Columbus Essay Essay, Research Paper

Perhaps more than any other single figure in American History, Christopher Columbus sparks controversy. By some people, he is praised as a hero of courage and vision. Other people utterly despise Columbus as a villain of the first order who enslaved the natives. Somewhere in the mix of those divergent opinions exists the truth about the legacy of Christopher Columbus. Columbus was a man armed with the dream of reaching the East Indies by sailing West. Columbus possessed mixed motives. First, he wanted to bring the Christian Faith to the inhabitants of the Indies. He was described by his contemporaries as a pious and thoughtful man. These were the qualities which most impressed Queen Isabella. Second, and arguably of equal or greater importance as a motive, Columbus wanted a share in the wealth of any trade with the Indies in order to secure his and his family’s financial future. Doing better by doing good is certainly a familiar enough refrain in the opera of human history. Third, Columbus was ambitious. He demanded of the Crown that he be named “Viceroy of the Indies” and “Admiral of the Ocean Seas.” These were not titles attached to sinecures. Yet, Columbus’ talents were not in administration. Viceroy was a role beyond his abilities and that is where the trouble truly began. Legend says that Queen Isabella pawned her jewels to fund Columbus’ voyages. It is true that Isabella had some history of putting her gems out as collateral in times of dire necessity. However, the 1492 voyage was funded by back taxes owed the Crown taken in the form of two small ships and crews. The financing deal which the Spanish Crown worked out with Columbus called for him to repay the Crown for the expenses of mounting the voyages out of Columbus’ share of the proceeds from the resulting trade. At the time of the agreement, Columbus, his mind filled with images of the untold riches of the East, had no idea just to what extremes he would be forced in order to meet his obligations. Those obligations and the stresses involved should not be understated. Instead of finding a land of great wealth in the forms of carpets, familiar spices, and gold, Columbus was forced to deal with very little gold, strange plants, stranger animals, and uncooperative, to the point of homicidal, natives. Michael de Cuneo wrote a letter dated October 28, 1495 in which it is clear feelings in Spain existed that both Columbus’ adventures may have been a very expensive failure; and that the future livelihood of the colonists whom Columbus had brought with him on the second voyage depended on Columbus being able to show a profit. Cuneo wrote, “I am very much afraid that he will have to abandon everything.” Columbus’ own letter to the Spanish Crown dated July 7, 1503 acknowleges that Spanish sentiment, “When I discovered the

Indies, I said that they were the world’s wealthiest realm…But because not everything turned up at once, I was vilified.” Faced with the urgent need to show a profit, Columbus turned to the largest marketable resource that he could see- a resource which conquerors, regardless of their culture, have always utilized- human labor. It was an act of utter desperation when Columbus ordered the catching of natives to ship back to Spain as slaves. Michael de Cuneo wrote the most detailed account we have of the first islanders being taken as slaves in his October 1495 letter. Over one thousand six hundred islanders were captured. All but five hundred and fifty escaped. On February 17, 1495, ships laden with those five hundred and fifty natives, who were to be sold as slaves, departed the islands. Yet, by the time they had arrived in Spain, nearly two hundred had died and been unceremoniously buried at sea. Cuneo wrote, “…we reached Cadiz, in which place we disembarked all of the slaves, half of whom were sick. For your information, they are not working people and they very much fear cold, nor have they long life.” What is the truth about the legacy of Columbus? Was he a pious man of great vision? Was he a great sailor? Was he an ambitious man who found himself involved in a venture riddled with political overtones and impossible demands? Was he an incompetent administrator who made very costly mistakes? The truth is, Columbus was all of those things, and more. He was a man, like all men, jointly capable of great virtue and grave sin. List of Works Consulted. Traditional Publications Baron, Robert C. ed.Soul of America Documenting Our Past Vol.I 1492-1870. Golden, Colorado:North American Press, 1994. Davis, Kenneth C. Don’t Know Much About History: Everything You Need to Know About American History (But Never Learned). New York: Crown Publishing, 1990. Irving, Washington. Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus, abridged ed. London: John Murray, 1835. Kammen, Michael. Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Morison, Samuel E. The European Discovery of America: The Southern Voyages 1492-1616. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974. Morison, Samuel E. The Journals and Other Documents on the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus. New York: Heritage Press, 1963. Wilford, John Noble. The Mysterious History of Columbus: An Exploration of the Man, the Myth, the Legacy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992. Related Internet Sites Consulted Columbus Day. http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web.pages/holidays/Columbus.html Columbus Navigation Homepage by Keith Pickering http://www1.minn.net/ keithp/ 1492: An Ongoing Voyage. http://sunsite.unc.edu/expo/1492.exhibit/c-Columbus/columbus.html On the 500th Anniversary of Columbus’ “Discovery” of America by Ken Ficara and Robert J. Howe. http://www.panix.com/ ficara/writing/columbus.html