



Ten History Lessons

by Peter H. Gibbon

*Editor's Note: This piece is excerpted from NCHE member Peter Gibbon's presentation at the NCHE National Conference in St. Louis April 1-3, 2004. The theme of the conference was **Exploration in World History**. Peter takes up the case of the explorer Christopher Columbus and suggests ten lessons about history that teachers could examine in conjunction with Columbus.*

In the forty-second episode of *The Sopranos* - titled *Christopher* - Tony Soprano is trying to prevent members of the New Jersey Council of Indian Affairs from lying down in the path of the annual Columbus Day Parade and from burning Columbus in effigy. In the midst of Tony's controversy with the Council, his son A.J. sits at the kitchen table, doing his homework. A.J. opens his American history textbook—Howard Zinn's **A People's History of the United States**—and announces to his parents that Columbus was a slave trader and a killer. He quotes Zinn quoting Columbus: *They would make fine servants. With fifty men, we could subjugate them. And make them do whatever we want.*

Tony Soprano fulminates and says to his son: *He discovered America is what he did. He was a brave Italian explorer. And in this house Columbus is a hero. End of story!*

Mob bosses solve controversial questions of history by fiat. But teachers must persuade. I would like to offer ten history lessons about Christopher Columbus as an alternative to the triumphalism of Tony Soprano as well as to the revisionism of his son—an alternative that I hope will help educate contemporary students to the complexity of history without extinguishing their idealism.

Lesson One: Ignorance. There is much we do not know: when Columbus was born...how he was educated...his inner ideas and conflicts. History is based only upon documents and accounts that have survived; thus much of history is a mystery, and many of the questions we ask about the past must go unanswered.

Lesson Two: The Tension between Myth and Reality. In the absence of certainty, myths and legends accumulate, particularly when events are momentous and historical figures important. Behind a nation's greatest achievements have been these supposed superhuman leaders. Nations have always used myths and legends to unify and uplift themselves.

But in **Don Quixote**, Cervantes says, *Poets can sing of things, not as they were but as they ought to have been; whereas the historian must describe them not as they ought to have been but as they were without exaggerating or suppressing the truth in any particular.*

Like Cervantes, today's historians consider it their duty to cut away myths and legends, to expose truth, to present the way things were. Columbus did not believe the world to be flat, nor did Queen Isabella pawn her jewels. There is a constant tension between mythical history and realistic history.

Ten Lessons

1. Ignorance
2. The Tension between Myth and Reality
3. Great men and women are complex
4. Great men and women do not act alone
5. Columbus was extraordinary, his achievement revolutionary
6. Our view of historical figures is influenced by our times
7. Our view of history is also influenced by our position and status
8. Is there room for judgment in history?
9. Nonhuman factors play a role in history
10. History offers hope

(continued on page 5)

History Matters!





Ten History Lessons (continued from page 1)

In an age of reality, what are we to make of the bronze doors dedicated to Columbus that lead into the Capitol building and portray him as a peaceful conqueror? Or of John Vanderlyn's epic painting, *The Landing of Columbus*, which shows Columbus bringing Christianity to Indians? Americans built the Capitol in a proud, confident age. They intended it to be a shrine to progress and greatness. They agreed with Columbus' first biographer, Washington Irving, to illustrate the glory of his nation is one of the noblest offices of the historian.

But today we are more iconoclastic, less innocent, some would say more honest. And the representations of Columbus in the Capitol raise serious questions. Should mythical history be condemned? Do our national landmarks require cautionary notes? Should the goals of contemporary history be only to encourage critical inquiry? Is there any room for patriotism and character building?

Lesson Three: *Great men and women are complex.* Important figures in history are complex—a mixture of the admirable and the petty—and products, even prisoners, of their times. Columbus was brave, skillful, visionary, and devout. In many ways, he was admirable. He was also ambitious, eager for fame and money, and thus human. He had no misgivings about slavery, exploited the Indians he encountered, and by our standards was cruel. Columbus was a brilliant sailor but a poor administrator, a devout Catholic without a sense of social justice. Students want their heroes to be great **and** good. That is not always possible. It is difficult to make Christopher Columbus an exemplary life.

Lesson Four: *Great men and women do not act alone.* Great individuals depend on the discoveries of others, on historical forces, and on luck. To the Chinese, Columbus was indebted for the compass, gunpowder, and paper. To the Portuguese, for maps. To the Pinzon brothers, for sailors. Thousands of sailors before Columbus had inched down the African Coast and out into the Atlantic. The printing press made available the books he read in monasteries and publicized his achievements all over Europe. Only a unified Spain could afford to sponsor his voyages. Others had sailed west and perished, but his thirty-three day crossing was calm.

Lesson Five: *Columbus was extraordinary, his achievement revolutionary.* Although flawed, dependent on others and lucky, he was extraordinary and his achievement amazing. Not just any sailor could pursue a vision for twenty years,

meet with failure and persevere. Not just any sailor could persuade a king and queen to finance a dream, could sail three ships into the unknown.

Today, with all continents traveled, all mountains climbed, all oceans mapped, it is easy to underestimate the boldness of an explorer. Accustomed to motorized ships, we take for granted a sailor's skill. We forget the misery Columbus endured in his years at sea: the moldy hardtack, rancid wine, rats, lice, dysentery, the arthritis that slowly crippled and killed him. According to Samuel Eliot Morison, the linking of two worlds made possible by Columbus' voyages was the greatest event in history since the birth of Jesus.

