

# Was Columbus an Imperialist? - A debate from *Taking Sides*

**Yes:** Kirkpatrick Sale, from *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1990)

**No:** Robert Royal, from *1492 and All That: Political Manipulations of History* (Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992)

## Issue Summary:

**Yes:** Defending the “Yes” position is historian and author, Kirkpatrick Sale, a contributing editor of *The Nation*, who characterizes Christopher Columbus as an imperialist who was determined to conquer both the land and the people he encountered during his first voyage to the Americas in 1492.

**No:** Robert Royal, vice president for research at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, argues that the answer to the question is NO. Royal objects to Columbus’s modern-day critics, and insists that Columbus should be admired for his courage, his willingness to take a risk, and his success in advancing knowledge about other parts of the world.

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## Yes: Kirkpatrick Sale

Columbus named everything (though he clearly knew they *already* had names because he frequently used the original names before he gave them a new name of his choosing (Columbus named: San Salvador, Santa Maria de la Concepcion, Isabela, Ferdinandina, Juana and la Ysla Espanola—as well as sixty-two other names on the geography of the islands.)

Sale says this is proof of his “taking possession” of these places—that he picked up the pace as he went along...and that it was only his naming that he regarded as legitimate—when Martin Alonso Pinzon named a river after himself, Columbus quickly renamed it Rio de Gracia instead.

Sale points out that Columbus’ journal says: “...it was my wish to bypass no island without taking possession” (October 15) and that “in all regions [I] always left a cross standing” (November 16) as a mark of Christian dominance.

Sale contends that there even seem to have been certain *procedures for claiming lands* established by the King and Queen (such as “the administering of the oath and the performing of the rites prescribed in such cases”) , and there was a secretary of the fleet sent along on the voyage whose explicit job was to witness and record these events.

Sale argues that the Spanish monarchs *assumed* that they were free to claim the lands even though they must have realized that these would be territories already claimed by the people living there, and even though they should have considered it a real possibility that someone in power in those lands--they thought they were headed out to claim lands in China—so they should have expected resistance from perhaps the great and powerful Ghengis Khan—whom they knew ruled in the region.

Sale says it's even more amazing that this claiming lands was the Spanish policy—given that Spain would never have imagined or tolerated the *reverse* situation (three small boats of the Taino Indians showing up on a European shore and claiming it in the name of *their* Gods and leaders.)

He also points out that Spain would **never** have presumed to try to claim sovereignty in *other* places (for example, say in some part of *North Africa or the Middle East*) – because they *knew* and expected that they would have faced severe, if not fatal consequences if they had even tried.)

Sale also criticizes Columbus for immediately assuming the inferiority of the natives, partly because they were naked, and especially because they seemed to Columbus to be so technologically backward—no iron, no understanding of Spanish weapons like a sword, and having very few weapons of their own.

Sale says Columbus's sense of superiority was part of what enabled him to conclude so quickly that they'd make "good servants," be easily converted to Christianity (he didn't think they had any "religion"), and that he would take some captive.

Sale doesn't know if Columbus intended slavery from the outset, but it's clear that it became a firmer and firmer part of his policy as time went on—he sent his crew ashore at one point to kidnap "seven head of women, young ones and adults, and three small children."

Sale then critiques some of Columbus's assumptions—the Taino weren't backward for not being dressed—it was what the climate warranted—whereas Columbus's men, clothed head to foot in 80 degree temps, were clearly the less sophisticated ones.

The Taino were exceedingly well adapted to their environs. They used body paint as a sunscreen. Their technologies were also perfect for the setting (several elements of which the European invaders quickly adopted themselves—such as large one-piece fire-burned canoes—some capable of carrying 150 passengers, and hammocks.

The average Taino houses were cleaner and more spacious than the typically crowded and disgusting hovels of the south European peasantry, and were remarkably resistant to hurricanes. Their artifacts and jewelry were made of renewable materials (coral, shell, bone, cotton, baskets, wood carvings, and pottery.)

Most striking was that the Taino had an agricultural system perfectly tailored to the island climate, based on *conucos* (mounds planted with yucca, sweet potato, squashes, and beans) which all grew together in a multicrop harmony in a way that resisted erosion, and featured some plants that produced minerals that replenished the soil, and some that provided the necessary shade and moisture for others. This was an exceptionally well balanced and protective form of land use that yielded produce far surpassing anything the Europeans knew how to get. It gave a continuous yearlong harvest, and required very little labor (2-3 hours a week.) The Taino lived an idyllic life: well fed, well housed, and without poverty or serious disease. They were a people who enjoyed lots of leisure time

Their government was just as harmonious. Villages were small (10-15 families) that were autonomous but with loose ties to neighbors—governed by a Kaseke (Caique in Spanish), an arbiter who was supported by advisors and elders. Violence was so rare that there is no evidence of war or tribal combats—Sale says Las Casas comments that no Spaniard ever saw two Tainos fighting. Thus, their outstanding cultural achievement seems

to have been friendliness, warmth, openness, and generosity. (Columbus wrote: “They are the best people in the world, and above all the gentlest,” (December 16) Read further quotes in pink—Columbus on the Taino.

