administrators, Francisco Roldán, led many of them in revolt, plotting to kill Columbus' brothers. When that failed, they seized control of a portion of the island.

Outnumbered, outflanked and facing possible death at the hands of the insurrectionists, Columbus was forced to accept a series of humiliating capitulations that included giving Roldán and his men control of plots of land and the natives who lived on them.

Before inking the deal, Columbus warned the affected chiefs, who agreed to play along in exchange for the elimination of the tributes. Forewarned, many of them were able to escape the island. The rest were roundly abused by Roldán.

Columbus sent a desperate letter to the king and queen, asking them to deliver troops to restore order to the island, but there was no immediate response. He also sent some of Roldán's slaves back to Spain as evidence of the sorts of abuses

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being committed against them. A secret letter of explanation was also sent but never arrived, prompting the queen to assume the slaves were Columbus' doing.

Columbus was finally wrestling the island under control, severely punishing the insurrectionists as well as those who abused the natives, when a dark force swept him from his position, dooming the indigenous populations to a swift extinction.

Inundated with malicious tales of Columbus' mismanagement and cruelty, the king and queen sent court official Francisco de Bobadilla to gather findings and report back. Upon his arrival, he unceremoniously stripped Columbus of his power and property, imprisoned him without taking his testimony, gathered a host of outlandish accusations against him and sent him back to Spain in chains along with his report. Bobadilla remained on as governor.

It didn't take long for the king and queen to sniff out the truth and exonerate Columbus. They restored his property and privileges but removed him from the

governorship, authorizing him to explore the outlying islands instead.

Meanwhile, Bobadilla was giving his men license to enslave, rape and murder the natives and subject them to forced labor. Catching wind of these transgressions, the king and queen sent a team led by Nicolás de Ovando to remove Bobadilla from power, punish the offenders and restore relations with the native populations.

As awful as the abuses were under Bobadilla, the real reign of terror commenced when Ovando took control of

the island. Columbus himself delivered a heartbreaking account of those atrocities and their consequences in a letter he wrote to the king during his fourth voyage.

"I am informed that since I left this island six parts out of seven of the natives are dead; all through ill-treatment and inhumanity; some by the sword, others by blows and cruel usage, others through hunger. The greater part have perished in the mountains and glens, whither they had fled, from not being able to support the labor imposed upon them."

By the time Columbus returned from his fourth voyage, his spirits, health and reputation were shattered. The queen passed away a few weeks later, and Columbus spent the remainder of his days embroiled in legal battles aimed at forcing the king to live up to the promises he had made. Columbus died an utterly broken man a year and a half later.

Now that you know the true story of Christopher Columbus, continue to the next page for a dismantling of his critics' most outrageous contentions.



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Countering THE CRITICS

by Paul M. Basile

Columbus' detractors would have us believe that he was a genocidal slave trader who tyrannized natives and settlers alike, and stopped at nothing to turn a profit and subjugate the islands. If you read the source material closely, though, all that dissolves into inaccuracy.

The worst offenders were Howard Zinn, author of "A People's History of the United States," and James W. Loewen, who penned "Lies My Teacher Told Me." Playing fast and loose with the truth at almost every turn, they offered no real proof for many of their assertions, often serving up quotes that were taken wildly out of context.

Together, they spawned a cottage industry that has peddled misinformation to every level of American society.

Surprisingly, some of their misconceptions are rooted in the work of noted Columbus scholar Samuel Eliot Morison. An exhaustive researcher, Morison's analysis of Columbus' tenure as governor was uncharacteristically shoddy on a couple of key points.

Often, the truth of the matter can easily be unearthed simply by looking at the entire passage in which a seemingly damning snippet is nestled. On occasion, you need to get a grip on a much bigger picture, or check the validity of one account against others.

An unlikely ally in this effort is Bartolomé de las Casas, a colonist-turned-friar who arrived on the scene shortly after Columbus departed. Las Casas' knowledge of Columbus' actions was encyclopedic, and though he admired Columbus as a person, he often wrote critically of his practices.

Modern opponents of Columbus quote him liberally — and not always



Samuel Eliot Morison

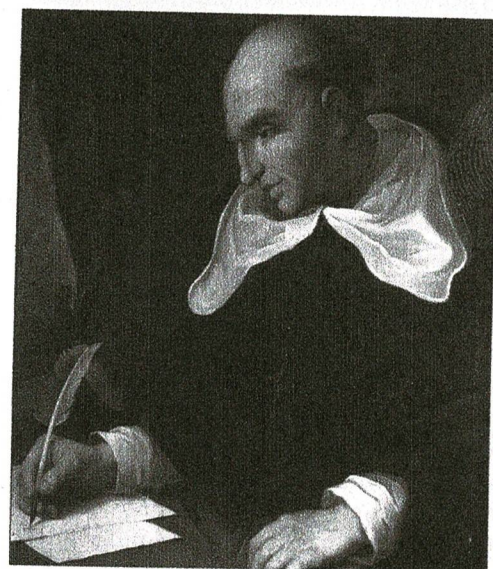
faithfully — when they want to bolster their points, but they manage to completely overlook the many times his writings contradict their assertions.

