DBQ: What should be the legacy of Christopher Columbus?

Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents (The documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise). This question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents.

Write a response that:

- Has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Cites evidence from included source perspectives.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible. Does not simply summarize the documents individually.
- Takes into account both the sources of the documents and the author’s points of view.

Focus Points:

- Bear in mind that you need to analyze and interpret the documents thoroughly and decide for yourself the legacy of Columbus.
- Time to put on your examining glasses and look through the eyes of many in order to accurately create your own vision.
- Avoid the trap of judging solely on present day values and virtues and develop an argument that is just, takes into historical events and demonstrates your mastery of the content.

Questions to ponder in order to formulate your own argument

a. Why are there such differing views of Columbus? Explain
b. Is he a sinner or a saint? Is he a hero or a villain? Can he be labeled in the middle of either extreme?
c. Which documents are positive and which are negative? Provide Evidence?
d. How do you think early explorers dealt with diversity? Give examples from the text.
e. How does Bartolome de Las Casas differ from Columbus’ diary entries? Give examples.
f. Why do you think Columbus is revered today as a great man? Give examples.
g. What struck you as the most significant information from the various texts? Why?
h. What were the greatest things Columbus did for Spain, the USA and for exploration?
i. How can you decide where the truth lies? What do you need to do?
j. What does this teach us to do as students of history?
How did Europeans view the people they encountered in the Americas? To what extent, if at all, were Spanish explorers and settlers able to understand or empathize with the culture of the Native Americans?

Probably the best way to gain insight into such questions is to read excerpts from the writings of Columbus and other explorers and conquistadores of the 15th and 16th centuries. Excerpts from three such primary sources are presented in Documents A, B, and C, below. The remaining documents (D-M) come from secondary sources (written long after the events they describe). They provide historian views of how Columbus represents the European culture of his times. As you will see, historians view past events with a strong bias against the European "conquest" and "genocide." Is present day historian interpretations supported by evidence in the primary source documents? Draw your own conclusion after completing your reading of all the sources provided.

**DOCUMENT A**

Upon his return to Spain in 1493, Columbus presented to Queen Isabella his captain's log—the daily account of what he had observed on his voyage. The following excerpts from that document describe his impressions of the Native Americans and also reveal his attitude toward them.

Friday, 12 October 1492:
I want the natives to develop a friendly attitude toward us because I know that they are a people who can be made free and converted to our Holy Faith more by love than by force. I therefore gave red caps to some and glass beads to others. They hung the beads around their necks, along with some other things of slight value that I gave them. And they took great pleasure in this and became so friendly that it was a marvel. They traded and gave everything they had with good will, but it seems to me that they have very little and are poor in everything. I warned my men to take nothing from the people without giving something in exchange.

Saturday, 13 October 1492:
I cannot get over the fact of how docile these people are. They have so little to give but will give it all for whatever we give them, if only broken pieces of glass and crockery. One seaman gave three Portuguese cetis (not even worth a penny!) for about 25 pounds of spun cotton. I probably should have forbidden this exchange, but I wanted to take the cotton to Your Highnesses, and it seems to be in abundance. I think the cotton is grown on San Salvador, but I cannot say for sure because I have not been here that long. Also, the gold they wear hanging from their noses comes from here, but in order not to lose time I want to go to see if I can find the island of Japan.

Monday, 24 December 1492:
...your Highnesses may believe that this island (Hispaniola), and all the others, are as much yours as Castile. Here there is only wanting a settlement and the order to the people to do what is required. For I, with the force I have under me, which is not large, could march over all these islands without opposition. I have seen only three sailors land, without wishing to do harm, and a multitude of Indians fled before them. They have no arms, and are without warlike instincts; they all go naked, and are so timid that a thousand would not stand before three of our men. So that they are good to be ordered about, to work and sow, and do all that may be necessary, and to build towns and they should be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs.

Christopher Columbus
“Letter to Queen Isabella of Spain” (1492)
Bartolome de Las Casas (1474-1566) was a Spanish priest and missionary who traveled to the island of Hispaniola in 1502 to convert the Native Americans there to Christianity. Las Casas found that the native people on the island were badly mistreated by Spanish officials and landowners. He did what he could to alleviate the Indians' sufferings and to stop the worst of the abuses. After living more than 40 years in the Americas, Las Casas returned to Spain, where he continued his campaign to prevent further mistreatment and enslavement of the Native Americans. In 1552, he wrote *In Defense of the Indian*, from which the following excerpts are taken.

