

October 12 is

# Columbus Day

in the United States of America.

When asked to describe Christopher Columbus,  
most people generally say two things:

1

He was a brave explorer who, despite terrible odds,  
sailed across the Atlantic and proved that the  
earth was round.



2

He was a tireless, courageous hero  
who discovered the New World.



These are the ideas that comprise Columbus's legacy.

I am here to dispel those ideas

and, with as much candor as I can muster,  
introduce a few of my own.

In 1491...

no one thought the earth was flat.

The notion that in pre-Columbian times everyone thought the earth was flat is a myth conjured up in the 18th century. Misguided historians started parroting other misguided historians which trickled down to schoolteachers, and the idea stuck.

Columbus knew the earth was round,  
the Queen of Spain knew the earth was round,  
and pretty much anyone with an education knew the earth was round --  
the Ancient Greeks had proven it 2,000 years  
before Columbus was even born.

In 1492...

Columbus sailed the ocean blue  
and discovered a new world.





Glossing over the fact that the natives living in the New World got there 14,000 years before Columbus "discovered" it,

**Leif Ericson** technically found the New World 500 years before Columbus ever set sail. Although Columbus's arrival did mark the beginning of a new era, semantically speaking he didn't discover the Americas.

I am not here to argue semantics, however. I am here to argue for Columbus's *true* legacy -- a legacy that I believe can be defined by detailing what transpired between Columbus and the Lucayan Natives who occupied what is currently known as the Bahamas.

On 1493...

Columbus's initial voyage to the New World was revelatory but not particularly fruitful. Columbus knew he'd stumbled onto something big, but he remained myopically focused on gold rather than the discovery of a new landmass. This myopia was partially fueled by the Natives themselves, for they wore gold jewelry that Columbus immediately took note of in his journal, and the source of that gold became his primary objective from then on out.

A better trade route to Asia be damned --

Columbus wanted **cheddar**.

This set the precedent for the remainder of Columbus's interactions with the native peoples. On the 1492 voyage, Columbus described

them as healthy, generous, hospitable people. When the *Santa Maria* was shipwrecked, the Lucayan Natives worked for hours to rescue the ship, saving the crew and cargo.

When Columbus returned home, he took twenty-five Lucayan Natives with him. Of those twenty-five, seven survived the Voyage.



Where there was kindness in the natives, Columbus saw weakness, and he concluded his 1492 journal entry with this:

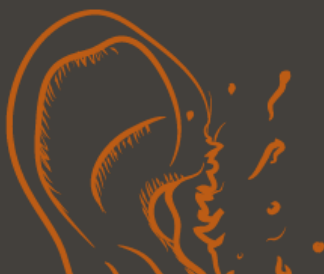
“I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men and govern them as I pleased.”

## Upon returning to Spain,

Columbus sold the queen on the idea of a new world saturated in wealth and prosperity beyond her wildest dreams. She in turn outfitted him with seventeen ships, 1,500 men, and an arsenal of swords, crossbows, and cannons.

So, Columbus returned to the New World -- this time armed to the teeth. Upon his arrival, he demanded that the Lucayan people give his men food and gold, and allow them to have sex with their women.

When the Lucayans refused, Columbus responded by ordering that their ears and noses be cut off, so that the now disfigured offenders





could return to their villages and serve as a warning to others.

Eventually, the natives rebelled. Columbus saw this as a perfect excuse to go to war, and with heavily armed troops and advanced weaponry, it wound up being a very short war: the natives were quickly slaughtered, having only spears, rocks, and other primitive tools to fight with.

There are eyewitness accounts of fallen Lucayan warriors being fed to hunting dogs while they were still alive, screaming and wailing in agony as the dogs feasted on their limbs and entrails.

Despite quelling the rebellion, Columbus *still* didn't have the gold he wanted. Not wanting to return home empty-handed, Columbus rounded up 500 Lucayan natives, chained them below the decks of his ships, and returned them to Spain so they could be sold as slaves.

Of those, 300 survived the voyage.



Another 500 natives were enslaved and kept in the New World. They were forced to feed, care for, and even carry Columbus's men around on their backs. This resulted in many Lucayans fleeing into the mountains to escape enslavement.

Columbus's men took to hunting these refugees down for sport and, after murdering them,

## using their bodies as dog food.



Despite all these awful shenanigans, Columbus *still* didn't have enough gold, so he set up a tribute system whereby natives who brought him gold would receive a token to wear around their necks. This token gave them a sort of "get out of jail free" card for a few months, so they wouldn't be required to produce gold until the token expired. Any native without a token who was caught not meeting their gold quota was punished.



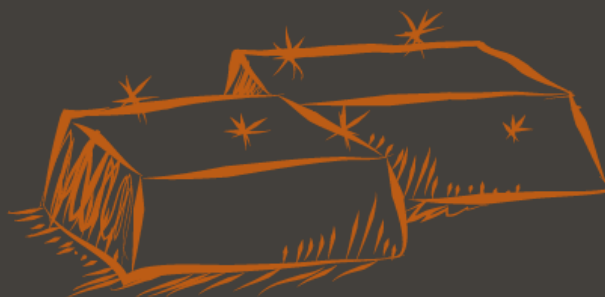
### The punishment?

