

# The People vs. Columbus, et al.

By *BILL BIGELOW*

THIS ROLE PLAY BEGINS with the premise that a monstrous crime was committed in the years after 1492, when perhaps as many as three million or more Taínos on the island of Hispaniola lost their lives. (Most scholars estimate the number of people on Hispaniola in 1492 at

between one and three million; some estimates are lower and some much higher. By 1550, very few Taínos remained alive.)

Who—and/or what—was responsible for this slaughter? This is the question students confront here.

## Materials Needed:

- Some construction paper suitable for making name placards.
- Colored markers.

## Time Required:

The time needed for this activity can vary considerably depending on the preparation and defenses mounted by students. Teachers should allocate at least two 50-minute periods for the role play.

## Suggested Procedure:

1. In preparation for class, list the names of all the “defendants” on the board: Columbus, Columbus’ men, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Taínos, and the System of Empire.
2. Tell students that each of these defendants is charged with murder—the murder of the Taíno Indians in the years following 1492. Tell them that, in groups, students will portray the defendants and that you, the teacher, will be the prosecutor.

Explain that students’ responsibility will be twofold: a) to defend themselves against the

charges, and b) to explain who they think is guilty and why.

One rule: They may plead guilty if they wish, but they cannot claim sole responsibility; they must accuse at least one other defendant. At this point, students sometimes protest that it’s ridiculous to charge the Taínos for their own deaths, or they may show some confusion about the “system of empire.” Tell them not to worry, that it’s your job as prosecutor to explain the charges. Each group will receive a written copy of the charges against them.

3. Explain the order of the activity:
  - a. In their groups, they will prepare a defense against the charges contained in the indictments. It’s a good idea for students to write these up, as they will be presenting these orally and may want to read a statement.
  - b. Before the trial begins, you will choose several students, who will be sworn to neutrality. These people will be the jury.
  - c. As prosecutor, you will begin by arguing the guilt of a particular group.
  - d. Those in the group accused by the prosecutor will then defend themselves and



will state who they believe is guilty and why. [One option is to require that each group call at least one witness. For example, in one class, the group representing the King and Queen called one of the Taínos to the stand and asked, “Have you ever seen me before?” No. “Did I ever kill any of your people?” No. “Did I ever hurt any of your people?” No. “We have no further questions.”]

- e. The jury will then question that group, and others may also question the group and offer rebuttals.
  - f. This process is repeated until all the groups have been accused and have defended themselves. The jury will then decide guilt and innocence.
4. Ask students to count off into five groups of roughly equal numbers. To get things moving quickly, I like to tell students that

the first group to circle up gets first pick of who they’ll represent. Go around to each of the groups and distribute the appropriate “indictment” sheets. Remind students to read the indictment against them carefully and discuss possible arguments in their defense.

As they discuss, I wander from group to group, making sure students understand their responsibilities—at times playing devil’s advocate, at times helping them consider possible defenses. Also, at this point, I distribute a placard and marker to each group so that they can display which role they are portraying.

Sometimes students want to see the indictments against the other groups. I encourage them to read these because it will help students develop additional arguments. Also, students may want to use other “evidence.” [See the first chapter of Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* and information included throughout the Rethinking Schools book *Rethinking Columbus*—for example, from Columbus’ diary (p. 96), the timeline (p. 99), or the Taínos (p. 106).]

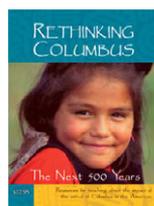
5. When each group appears ready—after perhaps a half hour, depending on the class—choose a jury: one member from each group (in a big class), or a total of three students in a smaller class. Publicly swear them to neutrality; they no longer represent the King and Queen, the Taínos, or anyone else.
6. The order of prosecution is up to you. I prefer: Columbus, Columbus’ men, the King and Queen, the Taínos, and the System of Empire. I save the System for last as it’s the most difficult to prosecute, and depends on having heard the other groups’ presentations. As mentioned, the teacher argues the indictment for each group, the group defends, the jury questions, and other groups may then question. Then, the process repeats itself for each indictment. The written indictments

should be an adequate outline for prosecution, but I always feel free to embellish.