*Concerning the methods of Spanish soldiers after an attack:*

Once the Indians were in the woods, the next step was to form squadrons and pursue them, and whenever the Spaniards found them, they pitilessly slaughtered everyone like sheep in a corral. It was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel; not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings or having a minute to think at all. So they would cut an Indian's hands and leave them dangling by a shred of skin and they would send him on saying "Go now, spread the news to your chiefs." They would test their swords and their manly strength on captured Indians and place bets on the slicing off of heads or the cutting of bodies in half with one blow. They burned or hanged captured chiefs.

*Concerning the treatment of Native American workers:*

When they were allowed to go home, they often found it deserted and had no other recourse than to go out into the woods to find food and to die. When they fell ill, which was very frequently because they are a delicate people unaccustomed to such work, the Spaniards did not believe them and pitilessly called them lazy dogs, and kicked and beat them; and when illness was apparent they sent them home as useless, giving them some cassava for the twenty- to eighty- league journey. They would go then, falling into the first stream and dying there in desperation; others would hold on longer, but very few ever made it home. I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were gasping and moaning in their death agony, repeating "Hungry, hungry."

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Francisco Coronado (c. 1510-1554) was a Spanish soldier and commander who, in 1540, led an expedition north from Mexico into what is today Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Seeking the legendary seven cities of gold, he was disappointed to find only adobe pueblos. The following is from Coronado's account of his travels in Quivira (northern New Mexico).

The province of Quivira is 950 leagues from Mexico. Where I reached it, it is in the fortieth degree [of latitude]. . . . I have treated the natives of this province, and all the others whom I found wherever I went, as well as was possible, agreeably to what Your Majesty had commanded, and they have received no harm in any way from me or from those who went in my company. I remained twenty-five days in this province of Quivira, so as to see and explore the country and also to find out whether there was anything beyond which could be of service to Your Majesty, because the guides who had brought me had given me an account of other provinces beyond this. And what I am sure of is that there is not any gold nor any other metal in all that country, and the other things of which they had told me are nothing but little villages, and in many of these they do not plant anything and do not have any houses except of skins and sticks, and they wander around with the cows; so that the account they
gave me was false, because they wanted to persuade me to go there with the whole force, believing that as the way was through such uninhabited deserts, and from the lack of water, they would get us where we and our horses would die of hunger. And the guides confessed this, and said they had done it by the advice and orders of the natives of these provinces.

Francesco Coronado,
*Travels in Quivira*

**DOCUMENT D**

In a controversial book, the historian David E. Stannard argues that Columbus and those explorers and settlers who came after him were responsible for the most destructive campaign of genocide in world history. (Genocide means the deliberate destruction of a group of people.) His history traces the violent treatment and even extermination of Indian peoples from 1492 into the 1890s. The following is Stannard's interpretation of Columbus.

Apart from his navigational skills, what most set Columbus apart from other Europeans of his day were not the things that he believed, but the intensity with which he believed in them and the determination with which he acted upon those beliefs. . . .

Columbus was, in most respects, merely an especially active and dramatic embodiment of the European and especially the Mediterranean mind and soul of his time: a religious fanatic obsessed with the conversion, conquest, or liquidation of all non-Christians; a latter-day Crusader in search of personal wealth and fame, who expected the enormous and mysterious world he had found to be filled with monstrous races inhabiting wild forests, and with golden people living in Eden. He was also a man with sufficient intolerance and contempt for all who did not look or behave or believe as he did, that he thought nothing of enslaving or killing such people simply because they were not like him. He was, to repeat, a secular personification of what more than a thousand years of Christian culture had wrought. As such, the fact that he launched a campaign of horrific violence against the natives of Hispaniola is not something that should surprise anyone. Indeed, it would be surprising if he had not inaugurated such carnage.

David E. Stannard,
*American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (1992)

**DOCUMENT E**

Susan Shown Harjo is a poet, writer, lecturer, curator, and policy advocate for the rights of Native Americans. Harjo, a Native American (Cheyenne and Hodulgee Muscogee) disputes the so-called benefits that resulted from Columbus’s voyages and the European colonization of the Americas that followed.

“As Native American peoples in this red quarter of Mother Earth, we have no reason to celebrate an invasion that caused the demise of so many of our people, and is still causing destruction today.”
After all, Columbus did not merely “discover,” he took over. He kidnapped Taínos, enslaved them—“Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold,” Columbus wrote—and “punished” them by ordering that their hands be cut off or that they be chased down by vicious attack dogs, if they failed to deliver the quota of gold that Columbus demanded. One eyewitness accompanying Columbus wrote that it “did them great damage, for a dog is the equal of 10 men against the Indians.”

