

The enigma of christopher columbus

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Hero or thief? Icon or villain? Misunderstood in many respects, revolutionary Italian explorer Christopher Columbus was a man of many titles, riddled with inaccurate myths and discrepancies. He was not the convivial man that donned a funny hat and feasted with Native Americans as popularized by coloring books, but he was also not the image so in vogue today of a vicious tyrant that only contributed negatively to society. Throughout the centuries, historians' views on Columbus have shifted and evolved as new information has been acquired. Nevertheless, the fact that Christopher Columbus reshaped the world and altered America's history forever is undeniable. In the fifteenth century, depending on one's perspective, Columbus was a resourceful and dedicated explorer.

When news first spread of his successful voyage to the Americas, European explorers were astonished by his remarkable feat and were inspired to embark on their own expeditions. Thus, Columbus served as the impetus of the age of discovery and imperialism. Although Columbus was not the first European to reach the Western Hemisphere, he was the first to settle permanently; consequently, world trade routes and people's daily lives were changed irrevocably. The Columbian exchange consisted of the widespread trade of food, plants, animals, as well as, more ironically, religion and diseases. As an indirect result of Columbus's exploration, Europeans experienced corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and many other goods for the first time. In exchange, Americans received rice, coffee, horses, cattle, and pigs, along with the unwelcome smallpox, measles, and influenza.

In the perspective of some of the natives, Columbus was an outsider who encroached on their resources and land. He was also accused of using

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barbaric acts of torture in his government and causing the deaths of many natives from the myriad of diseases brought overseas. Fifty-six years after Columbus landed, the population of the native Taino of Hispaniola decreased from approximately three hundred thousand to less than five hundred, largely due to the smallpox epidemic. Through the rise of foreign conquest, establishment of world trade, and exploitation of natives, Columbus increased interactions between societies and brought the world closer together. Although not celebrated substantially during the colonial period, by the 19th century, Columbus was glorified by many historians and artists who rediscovered and commemorated the explorer as a national symbol. Historians such as Washington Irving, George Bancroft, and William Prescott created romantic images of Columbus's travels, falsely claiming that he introduced a superior culture to the uncivilized natives in a relatively unsettled land.

In addition, a large number of cities in the United States were renamed after Columbus during the 1800s, most notably those of Georgia, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Ohio. A plethora of other institutions, including schools, libraries, universities, and sport teams, also honored the explorer by bearing his name. Images of Columbus were plastered on various monuments and art and were even used as official icons by numerous organizations. The sheer breadth of dedication to Columbus during the 19th century demonstrates Americans' profound desire for a national hero. The idealistic version of Columbus, both altruistic and valiant, was irresistible to many and satiated their thirst for a beloved icon.

However, not all Americans idolized the famous explorer. For example, groups such as Protestants who disregarded Columbus's Catholicism disagreed upon the use of Columbus as a national symbol. These more negative views of Columbus gained prevalence within the next two centuries. In modern society, the opposing attitudes toward honoring Columbus sharply contrast with the intensely reverent attitudes toward the explorer during the 19th century. Over five hundred years after Columbus first set sail to the Americas, he has been called out for his mistreatment of Native Americans and even accused of genocide.

Historians have exposed more accounts of Columbus's use of Indian slaves, greedy quests for gold, and cruel treatment towards natives. However, they have also noted his impressive accomplishments in navigation, given his resources at the time. His primitive ships and lack of modern technology did not hinder his determination to travel to new lands and enter a territory that many found too daunting and unfamiliar to explore. The achievements of Columbus were indubitably remarkable, but his resolve and fearlessness were even more impressive. This idea is what captures the essence of the persevering American spirit and truly makes Christopher Columbus an enduring inspiration. Although controversial and heavily discussed, his life, his story, and his work have had a tremendous impact on American history and continue to influence our society today.

With the ample resources and technology we have now, the ideas of breaking new boundaries and achieving great victories seem more conceivable when juxtaposed to the scant resources on which Columbus was able to manage. On Columbus Day, Americans do not honor a man who

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discovered that the earth is round or who is the reason for the deaths of thousands of natives. Instead, they honor a fearless adventurer who stands for the courage and drive of our nation's heart.