Name:

**Primary Source: Christopher Columbus’ Own Words**

**Title:**  The Meaning of America

**Author:** Christopher Columbus

**Year:** 1493

**Type:**  letter

**Quotation:**  "They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them"

**Annotation:**

At the time of the first discoveries, Europeans tended to view the New World from one of two contrasting perspectives. Many saw America as an earthly paradise, a land of riches and abundance, where the native peoples led lives of simplicity and freedom similar to those enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the Biblical Garden of Eden.

Other Europeans described America in a much more negative light: as a dangerous and forbidding wilderness, a place of cannibalism and human misery, where the population lacked Christian religion and the trappings of civilization. This latter view of America as a place of savagery, cannibalism, and death would grow more pronounced as the Indian population declined precipitously in numbers as a result of harsh labor and the ravages of disease and as the slave trade began transporting millions of Africans to the New World.

But it was the positive view of America as a land of liberty, liberation, and material wealth that would remain dominant. America would serve as a screen on which Europeans projected their deepest fantasies of a land where people could escape inherited privilege, corruption, and tradition. The discovery of America seemed to mark a new beginning for humanity, a place where all Old World laws, customs, and doctrines were removed, and where scarcity gave way to abundance.

In a letter reporting his discoveries to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) paints a portrait of the indigenous Taino Indians as living lives of freedom and innocence near the biblical Garden of Eden.

**Text:**

....The people of this island [Hispaniola] and of all the other islands which I have found and seen, or have not seen, all go naked, men and women, as their mothers bore them, except that some women cover one place with the leaf of a plant or with a net of cotton which they make for that purpose. They have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them, although they are well-built people of handsome stature, because they are wondrous timid. They have no other arms than the arms of canes, [cut] when they are in seed time, to the end of which they fix a sharp little stick; and they dare not make use of these, for oftentimes it has happened that I have sent ashore two or three men to some town to have speech, and people without number have come out to them, as soon as they saw them coming, they fled; even a father would not stay for his son; and this was not because wrong had been done to anyone; on the contrary, at every point where I have been and have been able to have speech, I have given them of all that I had, such as cloth and many other things, without receiving anything for it; but they are like that, timid beyond cure. It is true that after they have been reassured and have lost this fear, they are so artless and so free with all they possess, that no one would believe it without having seen it. Of anything they have, if you ask them for it, they never say no; rather they invite the person to share it, and show as much love as if they were giving their hearts; and whether the thing be of value or of small price, at once they are content with whatever little thing of whatever kind may be given to them. I forbade that they should be given things so worthless as pieces of broken crockery and broken glass, and lace points, although when they were able to get them, they thought they had the best jewel in the world.... And they know neither sect nor idolatry, with the exception that all believe that the source of all power and goodness is in the sky, and in this belief they everywhere received me, after they had overcome their fear. And this does not result from their being ignorant (for they are of a very keen intelligence and men who navigate all those seas, so that it is wondrous the good account they give of everything), but because they have never seen people clothed or ships like ours.

**Review Questions**

1. How did Europeans view the Americas? How did the Natives see their homeland?
2. What negative images of the Americas did Europeans have in 1493?
3. Who is this letter written to? Who wrote the letter?
4. What were five of Columbus’ impressions of the Taino?
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