

The Real Columbus, the Real Pilgrims, and Our Real Work in Diversity

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

2011



As those of us fortunate enough to now be making a living recover from our Thanksgiving overeating, the annual myth of our nation's origins takes center stage once again. It is, after all, a myth, and the horrible secrets it hides in our national basement account for much of the difficulty of what we try to do as diversity professionals.

That is why I believe the historical truths of the conquest of the Americas belong in our awareness and in our approach to our work. Every racially angry or defensive or locked-down participant in every one of our diversity sessions carries, in one way or another, the awful weight of a formative national history that has been neatly excised from our official American story. If we as diversity professionals take seriously our commitment to fostering mutual respect through racial truth-telling, we owe it to ourselves, our clients, and our country to deal with the facts that underpin race relations as we know it.

So, for the sake of all of us in dealing with the continuing fallout from our explosively formative racial history, I share the following facts gleaned from historian Howard Zinn's seminal *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, concerning Columbus's 1492 landing in the Caribbean and, later, the advance of the Pilgrims:

- The "Indians" (Arawaks, actually) welcomed Columbus with their culture's customary show of civilization: gifts and an expectation of peace and respect. Columbus replied by capturing and imprisoning several Arawaks by force and demanding to know where the gold was. He wrote in his journal that the Arawaks could be easily subdued and would make fine servants.
- What Columbus wanted was gold. He and his men killed for it, enslaved for it, and forced the indigenous people to dig and work massive mines in search of it.
- Spain, Columbus's sponsor, had promised a huge lifelong pension to the first man to spot land. That man was a crew member named Rodrigo, who cried out upon seeing the beach. Columbus, however, lied to the Spanish, claimed it was he who made the first sighting, and kept the reward for himself.
- In the process of roaming in search of gold, Columbus's men took women and children for sex and labor. Arawaks who refused to work or tried to escape were tracked down and killed.
- Columbus's men made large slave raids, at one point carting a shipment of 500 Arawak slaves aboard ships for sale in Spain. About 200 died en route.
- Columbus's actions were chronicled by a priest, Bartolomé de las Casas, who as

The Real Columbus, the Real Pilgrims, and Our Real Work in Diversity

By Bruce Jacobs



Expert Forum

2011

a young man had helped to capture Cuba for the Spanish before having a change of heart. Among Las Casas's many reportings, he wrote that the Spaniards "thought nothing of knifing Indians by tens and twenties and of cutting slices off them to test the sharpness of their blades... Two of these so-called Christians met two Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys."

– Arawaks's attempts at self-defense were ultimately crushed by the Spaniards' superior weaponry. In 1494, just two years after Columbus landed, only half of the original 250,000 Arawaks on the island were still alive. By 1515, there were 50,000 left. By 1550, 500 remained. By 1650, there were none.

– The governor of the Pilgrims's Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, rationalized the forcible seizure of Indian-occupied land by declaring such areas a legal "vacuum" in which Indians, having not "subdued" the land, had no legal right of ownership. The Pilgrims also used Bible scripture to justify their divine right to take Indian territory.

– In the pivotal war between the Pequot Indians and the Puritans in New England, the Pequot learned three things: 1.) That the English colonists would break even the most explicit of treaties when convenient; 2.) that English warfare against the Indians had no limits of principle or mercy; and 3.) that Indian weapons were hopelessly ineffective against European arms.

– Although there were massacres on both sides, the colonists were clearly the aggressors in the war for land, and between warfare and disease the Indian population north of Mexico would be reduced from 10 million to less than one million.

What must we do, today, with these facts of history, which are not subject to debate? We cannot use them to demonize modern generations who were not present when the conquest of North America -- and the vast enterprise of the African slave trade -- took place. Nor can we remain mute about them, giving de facto legitimacy to the dishonesty of official myths, if we are to be honest about our work of human respect and reconciliation.

Instead, we must face these facts, and their long-lasting consequences for power and privilege, as we appeal to the best in all of us to create fairer practices, stronger relationships, and better outcomes. After all, isn't harnessing the power of truth the reason why we do this work in the first place?