Instead of wearing a token around their neck, Columbus's men would cut off the natives' hands and force them to wear those instead.



### Awful, yes?

It worked though, and by using this tribute system Columbus finally got his cheddar.



## His greed mildly satiated,

Columbus began rewarding his lieutenants with sex slaves -- particularly young girls who had been forced into sexual slavery. In a letter to a friend, Columbus remarked upon how girls between the ages of nine and ten could be used as currency:

“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.”

-Christopher Columbus, 1500

And, in addition to smallpox and other diseases which wiped out huge segments of the native population, the sudden influx of forced labor in the New World resulted in a mass imbalance in the ecology and workforce of the Native peoples.

It's estimated that over the next fifty years, the final death toll from post-Columbian disease and starvation was in the range of 3-5 million people.

Columbus's gold exports also resulted in the paralysis of the gold economy of the Gold Coast in Africa. This led to the rise of African slaves as the dominant commodity in that region, which inadvertently makes Columbus the father of the transatlantic slave trade.



The point I'm trying to drive home is this:

# Christopher Columbus was awful.



He discovered the New World much like a meteorite discovered the dinosaurs.

And good ol' Chris Columbus,  
sex slaver, mass murderer, and champion of sociopathic imperialism,

## HAS HIS OWN FEDERAL HOLIDAY.

This is an honor shared by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.

### I repeat:

THE FATHER OF THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE  
TRADE IS HONORED ON THE SAME LEVEL AS  
ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

*But Columbus Day is an American tradition!*

-Some ignorant, white man from Bumretch, Nebraska.

Columbus Day was established in the 1930's by a male-only Catholic organization known as the Knights of Columbus. They wanted a male,



Catholic role model their kids could look up to, so they pressured  
Roosevelt into making it a federal holiday.

Columbus Day is not an American tradition.  
It's a recent mistake.

# Bartolomé.

If you look at anyone closely enough, you'll always find dirt.

In the case of Columbus, I did not simply find dirt.

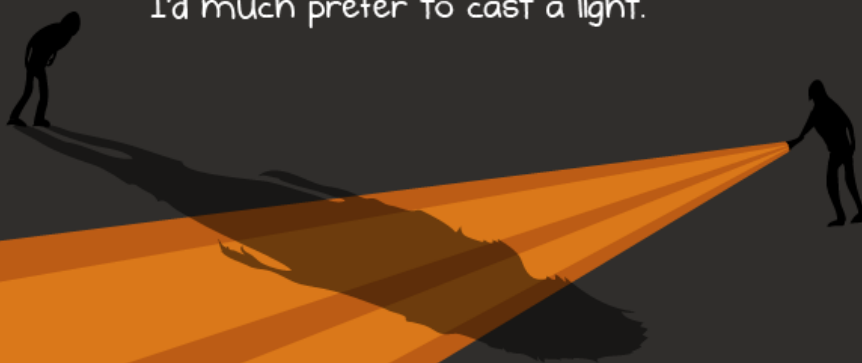
I found a soiled, wretched horror show of a human being.

That being said, it's incredibly easy to *defile* a historical figure.

I find it much harder and much more rewarding to *deify* one.

History is full of terrible people and terrible things, so instead of casting a shadow where there is already darkness,

I'd much prefer to cast a light.



And I'd like to conclude this essay by casting that light on

# Bartolomé de las Casas.

Bartolomé de las Casas started out a lot like Columbus.

He was a wealthy adventurer who traveled to the New World, where he owned a large plantation with many slaves.

Unlike Columbus, however, de las Casas underwent a radical transformation in his life. After witnessing the violent atrocities committed against the Natives, he gave up his land, freed his slaves, became a priest, and spent the rest of his life fighting the brutal colonization of the New World.

The only way he could make peace with the horrors he witnessed was to try and help as many people as possible.

His stand against the cruelty and imperialism of the Spanish Crown eventually earned him the title of "Defender of the Indians."

and Bartolomé de las Casas spent the next 50 years fighting for their equality.

He is considered to be one of the first advocates for universal human rights.

Like most people,  
I don't really celebrate Columbus Day.

I regard it like most other federal holidays:  
with a kind of hazy, lukewarm indifference.

This year, however, I intend to celebrate it,  
but not in honor of Christopher Columbus.




I intend to honor Bartolomé de las Casas,  
and proclaim Columbus Day to hereby be known as:

**Bartolomé Day.**

I realize Bartolomé is his first name,  
but *bart-oh-low-may-day* rolls off the tongue quite nicely

Because when I consider Bartolomé de las Casas,  
both the things he did and the person he was, I think:  
now *this* is a man whom children should learn about in school.

Christopher Columbus left his home and found a new world.  
Bartolomé de las Casas left his home and found his humanity.



And so,  
in the name of those who cast **light** where there is darkness,  
and in the name of those who are  
seeking, finding, or simply remembering  
their humanity,

I say to you,  
my dear reader:

Happy Bartolomé Day.

-The Oatmeal

#### Sources:

All of the information in this essay came from [A People's History of the United States](#), by Howard Zinn, and [Lies My Teacher Told Me](#), by James W. Loewen, both of which uses primary sources such as eyewitness accounts, journal entries, and letters from Christopher Columbus himself.