With the previous article in mind, let's focus on the most outlandish of these assertions and see how they fare when exposed to the bright light of reality.

Columbus meant to subjugate the natives from the start.

To assist in his research, Morison wrote the definitive translation of the journals Columbus kept during his first voyage. The originals were lost to time, so Morison worked from a transcription by las Casas, who summarized or quoted as he saw fit.

Even in its condensed form, the surviving document contains thousands upon thousands of words, 99 percent of which speak to Columbus' benevolent intent. For some unaccountable reason,



▲ BARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS

A contemporary of Columbus, he often wrote critically of his tenure as governor while at the same time offering insights that debunk many modern misconceptions.

Morison overlooked all of that, choosing to zero in on a half dozen passages that hint at a darker purpose — but only if you look at them sideways. Here are a few of them.

After Columbus met the Tainos face to face on Oct. 13, 1492, he wrote a long entry in his journal that contains the following fateful words: "They ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly whatever was said to them."

Here's Morison's takeaway, as recorded in his footnotes: "The thought of enslaving the Indians evidently crossed the admiral's mind at his first encounter."

If you scroll up the passage, though, you'll see that Columbus was actually explaining why the cannibalistic Caribs might want to enslave the peaceful Tainos before consuming them.

"They bear no arms, nor know thereof; for I showed them swords and they grasped them by the blade and cut themselves through ignorance. They have no iron. Their darts are a kind of rod without iron, and some have at the end a fish's tooth and others, other things. I saw some who had marks of wounds on their bodies, and made signs

Continues on page 30 ...

to ask what it was, and they showed me that people of other islands which are near came there and wished to capture them, and they defended themselves. And I believed and now believe that people do come here from the mainland to take them as slaves. They ought to be good servants and of good skill, for I see that they repeat very quickly whatever was said to them."

Bear in mind that Columbus was adamantly opposed to that sort of treatment. Paraphrasing from his journals, las Casas wrote: "The Admiral in all regions ordered all his people to take care not to annoy anyone in anything and to take nothing from them against their will, and so they paid them for all they received."

Morison offers the following snippets from an encounter with a different Taino tribe the next day as further evidence of Columbus' dark intent: "These people are very unskilled in arms ... with 50 men they could all be subjected and made to do all that one wished."

A fuller reading reveals that Columbus was ruling out the need to build a fort, presumably in case they encoun-

tered hostility, while trying to divine the crown's intent.

"I kept going this morning, that I might give an account of all to Your Highnesses, and also (to see) where there might be a fortress; and I saw a piece of land which was formed like an island, although it isn't one (and on it there are six houses) the which could in two days be made an island, although I don't see that it would be necessary, because these people are very unskilled in arms, as Your Highnesses will see from the seven that I caused to be taken to carry them off to learn our language and return; unless Your Highnesses should order them all to be taken to Castile or held captive in the same island, for with 50 men they could all be subjected and made to do all that one wished."

Everything Columbus did and wrote during his first stay militated against such an approach, but that wasn't his call. The matter was settled when the queen instructed Columbus to treat the natives "well and lovingly" as he prepared to embark on his second voyage.

Morison's misinterpretation of the

above two snippets was picked up by Zinn and Lowen and has echoed through the decades since. Here's another that didn't gain as much traction.

In response to this snippet — "Nothing was lacking but to know the language and to give them orders, because every order that was given to them they would obey without opposition." — Morison wrote, "Every man in the fleet from servant boy to Admiral was convinced that no Christian need do a hand's turn of work in the Indies; and before them opened the delightful vision of growing rich by exploiting labor of docile natives."

This was already an inane contention given Columbus' commitment to the exact opposite, but it utterly evaporates when you glance upward in the journal.