Susan Shown Harjo
“We Have No Reason to Celebrate an Invasion” (1991)

DOCUMENT F

In the following excerpt, Alphonse Lamartine (1790-1869) a French writer, poet and politician who was instrumental in the foundation of the Second Republic praises Christopher Columbus for bringing the virtues of civil society to the Americas.

All of the characteristics of a truly great man are united in Columbus. Genius, labor, patience, obscurity of origin, overcome by energy of will; mild but persisting firmness . . . fearlessness of death in civil strife; confidence in the destiny – not of an individual but of the human race . . . He was worthy to represent the ancient world before that unknown continent on which he was the first to set foot, and carry to these men of a new race all the virtues, without any of the vices, all of the elder hemisphere. So great was his influence on the destiny of the earth, that none more than he ever deserved the name of Civilizer.

Alphonse de Lamartine
The Life and Times of Christopher Columbus (1887)

DOCUMENT G

Christopher Columbus, who was born and reared in Genoa, Italy, obtained most of his early seafaring experience in the service of the Portuguese. As a young man, he became intrigued with the possibility, already under discussion in many seafaring circles, of reaching Asia by going not east but west. Columbus failed to win support for his plan in Portugal, so he turned to Spain. The Spaniards were not yet as advanced a maritime people as the Portuguese, but they were at least as energetic and ambitious. And in the fifteenth century, the marriage of Spain’s two most powerful regional rulers, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile had produced the strongest monarchy in Europe. Like other young monarchies, it soon grew eager to demonstrate its strength by sponsoring new commercial ventures…. His [Columbus] voyages were inspired as much by his conviction that he was fulfilling a divine mission as by his interest in geography and trade. A strong believer in the biblical prophecies, he came to see himself as a man destined to advance the coming of the millennium. “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth,” he wrote near the end of his life, “and he showed me a spot where to find it.”

Alan Brinkly
“American History: A Survey, Christopher Columbus” (2008)
Unable to celebrate Columbus' exploration as a great discovery, some apologists now want to commemorate it as the great "cultural encounter." Under this interpretation, Columbus becomes a sensitive genius thinking beyond his time in the passionate pursuit of knowledge and understanding. The historical record refutes this, too.

Contrary to popular legend, Columbus did not prove that the world was round; educated people had known that for centuries. The Egyptian-Greek scientist Eratosthenes, working for Alexandria and Aswan, already had measured the circumference and diameter of the world in the third century B.C. Arab scientists had developed a whole discipline of geography and measurement, and in the tenth century A.D., Al Maqdisi described the earth with 360 degrees of longitude and 180 degrees of latitude. The Monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai still has an icon - painted 500 years before Columbus - which shows Jesus ruling over a spherical earth. Nevertheless, Americans have embroidered many such legends around Columbus, and he has become part of a secular mythology for schoolchildren. Autumn would hardly be complete in any elementary school without construction-paper replicas of the three cute ships that Columbus sailed to America, or without drawings of Queen Isabella pawning her jewels to finance Columbus' trip.

This myth of the pawned jewels obscures the true and more sinister story of how Columbus financed his trip. The Spanish monarch invested in his excursion, but only on the condition that Columbus would repay this investment with profit by bringing back gold, spices, and other tribute from Asia. This pressing need to repay his debt underlies the frantic tone of Columbus' diaries as he raced from one Caribbean island to the next, stealing anything of value.

After he failed to contact the emperor of China, the traders of India or the merchants of Japan, Columbus decided to pay for his voyage in the one important commodity he had found in ample supply - human lives. He seized 1,200 Taino Indians from the island of Hispaniola, crammed as many onto his ships as would fit and sent them to Spain, where they were paraded naked through the streets of Seville and sold as slaves in 1495. Columbus tore children from their parents, husbands from wives. On board Columbus' slave ships, hundreds died; the sailors tossed the Indian bodies into the Atlantic.

Because Columbus captured more Indian slaves than he could transport to Spain in his small ships, he put them to work in mines and plantations, which he, his family and followers created throughout the Caribbean. His marauding band hunted Indians for sport and profit - beating, raping, torturing, killing, and then using the Indian bodies as food for their hunting dogs. Within four years of Columbus' arrival on Hispaniola, his men had killed or exported one-third of the original Indian population of 300,000. Within another 50 years, the Taino people had been made extinct [editor's note: the old assumption that the Taino became extinct is now open to serious question] - the first casualties of the holocaust of American Indians. The plantation owners then turned to the American mainland and to Africa for new slaves to follow the tragic path of the Taino.

