Five Hundred Years Later: RECONSIDERING COLUMBUS

"[The] acrimonious debate about the moral questions involved in the European conquest of New World peoples will continue to form one of the many contexts in which we remember Columbus—and judge him."

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What is the Quincentenary of the voyages of Christopher Columbus, with all the hoopla that will be appertaining to it. There will be the usual parades and fireworks. Busts of the man will be recast, and some will be newly created. Commemorative stamps, coins, and medals will appear in bedazzling array. Conferences, replete with learned scholars from all over the world, are being planned. New books and papers are being published, and for many older works about to be republished there will be new and lucrative markets. Schoolchildren by the millions will be shown likenesses of the intrepid Genoan, told of his daring exploits, and required to write appreciative essays about him.

At one level, it all seems entirely fitting and proper, for Columbus long has been regarded by many as America's first great hero. Indeed, at the level of its popular culture during the late 18th century and throughout the 19th, he was one of the few non-Americans to be cast in truly heroic terms. In the patriotic oratory of the age, there often was a juxtaposition of the supposedly decadent Old World and the New World of innocence and virtue. Just when a decaying, declining Old World needed it the most, a New World had been presented to a desperate humanity—or so many a Fourth of July orator assured his listeners.

For those millions whose theory of historical causation was a rather blatant, unapologetic providentialism, it seemed nothing less than the very breath of God that had blown those vessels westward. Throughout history, whenever God had some great work to accomplish on Earth, he called forth a human instrumentality to do his bidding. Thus had it been with Moses; thus it would be with Washington; and thus it was with Columbus. Behind the latter, then, was the Almighty, revealing an America that was to be a haven for the oppressed, a beacon for the world, the hope for universal humanity for all time to come. In such a dramatic and psychologically reassuring scenario, Christopher Columbus was playing on center stage, a European metamorphosed into both an American hero and agent of God.

Even if patriotic tradition and the folklore of our culture long ago transformed Columbus and 1492 into something very special and eminently worthy of celebration, we must remind ourselves of the elemental fact that Americans seemingly have been in a rather celebratory mood for more than one-third of a century. For 10 years or so during the 1950s and 1960s, we either were anticipating or actually participating in the Civil War Centennial. Then we looked ahead to the Bicentennial of the Revolutionary Era. In 1974, there was the great ceremony in the U.S. Capitol on the occasion of the Bicentennial of the First Continental Congress. Noted U.S. historians Merrill Jensen and Cecelia Kenyon, together with that immensely popular Briton-become-American Alistair Cooke, addressed a joint session of Congress and, via television, the American people. Soon, it was time to lift our glasses and our hearts in honor of the Bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence.

During the 1980s, one celebration quickly followed another: the Bicentennial of the Treaty of Paris in 1983, the Bicentennial of the Constitution in 1987, and, in 1989, the Bicentennial of the inauguration of George Washington, the First Congress, and the Supreme Court. This list does not even include 1985's 40th anniversary of the end of World War II, 1989's Bicentennial of the beginning of the French Revolution, or 1990's Year of Benjamin Franklin, which was com-
memorated by a host of events in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Now that we are in the decade of the 1990s, clearly it is 'Columbus' turn.

What is all this celebrating—running almost nonstop from the late 1950s to the present—really about? What does it mean? In one way, the late 20th century seems rather a curious time for so much glee. To be sure, as Americans imbued since the Enlightenment with the idea of human progress, we prefer to look on the bright side of things, to point out the strides we have made in health care, longevity, and quality of life. Even so, in our more balanced moments, we are forced to admit that this century also has been one of death and devastation.

We understandably prefer that face of the 20th century we see in the visages of people like Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Mohandas K. Ghandi, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the Anwar Sadat of his last few years. Yet, we know deep down that our century has other faces, other sides, as Eliot Morison has pointed out: 'It simply will not go away, we beheld anew the countenances of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Idi Amin, and Pol Pot. We recollect the amount of time, energy, and resources we have invested in the creation of the technology of mass destruction. This has been a century of progress and a century of death.

It well may be that we have been doing so much celebrating lately not despite this troubling ambivalence we have about the kind of century we have made, but, rather, because of it. We need to rejoice, and never more so than when we are confined in a debilitating blankness of spirit. Beyond this, there is another important reason why we Americans have been so eager to find things in the past to celebrate Columbus, but for ourselves.