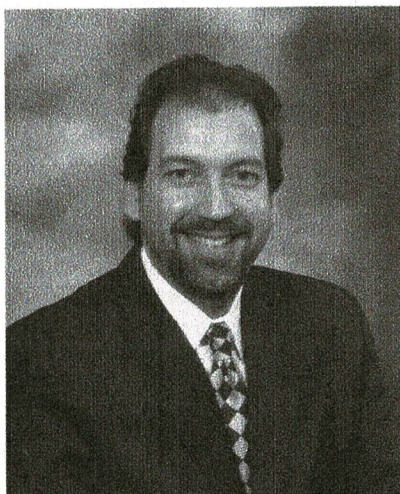
"The Admiral gave them glass beads, brass rings and hawk's bells, not that they demanded anything, but it seemed to him right; and more over says the Admiral, because he already considered them Christians, and for the Sovereigns, more than the people of Castile. And he



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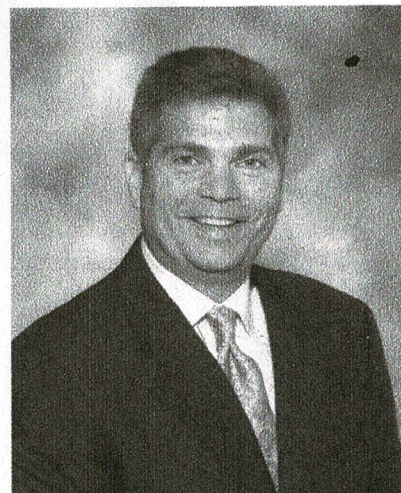
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says that nothing was lacking but to know the language and to give them orders because every order that was given to them they obey without opposition."

Columbus was actually commenting on the likelihood of the natives converting to Christianity without coercion. Remember that Columbus was intent on bring the native to the faith through love, not force — and that all monarchs — European and native alike — expected unquestioning obedience.

(With as much ground as we have left to cover, I'm going to switch gears here and summarize rather than address each issue chapter and verse.)

In a letter to the queen on his way back to Spain after his first stay, Columbus wrote glowingly of the treasures to be found in the Caribbean. Snopes, the website dedicated to separating fact from fiction, plucked this bit from the end of the letter as additional evidence that Columbus was bent on enslaving the natives from the start: "Their Highnesses may see that I shall give them as much gold as they may need ... and slaves as many as they shall order to be shipped."

The writer overlooks the fact that Columbus was referring only to the Caribs, who he had promised the Tainos he would vanquish, either in chains or by the sword.

Columbus exaggerated the riches of the Caribbean to convince the king and queen to fund his expedition.

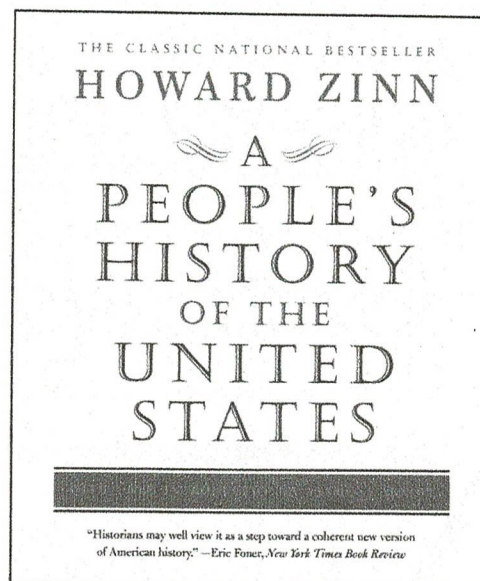
Nonsense, las Casas wrote: "And what can one say about the abundance of temporal wealth in gold, silver, pearls and precious stones? To give an idea, Indian gold is what prevails on the market all over the world."

Columbus was lulling the natives into a false sense of security during the first stay, departing on his second voyage with enslavement at the top of his to-do list.

Parroting Zinn and Loewen, anti-Columbus agitator Michael Coard wrote the following about the armada Columbus led on his second journey westward. "And during that 1493 voyage, he brought a fleet of 17 ships with 1,200 men for his malicious purpose of enslaving Red/Brown people and robbing them of their land and resources."

According to las Casas, the expedi-

tion was as large and well manned as it was to deter a possible maritime assault by Portugal, which envied Spain's foothold in the Caribbean. With those resources at his disposal, Columbus could easily have annihilated or enslaved the entire native population. Instead, he sent most of the men and ships home and built an entire settlement without once resorting to forced labor. Meanwhile, he continued to treat the new tribes he encountered during the first several months of his second stay with the same deference and respect that characterized his first stay.



Before returning to his settlement, Columbus toured the islands, taking innocent natives captive in an early slave roundup.

Columbus was actually raiding Carib strongholds, freeing dozens of Tainos from their clutches and keeping a promise to his allies to drag their enemies away in chains. In case you're wondering how bad the Caribs were, this description of a home that Columbus' men entered during the raids gives some indication. It comes from the writing of Peter Martyr, one of Columbus' more even-handed contemporary chroniclers.

