

Columbus, Governor of the New World

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The discoveries of Christopher Columbus were a turning point in history and led to many changes in the world, yet if one examines aspects of Columbus's turbulent career, especially his leadership, it becomes apparent that whilst he was an effective leader at sea, he often lacked the appropriate leadership skills on shore. His excessive responsibilities and total authority, often combined with his inexperience, resulted in many ill judged decisions. In addition, his personality, especially his stubborn and uncompromising nature, hampered his ability to govern effectively. Yet it would be wrong to blame these failures purely on Columbus himself. Many of those around him failed and betrayed him, encumbering him and weakening his leadership.

With hindsight, it is obvious that he was granted too much responsibility. The Spanish monarchs had agreed to grant Columbus the status of a nobleman and to make him admiral, viceroy and governor-general of any lands he might discover (Colliers,1992,vol.7 p.33). These titles gave him wide powers. Being admiral would allow him to judge all commercial matters, viceroy would make him the personal representative of the monarch and governor-general would allow him to act as the supreme civil and military authority. This abundance of authority meant that almost any dispute or conflict on new lands would be his direct responsibility. Unfortunately, it also meant that any grievances would also be aimed directly at him. To make the situation worse, Columbus appointed his own brothers to high positions. Pedro Las Casas, who travelled on the first voyage, described one of Columbus' brothers as possessing virtues which were "not necessarily those of a good leader"(Reinits,1970, p. 67). This monopolisation of power, it could be argued, allowed for hostilities from the settlers to be focused directly on the Columbus family, and it would appear to have inflamed the situation in Isabella, and "further alienated the malcontents at Isabella". (Reinits,1970, p.68)

It must be admitted that Columbus made numerous ill judgements and bad decisions. His initial mistake was in the type of men he selected to accompany him as settlers to the new world. "His choice was not always wise"(Reinits,1970, p.69). Many of them were young aristocratic adventurers, who lacked any aptitude for work and regarded it as a free holiday"(Reinits,1970, p.66). His second mistake was in selecting the unprotected, unhealthy shore of Isabella as a site for a colony. Isabella never prospered (which was the whole aim of the exercise), and Columbus paid it little attention. As discontent grew on the island, many lawless gangs and anti- Columbus factions began to appear. Instead of punishing the gangs for exploiting the natives and taking swift action against them to regain control "Columbus took the attitude that Spanish lives were sacrosanct, and decided to punish the frightened natives who had killed a few of them" (Reinits,1970, p.75). Arguably, this was a disastrous decision because it did not result in his regaining any control or re-establishing any order. Such mistakes were due simply to Columbus' lack of experience, as he seems to have realized himself. On returning to Spain Columbus was weeping "when he declared that any errors he may have made had been through lack of experience rather than want of zeal" (Reinits,1970, p.110)

Being the supreme leader on Isabella proved to be disastrous for Columbus. He had to control a whole society in miniature, with all its accompanying problems. “The unhappy story of the first settlements...with their unending quarrels, hatreds, and rebellions against him.”(Jackdaw). The settlers became “disillusioned and hungry”(Americana,1992,vol.7 p.384). There were complaints about shortages of food and claims from the Spaniards that “they could not eat ‘Indian food’ like maize”(World Book,1992,vol,4 p.213). Columbus tried to calm the rebellion by giving the rebels land and allowing them to enslave the Indians to work it. But this failed to satisfy many. One could justly claim that the measures Columbus took were not actually bad decisions, as they sought to settle the material demands of the settlers, yet it seems that the damage had already been done. Many disappointed settlers soon began to return to Spain and to “spread stories about the ineptitude of Columbus and his brothers as administrators.”(Colliers,1992,vol7,p.35)