This was the great cultural encounter initiated by Christopher Columbus. This is the event we celebrate each year on Columbus Day. The United States honors only two men with federal holidays bearing their names. In January we commemorate the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr., who struggled to lift the blinders of racial prejudice and to cut the remaining bonds of slavery in America. In October, we honor Christopher Columbus, who opened the Atlantic slave trade and launched one of the greatest waves of genocide known in history.
We live in a great country. Even those among us who would most like to see change occur are seldom willing to give up the personal freedoms ensured by our constitution and the principles on which it is based. And, generally, we like to celebrate the holidays that remind us of these principles and freedoms. We like our fireworks and our cookouts on the Fourth of July, and we like our turkey and football at Thanksgiving. There is one American holiday, however, which should not be included in that list: the one that celebrates discovery of America by Columbus.

We should cease to celebrate Columbus Day, first because it is ludicrous to say a place already inhabited can be "discovered"; second because Columbus failed to add anything new to the pool of European knowledge; and finally because the celebration of Columbus sends a message of hostility to the very peoples who have paid most dearly to establish the great nation of which we are a part.

Why do I use the word "ludicrous"? Consider what it was that Columbus allegedly discovered: a vast set of lands. Estimates of the pre-Columbian population of these lands vary widely, but numbers proposed in recent years by authorities on New World demographics such as Henry Dobyns suggest some 145 million people lived in the hemisphere in 1492, with some 18 million of those north of Mexico. These estimates are cited by David Stannard in his book *American Holocaust* as well as by others. Stannard goes on to show that this 145 million figure is roughly equal to the estimated 1492 populations of Europe, Russia, and Africa put together. Clearly, the lands visited by Columbus could not be said to be empty by any stretch of the imagination.

But if they were not empty, could these lands be "discovered"? The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "discover" as "To be the first to find, learn of, or observe." How can anyone discover a place which tens of millions already know about? To assert that this can be done is to say that those inhabitants are not human. And in fact this is exactly the attitude many Europeans and early Euro-American displayed toward indigenous Americans. We know, of course, that this is not true, but to perpetuate the idea of a Columbian discovery is to continue to assign a non-human status to those 145 million people and their descendants.

Okay, you may say, so Columbus did not discover America in that sense, but he still contributed important knowledge to the Europe of the time. After all, he was the first non-American to find the New World, and he proved the earth was round. Actually, neither of these statements is true.

Jeffrey Burton Russell, a professor emeritus at University of California-Santa Barbara and an authority on the intellectual history of medieval Europe, has shown in his book *Inventing the Flat Earth* that educated Europeans of Columbus' time did not believe the earth was flat. The few who did believe so, the ones routinely cited by modern historians to support the medieval flat earth idea, were the exceptions rather than the rule, ridiculed by their peers.

There is, indeed, considerable evidence that people from all around the world, including Europe, had visited the Americas for trade, fishing, refuge, and even settlement. Information about these previous voyages is published in numerous books, some sensational, some not. Several scholarly accounts are summarized in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, by James Loewen. Clearly, then, Columbus did not add new knowledge to the sum of what was known by people in Europe, either in terms of the shape of the earth or in terms of the lands of the earth.
Whatever the mystery and controversy may surround the story of Columbus, there can be no doubt about the results of his voyage for both the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas and for the peoples of Africa, and these constitute the most pressing arguments for ending Columbus Day. Most of us are familiar with these results in a general sort of way: we all know that Indian populations were decimated and the remnant peoples pushed westward, and we all know that large numbers of Africans were brought to the Americas involuntarily and enslaved. But few of us are aware of the personal involvement of Columbus in each case.

Columbus was personally and intimately involved in wanton violence against the Native people of the islands of the Caribbean, where he landed. He punished minor offenses against his domination by cutting off the Natives' noses and ears. Resistance only inspired him to full warfare on the island people, using, among other things, hunting dogs to literally tear the Indians apart. Later Columbus set up a tribute system to get the gold he had been unable to find, forcing the people to bring him gold regularly. Those who failed to do so had their hands cut off. Columbus' men hunted the people for sport and used the bodies for dog food. Soon forced labor was added to the list as well, in a system which led to malnutrition and disease. The Native people of Haiti, where Columbus established a colony in 1493, were almost completely exterminated within one generation, due directly or indirectly to Columbus' actions.

