



Francesca Testen

*Urbana High School
Urbana, Maryland*

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working Relationships Between Foreign Parties

The first of Columbus' voyages and discovery of several islands in North America in 1492 started the Columbian Exchange, the transfer of flora, fauna, and diseases between the Old and New Worlds.

The discovery of the New World is one of the most important events in the history of the world, and many people remember Columbus' voyages for the impact they had on the entire world without considering the importance they had on the relations between the nations of Europe.

Columbus received financial support for his voyages from the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, despite being from Genoa, Italy. There have been limited speculations as to why the Spanish monarchs would sponsor a foreign sailor such as Columbus. Ferdinand and Isabella seized upon a unique opportunity to spread Catholicism, improve relations between Spain and Italy, and be free of responsibility in the event of a crisis. The Spanish monarchs were probably more interested in their own personal gain and the benefits their country would receive. Regardless of Ferdinand and Isabella's motives, their funding of Columbus' voyages would change the world forever.

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy, the son of a weaver. As a young man, Columbus went on several voyages in the Mediterranean and helped his father with his weaving. In 1471, Columbus made his way to Lisbon and worked as a chart maker and sailed several voyages in the name of Portugal. At the time,

Portugal and Spain were embroiled in a conflict to control the sea and trade with the Indies, a region that included the countries of China, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The Indies contained a wealth of silks, spices, gold, and silver. For years, these commodities were transported over land routes, often being taxed by middlemen between Asia and Europe. Europeans were in need of a new way to reach the Indies; one that was more economical.

With the advent of the caravel, a new type of sailing ship known for its improved speed and maneuverability, European countries felt that a sea route to the Indies would be more effective. In 1488, Bartolomeu Dias, a Portuguese explorer, reached the Cape of Good Hope in Africa, a feat at the time that seemed nearly impossible.

Columbus felt that instead of going East, it would be easier to sail West until he reached the Indies. However, what Columbus proposed was nothing new; the idea of sailing West to the Indies had been proposed for many centuries prior to Columbus but was never done, due to the sheer danger and fear of the unknown. However, Columbus was determined to reach the Indies and cross the vast Atlantic Ocean at any cost. Columbus proposed his idea of sailing westward to King John II, the monarch of Portugal, in the hopes of gaining the money, men, and equipment he would need for his voyage. He was refused and decided to go to the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus first asked the royals to finance his voyage in 1486, but he did not gain their approval until 1492.

During that time, he made numerous attempts to convince the monarchs of the merits of his voyage. He made promises to convert the people of the Indies to Catholicism. This was no doubt a selling point for the royal couple, who were devout Catholics and had been maintaining religious homogeneity in Spain since the late 1470s in what is now known as the Spanish Inquisition.

One of the motives Columbus had for travelling to the Indies was to fulfill his duty as a good Catholic. When Columbus landed on what is now the Dominican Republic, he believed he had landed at his intended destination and not thousands of miles away. In a letter to King Ferdinand he wrote concerning the native people, "I gave them a thousand handsome good things, which I had brought, in order that they might conceive affection for us and, more than that, might become Christians and be inclined to the love and service of Your Highnesses and of the whole Castilian nation ... "

Columbus, upon seeing the native people of Espanola, considered them savage because they did not believe in God like Europeans did. He felt that it was his duty to convert them to Catholicism, not only for his God, but also for the monarchs who sponsored his voyage. Ferdinand and Isabella sponsored Columbus' voyages

because he showed the same devotion to God that they did, and would help convert non-Catholics. Columbus' religious work would help improve Spain's reputation as a devout Catholic nation as well as a new world power.

While Columbus was negotiating with Ferdinand and Isabella, in his native Italy there was a great change occurring. At the time, Italy was a group of separate city states, each with its own identity and government. During The Italian Wars, which started in 1494, after Columbus' first voyage, France and Spain were fighting for control of the Italian states to assert their power.

This would change the dynamic between the three countries, and eventually Spain would have control over Italy. "Not until 1478 did the infamous "Spanish Inquisition" rear its ugly head ... the expulsion or conversion of Sicily's Jews in 1492 followed similar developments in Spain. Former Jews whose conversions to Catholicism were thought to be incomplete were tortured." (Paglia)

This period of tension between the two countries was certainly cause for Italians to dislike the Spanish monarchs. Columbus, an Italian, was sponsored by the monarchs of the nation that were responsible for persecuting and torturing his own people. The Spanish monarchs probably sponsored Columbus because they may have seen his nationality as a way to improve the tense relationship that Spain and Italy had at the time. Columbus served as the image of a true and loyal Catholic Spaniard, despite the fact that he was from Italy. Perhaps Ferdinand and Isabella hoped to encourage Italians to view them positively because of their support of an Italian sailor.

As the ruler of a country, one is responsible for the actions of their citizens. Spanish monarchs may have sponsored Columbus' voyage to the Indies because even though he was representing the Spanish crown, he was of Italian origin. This meant that Ferdinand and Isabella would not be held accountable for his actions. If Columbus were to do something that could be condemned or looked down upon by Spanish citizens, it would not be the responsibility of Spain.

Ferdinand and Isabella could use Columbus' connection to Italy as a loophole if something were to go wrong to protect themselves. In this way, the Spanish monarchs only spent money, not their country's reputation. The freedom from liability was probably another reason why Ferdinand and Isabella decided to sponsor Columbus' voyage, rather than risk their reputation by sponsoring a Spaniard. The voyages of Christopher Columbus not only changed the world, but also helped the monarchs of Spain that financed his voyages. With Columbus' voyages, Spanish monarchs were able to improve their standing among European nations, preserve Spain's image of religious devotion, and kept themselves free of responsibility in the event of a crisis.

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