

## Regarding the Zinn Education Project

This project is absolutely horrendous and absolutely wrong. It is clear that Zinn, Bigelow, and the contributors to *Rethinking Columbus* know little about Columbus, have not read his diary, letters, memos or they could not be saying the things they do. Also no reference is given for their quotations..

The project at Jefferson High School inspired by his work, was beyond horrendous. The students' actions were nothing at all like Columbus's meetings with the natives. I quote from his diary, October 11 as they approached land and saw a number of natives : I, in order that they would be friendly to us because I recognize that they were people who would be better freed [from error] and converted to our Holy Faith by love than by force to some I gave red caps, and glass beads .. In which they took so much pleasure and became so much our friends that it was a marvel. (Diario, 1989,p.65) He continued to marvel at the beauty of the place and the friendliness of the natives.

What is also missing in both reports is the wider context, ie: what Columbus thought he was doing. His whole project was to sail West to meet the Grand Khan of Cathay [China] to set up a trading post. There was absolutely no intention of enslaving people of the greatest empire in the world. The gold/money he expected to obtain from trading was to be used to finance a crusade to take Jerusalem back from the Muslims before the end of the world. It was a very apocalyptic time the Black Death had taken between 25-50 million lives and there were still outbreaks of it. Then, two years after Columbus was born, Constantinople fell to the Muslims. Not only did this cut off the overland trade route to the East established by Marco Polo. This was especially hard on the Genoese since they had a large trading post there. At the same time, it also cut off the pilgrimage route to Jerusalem. As a boy, Columbus had witnessed a number of ships leaving from Genoa taking pilgrims to Jerusalem. Christians believed that Jerusalem had to be in Christian hands so Christ could come again and save all believers. Columbus had been collecting passages from the Bible and other religious works fortelling the end and later when he had time he gathered them together into what is know as his *Libro de la profecias* - Book of Prophecies and had figured out how many years were left. So he felt his voyage was urgent. He also continually asked Queen Isabella to send priests to instruct and baptize the natives so they would be saved. Baptized people could not be enslaved.

On the same day (and same page of his diary) he also said that he would take possession of the said island for the king and for the queen. But at that time taking possession was not what it has been interpreted as but instead was a way to tell other European nations to keep off -- it was Spain's to trade with. (Patricia Seed, 1995). It was Pope Alexander VI who on May 3 and 4, 1493 issued a papal bull that divided the world down the Atlantic ocean giving the eastern part to Portugal for trade and the western to the Spanish. Shortly thereafter, however, he added an addendum stipulating that the Spanish sovereigns could freely take corporal possession of the said islands and countries and to hold them forever. Oddly, no one holds the Pope accountable.

The night Columbus and his men first landed at Hispaniola, the Santa Maria went aground.

Clearly he would have to return to Spain in order to get more ships to rescue the men he had to leave behind. When he left, he took six of the natives with him more wanted to go. All were baptized at court, thus could not be enslaved. Two remained at the court, another, son of a chief, became Columbus's godson and loyal interpreter throughout his other voyages. The others wished to return home but two died at sea. Before he left, Columbus gave strict written orders (I have seen them) that those left behind should honor chief Guacanagari, do no harm to the natives, and not go marauding and raping among other groups. When he returned, November 28, 1493, all of his men were dead. He did not blame Guacanagari but learned, as he thought, that the men had begun to fight among themselves and then gone on raiding parties to the area belonging to another chief, Caonabo who, in turn, came and killed them. Columbus and Guacanagari remained friends throughout. Columbus had always been partial to the Franciscans and after this disaster, he became a lay Franciscan monk and is said to have worn their robes for the rest of his life. Perhaps this was in penance not only for the death of his men, several of whom were close friends, but also for the natives they had killed. Columbus the monk! Whoever heard of this? In other words the writers connected with the Zinn project totally ignore his serious religiousness and the religious motivation for the voyages.

While it is true that some of the natives were sent to Spain as slaves this was surely not a chief motive. Some of them were from the group known as Caribs who were said to be cannibals and warlike and had attacked the natives Columbus was friendly with. Papal policy permitted enslavement of those captured in a just war, those who resisted Christianisation, or those who went against the law of nature by committing sodomy and/or cannibalism. The Caribs fit all three descriptions. On one occasion Columbus returned to their homes some of Guacanagari's people whom the Caribs had enslaved. But also, while Columbus was continually off sailing to find the Grand Khan, the men he left in charge (Ovando Bobadilla, Margarit, Roldan and Hojeda) did round up some of the natives and these were sent back as slaves. Had they been released it is likely they would have attacked the tiny colony. But Columbus was furious with his men; they responded by capturing Columbus and sending him back to Spain in chains while they continued their rapaciousness.

Later, on another voyage, Columbus and his twelve year old son Ferdinand were marooned on Jamaica with 116 men. Columbus kept the men on board to prevent their rapaciousness. Indeed, young Ferdinand wrote: Our people being by nature disrespectful, no punishment or order could have stopped them from running about the country and into the Indians' huts to steal what they found and commit outrages on their wives and children. The natives were grateful, he said, and thus Columbus was able to negotiate with them for food.

In addition, the comment in Rethinking Columbus, that most of us are living on stolen land is ridiculous. Columbus never set foot on the land we know as America.

Finally, it should be noted that Bartholomew de las Casas who is sometimes referred to as the defender of the Indians, had slaves as a youth and in the new world where he owned two

encomiendas run by slaves. He only began to change his mind about these slaves long after Columbus's death but then suggested we import blacks instead! Columbus never had a slave.

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Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem