

Robert Petrone: Christopher Columbus is the greatest hero of the 15th & 16th centuries (pt. VII): The First Civil Rights Legislation of the Americas

DECEMBER 8, 2020 ROBERT PETRONE



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Christopher Columbus was none of the epithets with which his detractors repeatedly characterize him — and all of the historical resources show this unequivocally. Part seven in a series of eight.

The last *Broad + Liberty* article in our ongoing “1492 Project” series, subtitled “The Arch-Nemesis Bobadilla,” recounted the arrival of the villainous Comendador Francisco de Bobadilla, *reconquistador* and knight of the Order of Calatrava, who, through great deceit, slander and force, arrested and exiled Governor Christopher Columbus for a litany of made-up crimes he did not commit, and sent Columbus back to Spain in chains in the bowels of a prison ship to answer for them. The subtitle of this article, “The First Civil Rights Legislation of the Americas,” refers to how Christopher Columbus not only defeated Bobadilla’s lies that he was a criminal, but realized the greatest of his many achievements for the tribal peoples of the West Indies as the first civil rights activist of the Americas.

Many express surprise at the characterization of Christopher Columbus as the first civil rights activist of the Americas. This may be expected, given the steady diet of falsehoods propagated by Columbus’s detractors, the sinister axis of cultural majoritarians who have fulfilled the promise of Marxist crusader Rudolf Dutschke of a “long march through the institutions” of the West, including academia and, now, state and local government. As a counterpoint to the New York Times’ toxic propaganda series known as the “1619 Project,” this serial exposé by *Broad + Liberty*, which I call the “1492 Project,” seeks to untangle the twisted web of lies being fed to our children in our schools — now as early as grade school — and resulting in the razing of

statues and other monuments dedicated to Christopher Columbus, the first civil rights activist of the Americas.

The previous article detailed Admiral Columbus's slave-freeing sojourn around the West Indies, the first "Underground Railroad" of the Americas ("Underwater Railroad"?) in which he sailed from Caribbean island to Caribbean island delivering Tainos from bondage from the man-eating Caribs who repeatedly descended upon their villages, raping, kidnapping, murdering and eating Tainos. Columbus shuttled to shore those rescued Tainos who wished to remain in the West Indies, and brought back to Spain with him those who wished to be Baptized, rendering them immune to slavery and placing them under the protective aegis of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church.

But these efforts constituted only the first half of Columbus's Second Voyage, and the first half of his civil rights activism during it. The previous article also detailed how Governor Columbus quelled no less than three rebellions by the *hidalgos* (low, landed nobles of Spain who wished to enslave the tribal peoples to build their settlements) — Alonzo de Hojeda, Fray Bernardo Buil and his conspirator Captain Pedro Margarite, and Juan Aguado — and finally brought peace and prosperity to the West Indies. But before he brought this *Pax Columbiana* to the land, while still in the throes of these many rebellions, Governor Columbus had written to the Crown, beseeching them to send him someone the *hidalgos* would respect. On a dark day in history, the Crown sent Francisco de Bobadilla, the true racist, rapist, maimer, murderer, enslaver and genocidal maniac that current revisionist-"historians" incorrectly conflate with Christopher Columbus.

In fact, Columbus and Bobadilla were arch-nemeses. As previously detailed, immediately upon landfall, Bobadilla, seduced by the promise of an easy subjugation of the tribal people of the West Indies and an abundance of gold, shackled Columbus and his brothers on sight and sent them back to Spain in the bowels of a prison ship. He then undid all the restrictions on the *hidalgos* that Governor Columbus had imposed and unleashed a murderous and plunderous reign of terror on the West Indies. Knowing that the truth would soon exonerate Columbus in the Court of the Spanish monarchs, who would undoubtedly unseat the villainous *conquistador*, Bobadilla exhorted his conspirators to "[t]ake as many advantages as you can since you don't know how long this will last" (Bartolomé de las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, Book II, Chapter 2).

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As Bobadilla expected, Christopher Columbus's next act of civil rights activism was the undoing of the villainous *conquistador*. And that is where this latest article resumes, with Christopher Columbus cementing his role in history as the first civil rights activist of the Americas.

With his hands in chains aboard the prison ship, Columbus penned a letter to Doña Juana de Torres, the governess of Prince John of Spain. He wrote that Bobadilla “did everything in his power to harm me” and such damage to Hispaniola that “Their Highnesses...would be astonished to find that the island is still standing” (*Id.*, Book I, Chapter 181). He listed all of Bobadilla's treachery that he knew about, which was barely the beginning of the hellfire Bobadilla was unleashing in Columbus's absence. He promised that he would see to the unseating of Bobadilla and restore order to the West Indies.

Christopher Columbus made good on that promise. Once he returned to Castile, he presented his own case before the Crown, refuting Bobadilla's slander and revealing Bobadilla's misdeeds. Based on Columbus's testimony and the evidence he was able to provide, the Crown, now fully seeing the *hidalgos*' plot for what it was, released Columbus of his shackles and dismissed the false charges against Columbus as calumny. Pursuant to the evidence Columbus had presented regarding Bobadilla's lies and earliest misdeeds, the Crown deposed Bobadilla from the viceroyalty of the West Indies. Though Bobadilla had done a great deal of damage to the tribal peoples and the West Indies in the time it took for Columbus to get back to Spain and conclude the legal proceedings, finally Bobadilla, the terror of the West Indies, was no more. His plot to remove Christopher Columbus as an obstacle to the tyranny of the *hidalgos* was short-lived, and Christopher Columbus and the tribal peoples of the West Indies emerged victorious.

But Columbus wanted nothing more to do with governing the *hidalgos* of the West Indies. He told the Crown, “I wanted to escape from governing these dissolute people...full of vice and malice” (Letter of Christopher Columbus to Doña Juana de Torres, dated October 1500). Thus, rather than re-seat Columbus in a governorship he no longer wanted, the Crown replaced Bobadilla with a new governor, Nicolás de Ovando, Knight of Alcántara, and Comendador of Lares.

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Having learned from the tyranny of Bobadilla, Columbus was skeptical of Ovando. Columbus remained in Spain while the newly-appointed Governor Ovando and the newly-frocked Friar Bartolomé de las Casas — who would eventually pen this history he was witnessing in real time — traveled back to the West Indies. Columbus carefully drafted a petition to the Crown that he hoped would protect the tribal peoples from any further depredations by Spanish governors: a petition for the first civil rights legislation of the Americas.

This act by Christopher Columbus marked a milestone not only in the life of this Genoan mariner and not only in the history of the Americas, but in the history of worldwide civil rights. Historian and translator Andrée M. Collard noted that Christopher Columbus ignited what was to be the undoing of the feudal *encomienda* system, sparking the spread of “the enlightened Spanish legal tradition” first set forth in “the *Siete Partidas*” (*Historia de las Indias*, editor’s “Introduction”), a seven-part (as the name implies) Castilian statutory code first compiled in the thirteenth century during the reign of Alfonso X, establishing a uniform body of normative rules for the kingdom akin to the *Magna Carta* or the American Bill of Rights. Christopher Columbus sought to extend these civil rights protections to the tribal people of the West Indies.

The monarchs read Columbus’s petition for the civil rights legislation, and agreed with him. They granted his petition and promulgated the first civil rights legislation of the Americas. This royal decree from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella included “a very specific clause” at Christopher Columbus’s behest: “all the Indians of Hispaniola were to be left free, not subject to servitude, unmolested and unharmed and allowed to live like free vassals under law just like any other vassal in the Kingdom of Castile” (Book II, 83). Whatever treachery the *hidalgos* might plan this time under Ovando’s governorship, Christopher Columbus saw to it that the tribal peoples of the West Indies would now have the protection of law as mandated by two kings, the worldly *and* the heavenly.

And with that crowning deed accomplished, Columbus and the monarchs could now turn to planning Columbus’s fourth — and final — voyage. Though Ferdinand and Isabella made clear it was to be solely for the purpose of exploration, Columbus would defy his benefactors one

last time in the name of civil rights. In the next “1492 Project” article at *Broad + Liberty*, I will recount Columbus’s final confrontation in the West Indies for civil rights, “In the Court of Ovando.”

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