"Birds were boiling in their pots, also geese mixed with bits of human flesh, while other parts of human bodies were fixed on spits, ready for roasting. Upon searching another house the Spaniards found arm and leg bones, which the cannibals carefully preserve for pointing their arrows; for they have no iron. All other bones, after the flesh is

eaten, they throw aside. The Spaniards discovered the recently decapitated head of a young man still wet with blood."

Columbus permitted a friend (in some versions, a lieutenant) to rape a native woman.

The rape never happened. One can say that with some certainty after reading all the reports related to the incident. And the native wasn't just a woman; she was a fierce Carib chief who had a castrated Taino boy with her when Columbus' men ran her boatload of warriors down.

The only account in which the sexual assault occurred came from the pen of the supposed rapist, a bon vivant and friend of Columbus named Michele de Cuneo who accompanied him on part of his second voyage. According to de Cuneo, Columbus sent him out with armed members of his crew to capture the chief and her men, giving de Cuneo the ringleader as a servant for personally bringing her in.

There is no way that Columbus would have sent a pal and party boy on a mission that dangerous. Moreover, none of the several witnesses to and chroniclers of the capture reported on de Cuneo's involvement, and they surely would have, given how odd it would have been.

No capture, no prize, no rape. The noisy assault that de Cuneo describes would certainly have come to the attention of others on board and eventually to las Casas, but it appears nowhere in his chronicles.

Because there was no gold, Columbus engaged in a massive slave roundup to generate funds.

First, regarding the gold: 1) There was plenty of it, but it was hard to access for a variety of reasons, 2) Columbus was under no pressure by the king and queen to produce quick results and 3) his stay until that point was consumed with building a settlement, exploring the other islands and dealing with a crisis with the natives that had spiraled out of control.

In the midst of all that, according to de Cuneo, Columbus sent armed men into the forest to gather 1,500 native men, women and children, shipping 500

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of them to Spain in chains, doling out another 500 to his men as slaves and sending the remainder fleeing in terror across the island.

Despite de Cuneo's dubious reliability, it can safely be said that the roundup itself occurred because several chroniclers confirmed it. None of them, however, suggested profit as a motive. Both Martyr and las Casas depict it as a military maneuver aimed at heading off an all-out assault by the natives. Las Casas even identifies the tribes targeted by Columbus as those involved in the bloody response to the abuses the settlers committed while he was off exploring.

Regarding the number and disposition of the captives: If 500 natives were given to the settlers as slaves, it was done without Columbus' permission, and he put an end to it as soon as he found out about it. Otherwise, las Casas would have caught wind of it and screamed bloody murder.

When slave trading proved impractical because so many natives died in

captivity, Columbus instituted an inhumane system of tribute in which natives across the island were required to deliver an unrealistic amount of gold every three months or face the amputation of a hand.

The second slave roundup was a military tactic aimed at averting widespread bloodshed, not a fundraising scheme. When the tactic failed and Columbus won the ensuing war with the natives, he exacted tribute from the tribes that were aligned against him.

Columbus required gold only from those who had access to it, and he halved the requirement when it proved excessive. Las Casas considered the system itself unfair, but deemed the punishment for those who didn't meet their quotas "moderate." The severing of hands that modern critics ballyhoo didn't occur until well after Columbus was removed from governorship.

When the tribute system broke down, to generate revenue, Columbus

instituted encomiendas, in which tracts of land and the natives living on them were given as property to colonists.

The Spanish instituted this system after Columbus' tenure as governor. A precursor of the system was forced upon Columbus by the insurrectionists during his third stay, just as the system was forced upon the natives down the road. He eliminated the tribute system in exchange for cooperation from chiefs who were affected, and he did everything in his power to shield them from the effects of it.

Columbus provided young girls as sex slaves to his men.

That falsehood has its origins in the following quote: "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 are now in demand." It appears in a letter that Columbus wrote to a friend of the queen while he was being shipped to Spain in chains to stand trial. Much of the letter was devoted to condemning the misdeeds committed

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by the insurrectionists, including that particularly heinous one.

Columbus abused his own men.

Columbus ran a tight ship, even on land, and especially when resources were scarce, winning himself few friends among the men who served beneath him. He was particularly brutal with the insurrectionists as he tried to gain control of the island during his third stay, though las Casas characterized his measures as warranted under the circumstances.

But ordering a man hanged for stealing bread or having a woman stripped, placed on the back of a donkey and whipped for claiming to be pregnant? If the accusation is outlandish, count on it coming from the “testimonies” collected by Francisco de Bobadilla. He was the monster who sent Columbus to Spain in chains, succeeded him as governor and allowed his men to systematically abuse the natives until he was replaced by someone even more monstrous.

