Christopher Columbus

“In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue; he had three ships and left from Spain; he sailed through sunshine, wind, and rain.” That is the opening line of the poem “1492” by Jean Marzollo about explorer Christopher Columbus. Columbus is credited with discovering the New World, he was a key player in the significant growth in European colonization, he helped increase trade and trade pathways across the Atlantic, and was a well respected individual. Along with the success for which he is recognized, he is also infamous for bringing slavery, disease, and military conquests to the “new” world, which inevitably led to the demise of natives. With all of the successful voyages and modernization with which Columbus was involved, there is still a controversial issue that arises: should Columbus be considered a hero or a villain? I will be examining the traits that make Columbus a man whom some say is a hero and others condemn as a villain. At the conclusion, I will be sharing why I believe that Columbus is a villain.

As a person and explorer, Columbus has been portrayed as a hero and a man who paved the way for the future of the Americas through his positive actions. As Emma Willard, women’s rights activist in the early 1800’s and author of several history textbooks, put it:

“He possessed a teeming imagination, an ardent courage, a glowing zeal, and all those energetic impulses of the soul which lead to high achievement; and, with these noble qualities, he combined judgment the most grave and solid, prudence and patience the most steady and unoffending, piety the most devout, and, what chiefly ensured his success the most uniting perseverance ever manifested by man.” (The Textbook Columbus: Examining the Myth. Page 28).

It’s clear from this description that Columbus was more than just another explorer out to achieve personal goals or gain personal riches through his discoveries. Columbus had the personality
traits of a profound and fearless leader – creativity, bravery, passion – and as such was able to achieve grand things.

The same traits that made Columbus a respected individual would, centuries later, be required to fulfill the American dream. “From the eyes of a free enterprise capitalist, Columbus is an example of the kind of can-do entrepreneur who is the economic ideal of the United States – hardworking, going for what he wants, pushing to make it work, striving against overwhelming odds to succeed.” (How Should We Teach About Columbus – as a Hero or a Villain? A Commentary on Hans Koning’s Columbus: His Enterprise – Exploding the Myth. P. 28) These traits were shared by great American men such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford. In American school systems, students are taught that these men are heroes as much for their historical contributions as for their personal characteristics. It follows, for those two reasons, that students would be taught that Columbus was a hero as well.

Columbus is credited with establishing and increasing trade and trade pathways across the Atlantic, connecting the Afro-Eurasia and the Americas for the first time since the Ice Age. Columbus’ voyages were followed by the movement of previously unknown plants, animals, people, and products between Afro-Eurasia and the Americas; this is referred to as the “Columbian exchange”. It’s hard to conceive of such a significant and influential man as a villain.

Columbus had nothing if not an efficient public relations team. Explorers from Ireland, Mali, and Japan set sail across the ocean long before Columbus – Leif Ericsson beat him across the Atlantic by almost 500 years – but the world then was much different and illiteracy was
rampant. Ericsson didn’t keep any accounts of his travels, and even if he had, the Norseman of that day and age would not have been able to read them. On the other hand, Columbus kept a personal journal during his voyages and lived during the era of the printing press. Journalists during this period capitalized on growing public interest about exploration by publishing collections of Columbus’ accounts. It stands to reason, then, that news of Columbus’ expeditions was widely available long before news of the explorers who had come before him. As one author put it, “[Columbus] certainly was not the first to go to the Americas, but he was the first to get it in print” (How Should We Teach About Columbus – as a Hero or a Villain? A Commentary on Hans Koning’s Columbus: His Enterprise – Exploding the Myth. P. 28).

Upon arrival to the Americas, Columbus used violence to establish order. His aggressive nature manifested itself in the way he treated the local people. Columbus “kidnapped natives even though there was no market for slaves in Europe. He returned with an army, found Indians, and destroyed them” (Dark Side of Columbus Aired – ProQuest). Religious differences formed the basis for some of Columbus’ malicious behavior; those who didn’t share his belief in Catholicism were subjected to religious persecution. Twentieth century author and journalist Hans Koning explains, “mass murders in the name of striking down idolaters and heathens… the Arwak [Indian Americans] were often systematically killed in groups of thirteen by Columbus and his men in remembrance of the savior and his twelve apostles” (How Should We Teach About Columbus – as a Hero or a Villain? A Commentary on Hans Koning’s Columbus: His Enterprise – Exploding the Myth. P. 28).