Sale says that the Europeans never really could see past their nakedness to appreciate the fact that they fit into their surroundings with skill and comfort. Instead, Columbus interpreted their openness to mean that the Taino were naïve—like children--who didn't know any more how to bargain and cheat, than they did how to dress themselves.

As a result, Sale says, Columbus immediately began to envision the ease with which forts could be built (read third day entry—October 14). Later exploration led to a more complete vision of a colonial outpost set up for Spanish trade and merchants (read November entries about military sites) Sale says maybe Columbus only originally planned on a fortified trading post like the Portuguese had built in Africa at El Mina, but that if so, his vision quickly grew from trading post to a colonial settlement that would be an outpost for an expanding Spanish empire—where Spaniards would settle and prosper by living off the labor of the natives.

Sale quotes Columbus “and your highness will command a city and fortress to be built in these parts, and these lands converted; and I assure Your Highnesses that it seems to me that there could never be under the sun [lands] superior in fertility, in mildness of cold and heat, in abundance of good healthy water... So may it please God that Your Highnesses will send here, or that there will come learned men, and they will see the truth of all.” (read rest of quote) This attitude, says Sale, was the birth of European colonialism.

Columbus completely believed that it was fine to see the Taino as servants to the Spanish “They are fit to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and do everything else that may be needed”

It was the Europeans who really missed an opportunity to learn something about regeneration and social openness, about generosity and abundance, and harmony with the natural world.

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**No:** Robert Royal

Royal opens with quote from Columbus himself (4<sup>th</sup> voyage—he's under fire from critics) in which he's defending himself angrily—basically a: *those who weren't there—shouldn't criticize because they don't understand, weren't there, and couldn't do as well themselves...* message.

This is Royal's basic point too, that its easy for those not there to say how it should have been done. He also says that Columbus's errors as a leader rightly made him a target for critics. Royal acknowledges that Columbus's failures as a leader brought on atrocities on the natives—harsh punishments and executions—of Spaniards as well as Tainos.

But Royal says, we must not give in to the temptation to project our modern categories about right and wrong onto the past---(even though it's especially tempting knowing what we know now about what happened to the indigenous peoples later—ie. Virtual extinction in many cases—because that would be to give too much large scale meaning to things that are really only small scale events. For example, he says: When Columbus talks about how easy it would be to subdue the natives, or expresses impatience with his failure to find the high and rich civilization of Asia, many historians make the mistake of reading these attitudes as a combination of careless imperialism and greed—or even as a symbol of what was to follow.

But Royal argues that it's not that simple.

The Spanish record after Columbus is not all that bad Royal says—especially in terms of its gradual expanding of native rights.

Columbus himself was a mixed bag, says Royal, as the Las Casas account points out. Royal says Bartolome de Las Casas (an eyewitness and defender of the Indians) compares Columbus to Columbus's brother Bartolome, who was a strong leader, but not, according to Las Casas, as sweet and benign as Columbus.

Even Las Casas finds Columbus at fault in the end says Royal. Las Casas says both brothers began to mistakenly occupy the land and exact tribute [from the Taino] owing to “the most culpable ignorance, which has no excuse, of natural and divine law.” Royal says Las Casas has a hard time making sense of Columbus's contradictions too---that he was both “noble” of bearing and having “gentle manners”, while at the same time ignorant of the law. Las Casas says Columbus mistakenly assumed that the way to achieve his desires was to instill fear in the Taino—serving only to make the name Christian synonymous with terror—and this is contrary to the Christian God's law on converting infidels.

Royal criticizes Las Casas saying his accounts are of later treatment, and don't reflect the early gentleness and kindness of Columbus. He argues that conflicts with the natives and factional fighting among the Spaniards drove “The Admiral” to worse measures including enslavement.

Royal argues that Columbus was in an unprecedented circumstance (no one had ever been in such a situation before from whom Columbus could take his cue.) Therefore, we should not judge him according to the same standard we'd apply to a modern-day trained anthropologist.

Columbus had no way to understand says Royal that he was about to encounter a clash of different cultural values. Yet Royal gives Columbus credit for doing fairly well at first. Royal quotes a modern Italian anthropologist who says that the Europeans perception was that the natives would give all of their best goods for a mere trifle in exchange. Columbus himself, according to the anthropologist, restricted the trade of cotton to prevent grave injustices (his men were taking lots and lots of cotton and giving very little in return.) Instead, Columbus prohibited anyone from taking cotton, except that which he reserved entirely for the King of Spain.