Meanwhile Columbus set in motion the machinery which would lead to so much suffering for African peoples. Unconcerned about the depopulation he had caused on Haiti, he merely imported vast numbers of Native people from other islands to do his work for him, depopulating those islands in turn. He also sent large shipments of these people to Europe as slaves, thus beginning the pattern of transatlantic slave trade. Others followed his example, shipping Natives from various parts of North America both to Europe and to the Caribbean, but so many of these people died that the Spanish turned to Africa as their new source for slaves, reversing the direction of human traffic across the Atlantic. The first Africa-to-Caribbean slave trade was carried out by none other than Columbus' son, in 1505--only twelve years from the founding of Columbus' colony.

As Loewen points out with these and other facts, the legacy of Columbus' actions has been profound and long-lived. The pattern of genocide against the indigenous peoples of the Americas has been repeated over and over, and continues today in perhaps a more subtle form. The habit of white dominance over African-Americans which became so integrated into American society during the centuries of slavery remains a central characteristic of our culture. Yet what is important here is not so much to blame Columbus, but to understand what we are doing when we celebrate such a man. The message being sent to Native Americans and to African-Americans by Columbus Day is not merely one of irrelevance, but one of active, overt hostility. Celebrating the father of genocide and slavery in the Americas tells the groups who were victims of those crimes that we as a nation think those things were good and that as a nation we neither respect nor value the peoples so victimized.

I am not suggesting that we abandon any of the features that make America the great country it is, or that we cease to celebrate the principles that we value so much. I am asking instead that we take those very principles on which our country and our patriotic pride are based, and apply them. As Americans, we must cease to endorse this holiday which embodies not our highest values, but their very opposites.
**DOCUMENT J**

The voyage of Christopher Columbus and his diminutive fleet toward the unknown west was not only a prelude to a new historical era. For the brave navigator it was the culmination of years of bold speculation, careful preparation, and struggle against opponents who had belittled his great plan and thwarted its execution.

Expounding the strange doctrine that beyond the ocean stood solid, habitable earth, Columbus had first to make his views plausible to his doubting patrons and then to overcome the seemingly endless array of obstacles with which men of little minds barred the way to the fitting out of a fleet.

The courage and the faith and the vision of the Genoese navigator glorify and enrich the drama of the early movement of European people to America. Columbus and his fellow voyagers were the harbingers of later mighty movements of people from Spain, from Columbus's native Italy and from every country in Europe. And out of the fusion of all these national strains was created the America to which the Old World contributed so magnificently.

This year when we contemplate the estate to which the world has been brought by destructive forces, with lawlessness and wanton power ravaging an older civilization, and with our own republic girding itself for the defense of its institutions, we can revitalize our faith and renew our courage by are collection of the triumph of Columbus after a period of grievous trial.

The promise which Columbus's discovery gave to the world, of a new beginning in the march of human progress, has been in process of fulfillment for four centuries. Our task is now to make strong our conviction that in spite of setbacks that process will go on toward fulfillment.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

“Statement on Columbus Day” (1940)

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**DOCUMENT K**

Howard Zinn (1922-2010) was an American historian, author, playwright, and social activist. He was a political science professor at Boston University for 24 years and taught history at Spelman College for 7 years.

To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and to de-emphasize their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves-unwittingly-to justify what was done. My point is not that we must, in telling history, accuse, judge, condemn Columbus *in absentia*. It is too late for that; it would be a useless scholarly exercise in morality. But the easy acceptance of atrocities as a deplorable but necessary price to pay for progress (Hiroshima and Vietnam, to save Western civilization; Kronstadt and Hungary, to save socialism; nuclear proliferation, to save us all)-that is still with us. One reason these atrocities are still with us is that we have learned to bury them in a mass of other facts, as radioactive wastes are buried in containers in the earth. We have learned to give them exactly the same proportion of attention that teachers and writers often give them in the most respectable of classrooms and textbooks. This learned sense of moral proportion, coming from the apparent objectivity of the scholar, is accepted more easily than when it comes from politicians at press conferences. It is therefore more deadly.

Howard Zinn

“A People’s History of the United States” (1980)
“The Landing of Columbus” (1847) by John Vanderlyn portrays the Age of Discovery. Commissioned by Congress, the work hangs in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.

Mel-O-Toons: Christopher Columbus Video Clip

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuvRFZ4Mxbo