Despite all of this, it wasn’t until years later that effects of Columbus’ voyages triggered consequences that truly started to tarnish his reputation. The Native Americans lacked immunity
to the European diseases like smallpox, malaria, and measles that were brought over by Columbus and his crew. As a result, Spanish conquest and the subsequent spread of disease toppled both the Incan and Aztec empires. With the natives weakened by disease, the Europeans were easily able to defeat the remaining Native Americans and claim their land.

Time is relative, and it is difficult to justify Columbus’ actions by today’s principles compared to principles of his time. During a speech delivered to the Italian Cultural Center of Washington D.C., according to Donald J. Senese, a former secretary of education, applying today’s principles to previous periods in history results in reflecting on how we may have done a better job if we knew then, what we know now, as well as we are all witness to an evolution of core values over time. Senese explains, “A voyage into fantasy, an ignorance of reality, and a denial of the true historical process” (Columbus: Hero or Villain, pg. 126)

In retrospect, this is a valid point when discussing the legitimacy of the hero vs. villain controversy regarding Columbus; however, the negative ways about him and his aggressive acts cannot be justified by the time period. The types of wrongs that Columbus committed are not justifiable under any circumstances. In order to conclude that Columbus is a hero, these wrongs have to be overlooked entirely. Given the evidence, I believe that Columbus is a villain because he was not actually the first to discover the Americas, he brought slavery and disease overseas, and he behaved aggressively and maliciously towards the natives.

My Comments:

In the third sentence, replace all commas with semi-colons. Otherwise, a good intro.

In paragraph three, change "be" to "are" in line 1.
In the paragraph that begins near the bottom of p. 3, in the fourth line, you might want to add, just to make the point complete, that the "conquest and subsequent spread of disease" occurred over of years from the early 16th to the 17th century, and even later. (textbooks often create the impression that all of this happened rapidly, but the full effects took several centuries).

The sentence about the Senese speech needs to rephrased and changed into two sentences, and its also not clear exactly what he means by "A voyage into fantasy...." (I have the general idea of where he is going, but this is really important viewpoint that must be clearly explained)

In the last paragraph, what you're really doing is applying a universal standard of human rights to judge Columbus's actions. What makes such a standard interesting in terms of Columbus is that he professed to be Christian, and Christianity clearly contains such a universal standard, so one way you could seemingly clinch your point is to note that Columbus did not truly practice the teachings of his faith.

But on the other hand, I agree that even if its wrong to apply modern standards to Columbus, its certainly a stretch to consider him a hero too, given his treatment of the Native Americans.

At the same time, I don't know if his not being the discoverer of American makes him a villain--a "salesmen" perhaps, and maybe dishonest as well, but I'm not sure such behavior is villainous.

Scores in Rubric:

HIST 3030 Controversial Figure Essay feedback: You have received an overall score of at least 42 points. You have exceeded the expectations for this assignment.
Criteria Group 1
Comprehension: You clearly understand a variety of info from diverse sources, but I'm gonna take off a couple of points, because a couple of key issues could've been explicated a bit better. 15/15 Points
Soundness of Argument: Again, its mostly clear, but gets a little bit confusing in couple of places. 13/15 Points
Criteria Group 2
Support: There is only so far you can go with sources, given that this assignment is based on the articles in the course reserve. But in a couple of places I thought maybe an additional sources could've made the argument more convincing. 8/10 Points
Criteria Group 3
Organization: I'm going to take 1 point off here as well, partly because I don't know if the point on him not being first is evidence of villainy. 4/5 Points
Formatting/Grammar: There are a few grammatical/flow issues, but pretty smooth overall. AND I think those citations in the text would be better if they were just the author's name and page number, with the full citation in a bibliography at the end. 3/5 Points
Total Points = 43