Royal says, if we're going to criticize him for all of the inequalities that later came, we should at least give him credit for his initial attempt to find a fair path through the incredibly confusing mess of cultural differences. Even though he failed and permitted much worse practices than unequal trade, Royal claims that Columbus had an authentic concern for justice during the first contacts.

Royal also points out that despite the cultural gulf---“mutual affections and understanding” did at times appear. He cites the wreck of the Santa Maria on Haiti at Christmas 1492, and all the help that the Taino gave the Spanish. Columbus's log entries show, says Royal, that he views the event as a good thing.

Royal says it's not fair that historians always say that those log entries only show that Columbus was putting a good spin on a disaster so as to curry favor with the monarchs. Instead, Royal says, a marine historian (rather than all those “jaded” Columbus specialists) was in a position to take a fresh look at Columbus's log entries, and noticed that there seems to have been some genuine affection between the Indians and the Spaniards around

the Santa Maria grounding.

Royal also criticizes novelist Hans Koning for writing in the Washington Post about the Quincentenary in a way that attempts to revise history—but really only over-simplifies it by blaming everything on the Europeans in general, and Columbus in particular.

Royal takes on Koning's article *Teach the Truth About Columbus* point for point. First, he says: Columbus's awe in his log entries is not "fake"—yes he may want to convince the King and Queen of the value of the land, but he also found it beautiful, believing the Venezuelan coast so lovely that he claimed it to be the site of the original Garden of Eden.

Second, Royal says, not all of his relations with the Indians were bad. He cites a feast that the natives and Spaniards held after the rescue—The Chief gives Columbus a crown, Columbus gives him a cloak and boots, and large silver ring. Royal reports that Columbus and the Chief became so close that the Chief asked if he and his brother might return with Columbus to Spain. Royal also says that he left orders that the 39 men left behind "should avoid as they would death, annoying or tormenting the Indians, bearing in mind how much they owe these people."

Royal says this proves that one cannot, in light of this account, call the founding of the fort and settlement at La Navidad instances of simple arrogance and imperialism. The bond between Columbus and the Chief was real. It lasted even after full-scale war between some Spaniards and the Indians during Columbus's second voyage. Thus, Royal says, even though horrible things happened later---the early interaction is much richer and more diverse than most people—who are blinded by the contemporary arguments about Columbus—ever have the chance to realize.

Royal says most of the uproar around Columbus basically revolves around three of his actions:

- a. Immediate kidnap of some Tainos on his first voyage for questioning and use as interpreters
- b. Columbus ordering exploratory missions after the destruction of La Navidad without setting up safeguards to restrain outrageously violent men on the missions, and then punishing the natives for objecting to the Spaniards living off the land, or for resisting the Spaniard's commands—and then shipping some of them home to be slaves with a poor excuse (cannibals)
- c. His impossible system of gold tribute that was harshly enforced.

Royal says these charges are true....and that we must not excuse Columbus by saying that he was only applying the best standards of his time. Nor should we say we can't judge the past—there are some universal principles that allow us to criticize improper force, enslavement, and exploitation whenever and wherever it occurs.

But, says Royal we should ask what led to the behavior, because Columbus was not by nature a brutal man like Cortes or others. The first sign of harshness, Royal claims, wasn't until the second voyage. Thus, he says, though Columbus did kidnap some Indians—two of them interpreters, he set one free immediately upon returning to Hispaniola during the second voyage, in hopes that the free Indian would tell the others of Spain's wonders and of Columbus's good intentions.

Secondly, Royal says Columbus and the monarchs always disagreed about slavery. And Columbus was demanding gold because he thought it was there, and that the Indians were just being lazy. Columbus's tax was only what all governments do.

Finally, Royal says, the Spaniard never intended genocide. The ready supply of workers was in their best interest. It was disease that soon wiped out whole tribes.

The bottom line is that Columbus was a bad leader who tried unsuccessfully to avoid conflicts by exploring and fluctuating between being too harsh and too indecisive.

In the end, Royal criticizes Sale for trying to define a man and a historical period with much "sharper boundaries" than is possible. He disagrees when Sale says "it doesn't matter if Columbus is a good man or not"... "what matters is that he brought over a culture centered on its own superiority," and that "the failings of the man were, and remain, the failings of the culture."

Royal says it does matter for the sake of historical justice, and an entire culture can't simply be tied to a single man. Royal says the argument about European superiority can take place quite well leaving Columbus out of it.