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From Columbus to the Declaration of Independence

This unit, which focuses on the American Revolution, provides teachers with a variety of options. It raises an overarching question: When is violence justified for effecting political change? With the exception of chapters on Columbus and Jamestown, teachers can weave their lessons around different aspects of this basic question. They may also use this material to supplement or even replace the basal text and treat every lesson-chapter as an important part of the traditional story of the events that led to the American Revolution.

Each chapter in this unit raises a question of its own. For example, the chapter on Columbus asks whether he was truly a hero who discovered a continent or a lucky adventurer who unwittingly opened a new world to exploitation by the old. The Jamestown chapter asks whether the hardships experienced by its earliest settlers resulted more from a failure of leadership than from the difficulties inherent in establishing a colony 3000 miles from home. The Mercantilism chapter asks whether the negative effects of England's mercantile laws were offset by the advantages of living under the protection of the mother country.

Each chapter is also designed to accommodate a wide range of student abilities. The first part of every chapter is written at a lower reading and conceptual level than the second part. The two parts are separated by a series of student exercises, including a graphic organizer and several questions intended to help students master basic information and stimulate higher-order thinking skills. The second part of each chapter, "For Further Consideration," is written at a higher reading and conceptual level. It is followed by a question that requires students to write a strong paragraph and/or be prepared to present their opinions in class. In some cases, this section continues the story; in others, it challenges students to think deeply about issues related to the overarching question raised in the unit. In addition, I (Inquiry)-Charts are provided to help students optimize what they already know or think about a topic and integrate it with identifiable additional information they find in the text and in other sources. Finally, each lesson includes vocabulary words and key terms in flash card format; these can be used either for review or reference.

This unit is also designed to stimulate informed discussions and higher-order thinking skills rather than recitation and rote learning. Students are provided with the information they need to acquire and share factually supported opinions and/or consider important philosophic issues. Opportunities are provided for a mock trial of the British soldiers implicated in the Boston Massacre, for a discussion on Britain's right to tax the colonists, for justifying the Boston Tea Party and the Intolerable Acts, and for deciding who was the aggressor at Lexington.

Chapter 1. Christopher Columbus: Hero or Reckless Adventurer? Teacher Page

Overview:

This chapter tells the story of Columbus from his childhood in Genoa. It credits his genius as a navigator, explains his reasons for believing he could reach the Indies by sailing west, and chronicles the difficulties he faced in securing resources for his four voyages, as well as the challenges encountered en route. The Graphic Organizer asks students to find evidence to support both positions on the controversy: hero or reckless adventurer. The “For Further Consideration” section presents two documents: one a laudatory appraisal of the enlightening impact of European civilization on Native Americans, and the other bemoaning the destruction of native cultures by European interlopers.

Objectives:

Students will:

- learn the basic facts concerning Columbus’s early years and four voyages to the New World
- collect facts supporting the position that Columbus was a hero to be admired and that he was a reckless adventurer with serious flaws
- engage in a serious and informed discussion of these opposing viewpoints
- become familiar with the Eurocentric and the third-world perspectives concerning the effects of Columbus’s discoveries (optional)

Strategies:

Before class: Assign the chapter either up to or including the “For Further Consideration” section and inform students they will be expected to write their answers to all the Student Activities questions covering the assigned section(s).

In class: After reviewing students’ answers, engage them in a discussion about whether Columbus was a hero or an adventurer. If you assigned the “For Further Consideration” section, ask students to share their responses to the Eurocentric and third-world views of Columbus’s discovery.

Chapter 1. Columbus: Hero or Reckless Adventurer? I-Chart

	For what did Columbus become famous?	What qualities did Columbus have that made him famous?	Why are some people unhappy about Columbus's activities?
What I already know			
What I learned from Chapter I, Part I			
What I learned from Chapter I, Part II			
What I still would like to learn about this subject			

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—Christopher Columbus

navigator

adventurer

reckless

calculation

superstitious

Mediterranean

remote

turmoil

Viceroy

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—Christopher Columbus

Careless, not taking precautions	A person who steers or plans voyages (usually applying to ships)	A carefully reached conclusion, often using math	Far away
A person who enjoys taking risks, especially in traveling	Believing in supernatural causes of events or actions	A condition of great confusion; a disturbance or commotion	
A large body of water separating Europe from Africa	A governor who represents a king or emperor in a colony or country		

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—Christopher Columbus

		imposed
		obscurity

Vocabulary for Chapter 1—Christopher Columbus

Forced upon		
Something not well known or out of the mainstream		

Chapter 1

Christopher Columbus: Hero or Reckless Adventurer?

Introduction

As you already know, Christopher Columbus's great achievement is celebrated with a national holiday. He is honored as a great and bold navigator and an agent of an advanced civilization. But you should also know that the continent he supposedly "discovered" had its own special cultures and civilizations, and that his discovery led to the destruction of many long-established societies. As a result, Columbus became a symbol of the way Europeans forced their way of life on Native Americans. Although he was not personally responsible for the behavior of those who came later, we can judge the character and actions of the man whose explorations had such a dramatic impact on the lands he discovered. The results of our study can help us decide whether Columbus should be regarded as a great and bold navigator or merely a lucky adventurer and the cause of future troubles for Native Americans.



