

COMPARING PRIMARY SOURCES

On Celebrating Columbus Day

Columbus Day is celebrated as a holiday in most of the United States. The 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the Americas inspired a spirited national debate on whether this event is worthy of celebration.

As you read the differing points of view on honoring Christopher Columbus, consider your position on this controversial issue.

A NATIVE AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE

David Archambault, a Lakota, is president of the American Indian College Fund.

During this quincentenary of Columbus's voyage, attention is once again focused on what the white man brought to this land and on Columbus himself. This man who made such a remarkable journey has become the stuff of legend as well as history. He is admired and detested, exalted and condemned. Columbus Day will surely never be a favorite holiday among Indians, but we should consider Columbus for what he was—not for what we may wish he had been.

Columbus was a skilled and courageous mariner who led his ships across uncharted waters. He found land and people unknown to Europeans. He discovered a sea route between Europe and America. . . .

Columbus came here, however, not to trade, but to conquer; he came to enrich himself and enslave his captives. His mission, in the words of his royal charter, was to "discover and acquire" all new lands as well as "pearls, precious stones, gold, silver," and other valuables. He would write back to Spain, "From here, in the name of the Blessed Trinity, we can send all the slaves that can be sold."

Columbus was a man of his time. He felt inspired by his God, empowered by his monarch, and reassured by the rightness of his cause. He was sailing, as the saying had it, for "God, glory, and gold." If he had objected to enslaving others and taking their lands, someone else may have gotten that royal charter. To me, Columbus is neither hero nor villain, but rather a symbol of a world forevermore transformed. His culture and mine have never fully made peace.

A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

Donald J. Senese is a former Assistant Secretary of Education and a charter member of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission.

This year we are celebrating the quincentennial of the founding, discovery, or encounter with the American continent, an event of great historical, cultural, and political significance. The mere fact that I used other terms beyond the common word "discovery" is an indication of a problem we face in celebrating this event.

Many of us have spent many years looking forward to this great occasion which created one of the truly great revolutions in world society and history.

We can truly say that when Columbus "sailed the ocean blue in 1492" the result of his adventure created such a revolution, an earthquake in the scale of historical events, that the world has never been the same again. . . .

We can concede that in the process of discovery, conquest, and eventually assimilation, certain injustices occurred. Yet, our concession on this point must not obscure the overall picture of what happened when two distinct societies came into contact. The overall picture is much more positive than the critics prefer to paint it. . . .

In considering whether Columbus was a hero or villain, we must look at the broader picture. We must put aside narrow ideological considerations to view the greater concept of how this remarkable person changed the world by—and you can choose your own term—his "discovery," or "encounter," or "exchange." Whichever one you select, it does not diminish the remarkable achievements of Christopher Columbus and a fair assessment which leaves him as a hero not only for his times but our times as well.