7. After each group has been charged and has made its defense, I ask the jury to step out of the classroom and deliberate. They can assign “percentage guilt,” e.g., one party is 25 percent guilty, another 60 percent, etc. They also need to offer clear explanations for why they decided as they did. As they deliberate, I ask the rest of the class to step out of their roles and to do in writing the same thing the jury is doing.
8. The jury returns and explains its verdict and then we discuss. Here are some questions and issues to raise:
  - Was anyone entirely not guilty? Did the prosecutor convince you that the Taínos were in part responsible for their own deaths?
  - Why *didn't* the Taínos kill Columbus on his first voyage?
  - How did you weigh responsibility between the “bosses” and the men they hired?
  - Can you imagine a peaceful meeting between Europeans and Taínos? Or did European life—the “System of Empire”—make violence inevitable? How would Spain and other European countries have had to be different to have made a more peaceful outcome possible?
  - What more would you need to know about the System of Empire to understand how it affected people’s thinking and behavior?
  - If the System of Empire is guilty, what should be the “sentence”? You can’t put a system in prison. ■



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# Columbus

## The Indictment:

You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

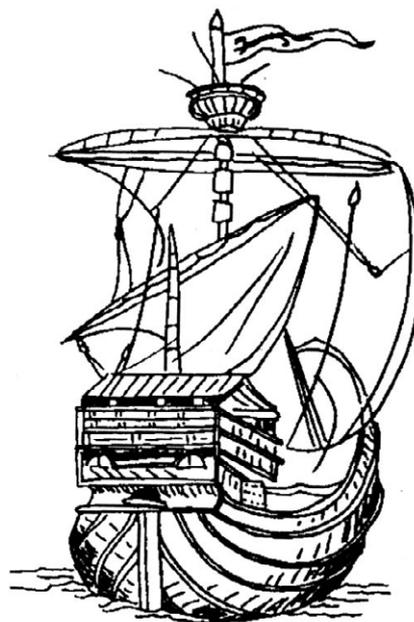
YOUR FIRST ACT IN THE LANDS you “discovered” was to take possession of another people’s territory in the name of an empire thousands of miles away.

From the very beginning of your time in the Indies you kidnapped Taíno Indians. Even when they attempted to escape, making it clear that they wanted to leave, you refused to release them.

Your journal shows that your only wish in the Indies was to find gold. The only reason you showed any kindness to the Taínos on your first trip was so they would agree to show you the source of their gold.

On your second voyage to the Indies, you ordered your men to round up Taínos and had over 500 shipped to Spain as slaves. You told your men to help themselves to the remaining Taíno captives, which they did. This act alone killed several hundred Taínos.

In 1495 you started the policy of forcing Taínos, age 14 and older, to collect gold for you. Those who didn’t return every three months with the amount of gold you demanded were punished by having their hands chopped off.



You ordered your men to spread “terror” among the Taínos when there was rumor of resistance.

The list goes on. When you arrived on Hispaniola there may have been as many as a million or even three million Taínos on the island. According to one Spanish priest, by 1542 there were 200 Taínos left. There is no one to blame but you.

You were Admiral, you were Viceroy, you were Governor of the island. ■

— from the role play, *The People vs. Columbus*, et al.

# Columbus' Men

## The Indictment:

You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

WITHOUT YOU, COLUMBUS' ORDERS to enslave and kill Taínos would have been empty words.

There is no evidence that Columbus personally captured slaves or killed anyone with his own hands. You are the ones responsible for the enslavement of first hundreds, then thousands, of Taíno Indians.

You did the dirty work. You raped women. You set dogs on infants. You cut the hands off Taínos who didn't deliver enough gold. You whipped Taínos if they didn't work hard enough in the mines.

Without you there were no crimes.

You may try to blame your superiors, Columbus or even King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. But because someone orders you to commit a crime does not free you of the blame for committing it. You could have said no. There were Spaniards, like the priests Antonio de Montesinos and Bartolomé de las Casas, who refused to mistreat Indians and spoke out on their behalf. Why didn't you?



Without the soldier there is no war.

Without you there would have been no genocide. ■

— from the role play, *The People vs. Columbus, et al.*

# King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella

## The Indictment:

You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

WITHOUT YOUR MONEY, Columbus couldn't have launched his plan to find the East Indies by sailing west. Without you, he was an unemployed sailor.

You hired him to “discover” and claim new lands. Thus you are guilty of conspiracy to steal the territory of people you didn't even know, who had never bothered or harmed you.

When Columbus returned after his first voyage with several Indian captives, and you rewarded him, you became guilty of kidnapping. You could have ordered Columbus to stop kidnapping Indians. You could have punished him for this illegal act. By not doing anything to stop Columbus and his men, you legalized every crime they committed.

In his first letter to you, Columbus wrote that the Indians would make excellent slaves. Right away, you could have ordered him to take no slaves. You did no such thing, and thus became accomplices in all future slave-taking. True, after a while you discouraged Columbus from enslaving people—they mostly died,

anyway—but you never punished him for these crimes, which killed hundreds of human beings.