Columbus as a Young Man

He was the son of an unknown Italian weaver and wool merchant; he had little education and no formal training in the art of navigation. But by age 14, this young lad was serving as a cabin boy and dreaming of fame and fortune. Eleven years later, he had become a ship's captain, an excellent navigator, and a skilled sailor with a sixth sense for detecting storms before they could be seen. His career took him to the far ends of the Mediterranean, through the straits of Gibraltar, up the coast of France to England and Ireland, and south along the coast of Africa. He sailed westward to the edge of the uncharted waters on the far side of the Azores and the Canary Islands. With a full head of red hair and knowledge of three languages, this man of noble bearing had developed a great deal of confidence in himself. He was sure in his belief that God had chosen him for some kind of a divine mission.

Early Calculations

While Columbus was growing up, most people believed that the world was flat and anyone heading west from Europe would likely sail off the edge of the earth. But

Columbus had reason to challenge this old superstition. While gazing over the ocean and watching driftwood floating in from the west, he came to the conclusion that land must lie somewhere out in that direction. By noting that the sails of ships always appeared on the horizon before the ship itself came in sight, Columbus decided the earth must be round. Using the math that he had learned, he came to believe he could sail west instead of walking eastward to reach the fabulously wealthy lands known as the Indies discovered by Marco Polo centuries ago. By following a southerly route, he could take advantage of winds from the east to reach the Indies. Loaded with untold riches from his explorations, Columbus believed he could return by taking a northern route towards France where the winds blew from the west. The only serious mistake Columbus made in his reasoning was that he underestimated the distance around the earth by some 10,000 miles.

The Deal with Spain

Armed with pride and ambition but with very little money, Christopher Columbus traveled to Portugal. At the royal court, he showed his maps to the King and tried to talk him into paying for a voyage to the Indies. However, King John of Portugal was busy supporting attempts to reach China and India by sailing east. Turned down by the Portuguese, Columbus headed to Spain and the court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He impressed the royal couple with his vast knowledge, commanding personality, and strong belief in God. He excited them with promises of souls that could be saved and money that would be made. He convinced the King's and the Queen's advisors that his incorrect mathematical calculations of the distance to the Indies were accurate. After weeks of discussions, Columbus was about to get a deal allowing him to make his voyage at the King's expense. But at the last minute, he insisted on obtaining the titles of "Admiral," "Vice-Roy," and "Governor" and the

Our will is That you, *Christopher Columbus*, after discovering and conquering the said Islands and Continent in the said ocean, or any of them, shall be our Admiral of the said islands and Continent you shall so discover and conquer; and that you shall be our Admiral, Vice-Roy, and Governour in them, ... and that you may exercise the office of Vice-Roy and Governour of the said Islands which you and your Lieutenants shall conquer, and freely decide all causes, civil and criminal, appertaining to the said employment of Admiral, Vice-Roy, and Governour as you shall see fit in justice.

—*Privileges and Prerogatives Granted to Christopher Columbus, April 9, 1492*

promise of 10 percent of the Crown's share of gold and silver. When refused these titles, Columbus set off for France to gain its king's support for his voyage. Fortunately for Columbus, a last-minute appeal from an advisor convinced the Queen to meet Columbus's terms.

The First Voyage

On August 3, 1492, three frail ships—the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria—set sail with a crew of some 90 men. They stopped at the Canary Islands to take on necessary supplies for the dangerous trip. With favorable winds at their backs, the tiny ships made good progress into the unknown. But after a month on the open seas with no land in sight,



Artist's depiction of Columbus's landing

Columbus's sailors began to lose faith in their commander; they called for a quick return home. Unafraid, Columbus ordered his men to continue their voyage. To motivate them, he promised that the first man to spot land would be rewarded with an amount of money equal to a sailor's yearly wage. However, Columbus ended up keeping the money for himself. He claimed he saw lights far in the distance on the night of October 11th, before the sailor who sighted land in the morning.

The land the cheated sailor had detected was Watling Island in what we now know as the Bahamas. In the company of the officers of his three ships, Columbus came ashore and immediately knelt in thanks to God for a safe voyage and claimed the land for the King and Queen of Spain. The Taino Indians on shore being "discovered" saw the white sails and strange men with hair covering their faces and helmets reflecting the early morning sun. Timid at first, they gradually made their presence known. Columbus later described them as handsome, tall, intelligent, generous, and peaceful. He also made note that they had bits of gold attached to their noses and wore no clothes. He tried to make friends with them by giving them strings of colored beads. In return, he learned of men and women on other islands who wore bands of gold on their arms. He was also told that other natives, the Caribs, were fierce warriors and cannibals.