Columbus engaged in genocide and other high crimes against the natives.

Critics have long tried to blame Columbus for the gross abuses that took place during and after his tenure, but every single one of the acts they point to was carried out against his expressed commands and/or outside of his control. The previous article contains countless examples.

The worst of those misdeeds are splattered across the pages of Zinn’s book in an ellipses-riddled gorefest that includes stabbings, beheadings, mutilation, rapes, forced labor and wonton destruction that led to suicide, infanticide, starvation and widespread death.

In the middle of all that, Zinn slyly plunks a quote by las Casas that gives the impression Columbus turned a blind eye to those abuses. But all of them were committed either by the insurrectionists during Columbus’ third stay or by his successors after he was removed as governor.

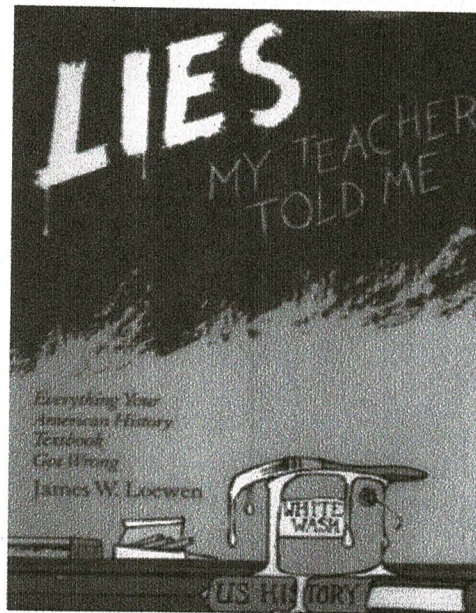
Columbus paved the way for the calamities that followed.

While many modern detractors falsely attribute to Columbus the crimes perpetrated by his successors, more respectable historians like las Casas and

Morison contend that he opened the door to them.

But the measures Columbus took to bring order to an island torn apart by his underlings bear no resemblance to the atrocities committed under the stewardships of Roldán, Bobadilla and Ovando.

It’s absurd to contend that the monsters who later decimated the native population were following Columbus’ lead, as though they were children mindlessly modeling the bad behavior of a parent. It’s much more reasonable to contend that their reign of terror would have commenced on Oct. 12, 1492, had they been in charge from the start.



While Columbus was searching Hispaniola for gold early in his second stay — when he was supposedly intent on enslaving the entire island — he paused before the hut of tribal chief to seek his blessings to pass through his village.

By stark contrast, this is what Spaniards were instructed to read aloud — in Spanish — whenever they first encountered native populations during their conquest of the rest of South and Central America.

“I implore you to recognize the Church as a lady and in the name of the Pope take the King as lord of this land and obey his mandates. If you do not do it, I will enter powerfully against you all. I will make war everywhere and every way I can. I will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and his majesty. I will take your women and children and make them slaves. ... The death and injuries you receive from here

on will be your own fault and not that of his majesty nor of the gentleman that accompany me.”

However imperfect his stewardship was, Columbus served as a storm wall against the atrocities spawned by this mentality. Ultimately, his legacy should be viewed in that light.

That point was aptly illuminated in 1828 in the following passage from “A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus,” a biography by early American author and historian Washington Irving.

“His conduct as a discoverer was characterized by the grandeur of his views, and the magnanimity of his spirit. Instead of scouring the newly found countries, like a grasping adventurer eager only for immediate gain, as was too generally the case with contemporary discoverers, he sought to ascertain their soil and productions, their rivers and harbours. He was desirous of colonizing and cultivating them, of conciliating and civilizing the natives, of building cities, introducing the useful arts, subjecting everything to the control of law, order and religion, and thus of founding regular and prosperous empires. In this glorious plan, he was constantly defeated by the dissolute rabble which he was doomed to command; with whom all law was tyranny, and order restraint. They interrupted all useful works by their seditions, provoked the peaceful Indians to hostility, and after they had thus pulled misery and warfare upon their own heads, and overwhelmed Columbus with the ruins of the edifice he was building, they charged him with being the cause of the confusion. Well would it have been for Spain, had her discoverers who followed in the track of Columbus possessed his sound policy and liberal views. What dark pages would have been spared in her colonial history! The new world, in such case, would have been settled by peaceful colonists, and civilized by enlightened legislators, instead of being overrun by desperate adventurers, and desolated by avaricious conquerors.”

Setting aside the antiquated notion that the native populations needed civilizing, that portrait of Columbus is what we should be fighting with all our might to bring to the attention of a misinformed American public.