Lesson Six: *Our view of historical figures is influenced by our times.* At the World's Colombian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, life-size replicas of the *Nina*, *Pinta* and *Santa Maria* floated across a man-made lagoon. On display were 71 portraits of Columbus and facsimiles of his ships' logs. Visitors could stroll through a full-scale reproduction of the monastery where Columbus stayed in Spain before petitioning Queen Isabella for the funding. One in three Americans attended this Exposition.

Today we question institutions, authority, the power of individuals to effect change, and the possibility of heroes. Our times are anti-colonial and multicultural, sympathetic to the victim rather than the conqueror. In English history books, even Captain Cook and Sir Francis Drake have lost stature.

In a recent visit to Goree Island, once a fort that transported thousands of slaves to the lands Columbus discovered, President Bush asked that we "be mindful of past wrongs" and recognize that "a republic founded on equality for all became a prison for millions." An age of apology willing to acknowledge the cost of nation building, to put slavery at the center of its national narrative, and to worry about the environment is going to be hard on all explorers unless, like Shackleton, the exploration is of Antarctica, where there are no trees to cut down and no indigenous people to displace.

Lesson Seven: *Our view of history is also influenced by our position and status.* In the 1992 documentary *Columbus in the Age of Exploration*, the Mayor of Columbus, Ohio, sees Columbus as linked to the prosperity of his Midwestern city. The Mayor of Mexico City sees him as fusing Spaniards and Indians into a new and better society. Mexican Indians see Columbus as the conqueror who brought them humiliation and poverty. African-

(continued on page 7)





Ten History Lessons (continued from page 5)

Americans in Jamaica point to ruined sugar plantations that brutalized their ancestors.

Lesson **Eight**: *Is there room for judgment in history?* If heroes are flawed, if reputations rise and fall, if our views are conditioned by our times and social position, is there is room for judgment? I think so. In contemplating Columbus' career, students should condemn his depredations and the ethnocentrism and "conquest mentality" that encouraged him.

But, there should also be understanding. Smallpox and measles killed more Indians than bullets and swords. Most of the Indians who died had never seen a European. The conquerors believed that tropical forests were inexhaustible. Nor were the Caribbean Islands a paradise; the Indians fought among themselves and died of their own diseases.

And above all, there should be balance. Howard Zinn may have a point when he correctly reminds us in **A People's History of the United States** that Samuel Eliot Morison gave too much space to Columbus' heroism and not enough on the Arawaks' suffering. But Zinn errs when he minimizes disease, when he extols the noble savage, when he implies that out of a garden Europeans made only a wasteland. America may have begun in exploitation, the cost of progress may have been high, but the culmination of the encounter between the two worlds produced democratic capitalism, the envy of the world, the new Utopia, with a steady movement towards tolerance, social justice and racial equality.

Lesson **Nine**: *Nonhuman factors play a role in history.* In junior high school, I drew with colored pencils on a map of the world the routes of the great explorers: Columbus, Coronado, Magellan. Today's students should know these names. But they should also know about the diseases that accompanied the explorers. They should know about sugar cane, which brought slaves from West Africa. But Columbus' voyages also produced a beneficial exchange easily overlooked; the New World gave corn and potatoes that fended off hunger for millions of people in Africa and Europe; from the Old World arrived horses, cattle, pigs, sugar, wheat. They should marvel at the Columbian exchange, a transfer not understood at the time and not taught in my junior high school, but a transfer that changed the world.

Finally, Lesson **Ten**: *History offers hope.* Tacitus reminds us that one of the purposes of history is to rescue virtuous actions from oblivion. In a sermon delivered in 1511, to

soldiers, colonists and court officials, the Dominican friar Antonio de Montesinos asked: *Tell me, by what right and with what justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude?* Today, there is a 150-foot statue of de Montesinos facing the Caribbean Sea on George Washington Avenue in Santo Domingo.

Bartolome de Las Casas settled in Hispaniola, profited from the Spanish conquest, then became a Dominican monk and a fierce, even fanatical critic of what he called a New World genocide. He tried to stop the practice of slave labor gangs and forced a debate over Spanish treatment of Indians. By 1550, the Spanish crown declared that Indians had souls and ended forced conversion and the tribute system that had ruined Indian life. There is a statue of Las Casas in Mexico City.

In closing, that an episode of *The Sopranos* could be built around Christopher Columbus demonstrates that controversy surrounding his life and legacy is widely known among Americans. The episode is also more complex than an argument between father and son about whether Columbus is a hero or a killer. It reminds viewers that Columbus' contemporaries believed in slavery. In a simplistic way, it elicits viewers' sympathy and asks them to consider our past from the point of view of those who died or were displaced.

With that said, the episode "Christopher" is **not** a history lesson. There is no sense in it that history is mysterious and often tragic, that great men and women are complex—both the makers of events and dependent on social forces—that chance is important, that historical reputations rise and fall, and that our perceptions of historical figures and events depend on our times and status in society.

It is not surprising that *The Sopranos* never heard of Anton de Montesinos or Bartolome Las Casas, humanitarians who condemned conquest and greed, who give us hope that history can be more than the crimes and depredations of mankind. Nor in *The Sopranos* do we get even a glimpse of the humanitarian, multicultural democracy set in motion over 500 years ago by Columbus' voyages. 📌

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