I gave to them many beautiful and pleasing things that I had brought with me, no value being taken in exchange, in order that I might the more easily make them friendly to me, that they might be made worshipers of Christ, and that they might be full of love towards our King, Queen, and prince, and the whole Spanish nation;

These people practice no kind of idolatry; on the contrary they firmly believe that all strength and power, and in fact all good things are in heaven, and that I had come down from thence with these ships and sailors; and in this belief I was received there after they had put aside fear. Nor are they slow or unskilled, but of excellent and acute understanding; and the men who have navigated that sea give an account of everything in an admirable manner; but they never saw people clothed, nor these kind of ships. As soon as I reached that sea, I seized by force several Indians on the first island, in order that they might learn from us, and in like manner tell us about those things in these lands of which they themselves had knowledge ...

—Columbus Letter, May 1493

Inspired by his new friends, Columbus continued his search for the riches of the Indies. He started on a three and one-half month voyage of discovery around the Caribbean. After sailing for 75 days, Columbus ran the Santa Maria aground on an island he named "Hispaniola" (today occupied by Haiti and the Dominican Republic). Despite his best efforts, Columbus couldn't pry the Santa Maria loose. He was forced to abandon the ship. However, with help from willing natives he saved most of its timbers and used this lumber to build a fort. Because there was no room for them in his two remaining ships, Columbus left 39 of his men on the island with the promise he'd return. With that, the Admiral set sail for Spain.

The Second Voyage

Accompanied by captured natives, his ships laden with local spices and tropical birds, Columbus made his victorious return to Spain. He entertained the royal court with stories of cannibals and mermaids. His display of New World treasure convinced the King and Queen to provide him with 17 more ships, over 1200 men, and enough supplies to build shelters, establish a permanent settlement, conquer natives and convert them to Christianity, and continue his explorations. Columbus set sail for the world he had "discovered" amidst great hopes and fanfare.



Columbus with Ferdinand and Isabella after his return from his first voyage

By using his excellent navigation skills, Columbus had no trouble finding the site where he had left his men. But to his shock and grief, the fort had been burned to the ground. The native Tainos had probably been mistreated by the Spanish and responded by killing all of the men Columbus left on the island. Despite this loss, Columbus decided to start a small colony close to the ruins of the old fort. He ordered his men to build a new stockade, new shelters, and to begin plowing the fields and planting crops.

The Spaniards Columbus had brought with him had not come to the New World to perform manual labor and take orders from a foreigner. They preferred to spend their time searching for gold and silver. Many of the natives died as a result of practices Columbus permitted while in charge of this settlement. The Tainos were ordered by the Spanish to collect a certain amount of gold per month or have their hands cut off for failing to fulfill this requirement. The Spaniards rounded up about 500 Tainos to be sold as slaves in Spain; most of them did not survive the journey. Spanish settlers

were allowed to enslave Indians for their own plantations, or work them to death in the gold mines later established on the mainland. As a result of their mistreatment and the diseases brought by the settlers, the population of natives rapidly declined in 20 years, from as many as 3 million to as few as 11,000.

When Columbus left the colony to continue his explorations, he put his brother, Diego, in command. Unfortunately, Diego was a weak leader and unable to stop the Spanish from fighting amongst themselves. When authorities in Spain got word of the turmoil in Hispaniola, they sent a royal commission to investigate. Hearing this news, Columbus hurried back home to answer any charges that might be made against him and to give his own version of the story.



Columbus and Taino Indians on Hispaniola

The Last Two Voyages

Back in Spain, Columbus was cleared of the charges against him and was even given permission to organize another voyage. His third tour was even less successful than the second. He reached the coast of South America, but claimed that the Orinoco River he discovered in Venezuela flowed from the heavenly paradise that started in the Garden of Eden. When he reached the town of Santo Domingo in Hispaniola, the Spanish official in charge had the “Great Explorer” arrested, and brought back to Spain in irons. Fortunately, Columbus still enjoyed the King’s and the Queen’s support. He had his titles of Governor and Admiral of the Fleet taken away, but he was pardoned and paid for his time in prison. Furthermore, he was granted permission to lead another expedition—provided that he stays clear of Santo Domingo.

On his fourth voyage, good fortune escaped Columbus once again. His ships were battered by storms and were forced to land on a remote island. Here, they waited for a whole year to be rescued. While they waited, the stranded commander and his men were at the mercy of natives who for a while even refused to sell them food. However, Columbus was able to use his knowledge of a coming eclipse to convince the natives he was withholding the



Painting depicting the death of Columbus

light of the moon. He told them he would not restore the moonlight until food deliveries were resumed. When a rescue ship finally arrived, this former “Admiral of the Fleet” was forced to return to Spain as passenger and not as the ship’s commander. Once back in his adopted country, the aging explorer spent most of his remaining days trying in vain to have his titles restored. He did succeed in getting his promised 10 percent of the Crown’s share of gold found in the New World. As a result, Columbus lived comfortably but in relative obscurity until his death on May 20, 1506.

Student Activities

A. Student Exercises:

1. How did Columbus decide that he could reach the Indies by sailing west?
2. What agreement did Columbus reach with the King and Queen of Spain?
3. Give three examples of how Columbus treated Native Americans.