Some claimed that he was “too lenient’ (World Book,1992,vol 4,p.213) and “...had little of the tact needed to handle the undisciplined individualists”(Americana,1992,vol7,p.348) It has also been said that “he failed to check the abuses of those under his command”(Americana,1992,vol7,p.349). These assertions may very well be true. It would seem that, if Columbus’ handing of the factional gangs around Hispaniola is any indication of his leadership, it is reasonable to say that he was on that occasion very lenient. He simply failed to control his men. Michele de Cueno, a friend of Columbus who travelled on the second voyage, writes that, upon discovery of an island, an armed party went ashore and headed inland “for purposes of plunder...helping themselves to women and gold.”(rex 68) Such occurrences also point to a leniency, and lack of discipline amongst Columbus’ men. Perhaps, if Columbus had taken swift ruthless action against the first surge of rebels, future rebellions could have been discouraged, but the success of such a strategy could never be a certainty. This on-going failure to keep law and order in the colony resulted eventually in the removal of Columbus’ powers. “The business of discovery and colonial settlement had quickly grown too complex for any one man to manage, especially one whose ideal theatre of action was on the bridge of a ship.”(Colliers, 1992,vol7,p.35)

Columbus’ personality very much effected his ability to lead, as well as effecting how people perceived him as a leader. Columbus was “ a bold and pertinacious explorer, a capable sea commander and a careful and accurate navigator”. (Americana,1992,vol7,p.349) His approach to leadership seems to have been very narrow and uncompromising. “His characteristic obstinacy...his intellectual and spiritual loneliness and his sense of personal mission made him arbitrary and inflexible”(Americana,1992,vol7,p.349). Such obstinacy would no doubt have negatively affected those around him, especially his officers and crew, who may have felt frustrated at Columbus’ lack of compromise and resentment at his stubbornness. For example, during the first voyage Martin Alonso Pinzon, one of the prominent leaders on the expedition, suddenly took one of the ships from Cuba without permission and sailed off “to trade and explore on his own” (Collier,1992,vol7,p.34). Alonso is known to have had many disputes and disagreements with Columbus on that voyage, and his impromptu departure suggests that he was dissatisfied with the admiral’s management. “His tenacity was so great as to be a fault. A man of one idea, and that a radical one, he was regarded as tiresome by most people and was hated by many.”(World Book,1992,vol4,p.214) It also appears that Columbus had “an

unfortunate habit of saying “I told you so” (World Book,1992,vol4,p.214) and this made many people keen to trip him up, and no doubt more willing to disobey him.

Yet the many failures in leadership that occurred in the new world cannot be blamed on Columbus’ own failings. Many of those around him did not fulfil their responsibility and openly defied Columbus’ authority. “officials were sent out from Spain to rule and interfere with him”(Jackdaw) adding further strain on conditions in the new world. After Columbus’ eventual arrest, a man called Ovando was appointed governor of Hispaniola. It was obvious that he refused to cooperate and respect the advice of the admiral. On the fourth voyage, Columbus noticed a hurricane approaching and sent a captain ashore to warn the governor. Ovando laughed it off and sent a large fleet to sea. It was struck by the hurricane, which sank some twenty ships and their crews. Ovando’s foolish decision highlights the failures of the new governor, and shows that some simply refused to acknowledge Columbus’ experience, thereby bringing failure to the colony. It also demonstrates the sort of attitudes Columbus had to overcome. On the same expedition, Columbus played a famous eclipse trick on the natives in order to obtain food for his men. This effective and ingenious idea shows the skilful leadership of which Columbus was capable. In hindsight, he saved the lives of his men from starvation and this makes one wonder whether other leaders could have been so inventive in times of crisis. Columbus was an “impossible man, yet a great man.”(Jackdaw)

Columbus’ leadership skills at sea seem to have deserted him on shore. The overbearing responsibility and authority he was granted by Ferdinand and Isabella, coupled with his inexperience, restricted his ability to cope with the many crises he encountered.. Furthermore his own stubborn disposition made many resentful of him. Yet Columbus was not completely at fault. The failures and irresponsible behaviour of those around him contributed to problems of disorder and leadership in the colony.

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