Really, you didn't care what Columbus did, so long as you got rich. At times, you would order that the Taínos should be treated humanely. But you took no action to stop the Taínos from being forced to work in the mines. They were slaves in everything but name. Had you wanted the cruelty to stop, you could have ordered all your subjects home. But then you wouldn't have gotten any more gold. And that was what you wanted, right?

Because Columbus was unpopular with other Spaniards, you replaced him as governor. But you never punished him for the crimes committed against Taínos when he was governor. And these crimes continued under the next governor.

Because you were the bosses and because you paid the bills, you have more guilt than had you been the ones wielding the swords and hangmen's nooses. ■

— *from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.*

# Taínos

## The Indictment:

You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

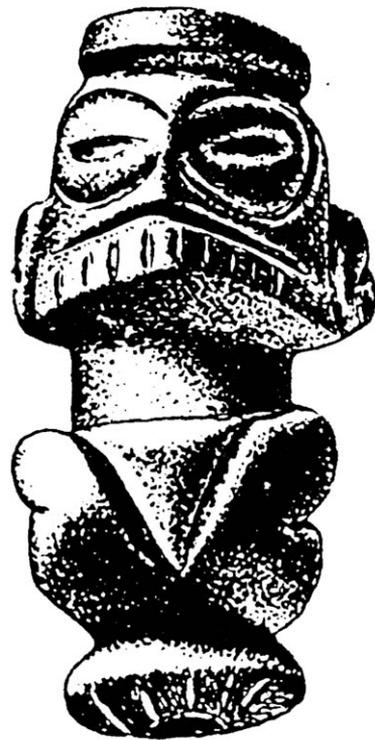
WHILE YOU ARE THE VICTIMS of this crime, you are also guilty of committing it. You failed to fight back against the Spaniards. This meant that you brought the fate of slavery and death upon yourselves.

From the very beginning you must have known what Columbus meant to do. He took Taíno captives from other islands and held them against their will. He claimed your land as his own. He was interested only in finding gold. When your people were cut by Spaniards' swords, Columbus and his men showed no concern. All this you must have known.

Tragically, you let this greedy, violent man get away, so he could return. On his next trip, however, he brought 17 ships and between 1,200 and 1,500 men, all heavily armed. You allowed, even invited, this invasion.

Foolishly, your *cacique* (leader), Caonabó, killed the 39 men Columbus left behind. Why didn't Caonabó and the Taínos kill all the Spaniards—including Columbus—before they had a chance to return to Spain? Imagine the different outcome had the Taínos been smart enough to stop Columbus before he could launch the invasion.

Who knows why the Taínos of Hispaniola did not unite to throw out all the



Spaniards? Had Taínos worked together they might have beaten the Spaniards even after Columbus returned. After all, the Spaniards numbered fewer than 2,000; Taínos numbered in the hundreds of thousands, possibly as many as three million.

However, as a result of this Taíno failure, all the Native peoples of the Americas suffered. ■

— from the role play, *The People vs. Columbus, et al.*

# The System of Empire

## The Indictment:

You are charged with the mistreatment and murder of thousands, perhaps millions, of Taíno Indians.

THIS GETS COMPLICATED. You are not a person, but a system. We like to blame crimes on people. But in this case, the real criminal is not human.

True, Columbus' men did the killing, Columbus gave the orders and King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella paid the bills—and took the profits. But what made them behave the way they did? Were they born evil and greedy? The real blame lies with a system that values property over people.

European society was organized so that an individual had to own property to feel secure. The more property one owned, the more security, the more control over one's destiny. There was no security without private ownership of property. If you were poor, you could starve. The Taínos were not perfect, but they had no "poor" and no one starved. Indians commented that Europeans' love of gold was like a disease. In fact, this attitude was a product of a diseased system.

In order to get more wealth, Columbus and his men took Taínos as slaves, terrorized them into searching out gold and forced them to work on their farms and in their mines. They justified all this by telling themselves that the Taínos weren't Christian, so "we" can control "their" land and labor. The European

system saw only white Christians as full human beings.

It was life in a system that valued private property (especially gold), and approved of violence against foreigners and non-Christians to get it, that made Columbus and his men enslave and kill. Sane people do not kill hundreds of thousands of other human beings. It was a rotten, insane system that led Columbus and the others to behave the way they did. You, as the representatives of this system, are guilty for the genocide committed against Taínos.

As a final test to see who is guilty for the mass murder of the Taínos, ask yourself these questions:

- If it had been some other "explorer" besides Columbus to "discover America," would he have let the Taínos keep their land?
- Would he not have enslaved people?
- Would he not have made them search for gold and work in the mines?

You know the answer: Any European conqueror would have been every bit as bad as Columbus. Why? Because the system of empire was to blame, not any particular individual. ■

— *from the role play, The People vs. Columbus, et al.*