Conflicting biographies

Much of our attention during this Columbian Quincentenary naturally will focus on the Genoan himself. That also was true a half-century ago, as Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard University commemorated an earlier anniversary of the voyages by publishing his pioneering Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus. To many, it remains perhaps the best single work on Columbus ever published. In part, the book's fame rests upon Admiral Morison's meticulously having retraced Admiral Columbus' course to the New World. Most previous biographers, as Morison pointed out, had gotten Columbus only to the water's edge. They had not concentrated on the man actually at sea, "on his chosen element." Because Morison had experienced the watery world of Columbus firsthand and had placed the adventurer in his proper seafaring context, there is a sense of high drama in Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

Even so, there are questions regarding this biography. Was the author simply too adoring of his subject? Discussing the sorrows of Columbus' final years, Morison says: "Waste no pity on the Admiral of the Ocean Sea! He enjoyed long stretches of pure delight such as only a seaman may know, and moments of high, proud exhilaration that only a discoverer can experience." Has Morison interpreted the Admiral of Columbus in much too positive a light? Has he overgeneralized in the last few lines, when he writes: "The whole history of the Americas stems from the Four Voyages of Columbus; and as the Greek city-states looked back to the deathless gods as their founders, so today a score of independent nations and dominions unite in homage to Christopher the stout-hearted son of Genoa, who carried Christian civilization across the Ocean Sea."

Readers desiring a more balanced treatment, or even a decidedly unbalanced one in the other direction, may wish to consult Kirkpatrick Sale's The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy. Here, Columbus is no hero. Sale's Columbus is greedy and cruel—and even an incompetent sailor. He is no bearer of the truth to faraway lands, but the perverser of what had been a New World paradise—before he and his European kind arrived. In a critique of Sale's work entitled "Debunking Columbus" (The New York Times Book Review, Oct. 7, 1990), William H. McNeill, professor of global history at the University of Chicago and a member of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Committee, blasted The Conquest of Paradise, calling various parts of it "ridiculous," "absurd," "silly," and "callow."

One need not accept either Morison's glorification of Columbus as quite literally a Christopher—the bearer of Christ and Christian civilization—or Sale's denunciation of him as a kind of serpent in a new Eden. However, what is clear in both these renditions, and many other scenarios besides, is that it is virtually impossible to keep focused on the person himself. Inevitably, it seems, we go from the flesh-and-blood man to questions of just what he—and 1492—really symbolize. Culturally, environmentally, globally—what does the Columbian Age mean? The debate, almost as old as the age itself, rages on, intensified by this time of commemoration.

To begin with, there is the issue about the rise of modern technology and what it has done for (and to) humankind. The four Columbus voyages and all the traversing of the oceans that was to follow would not have been feasible without the changes in naval architecture and improvements in navigational instrumentation at the dawn of the modern age. A heavier and heavier reliance on technological innovation has been one of the most important phenomena defining our age as "modern."

It is a long way from Columbus' astrolabes and compasses to our atomic bombs and genetic engineering. Nevertheless, we have traveled that road during the last five centuries, and many now are wondering out loud about the wisdom of our having done so. In The Declaration of a Heretic, Jeremy Rifkin has painted a terrifying picture in which our faith is a blind one: he sees it in science and its technological applications has brought us to the brink of annihilation. These technologies and genetic technologies will be, perhaps to destroy the globe, perhaps to manipulate life forms (including our own) until they have been altered beyond all recognition.

What Rifkin leaves out, his critics contend, are all the positive consequences of technological change, the wonders wrought by the Commercial and Industrial Revolutions, even the military hardware that made possible the winning of World War II and perhaps with it the saving of Western civilization. This debate goes on and on, often acrimonious, with no end in sight. Was Columbus the bearer of Christ or of technology?

Columbus also has been made out to be the symbol of the emergence of the nation-state. It was the marital union between Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, and the consequent political union that created something approximating modern Spain, that formed the necessary political and economic context for Columbus' voyages. One by one, the emerging nation-states of Europe mimicked the Portuguese and Spaniards, seeking their own shares of the treasures of these other worlds. By the 17th century, the English and French were in on the act, and there even were places called the New Netherlands and New Sweden. Unified belatedly in the second half of the 19th century, the Italians and Germans predictably had the same dream of empire. In the 20th century, especially in the aftermath of World War II and the breakup of most of these once mighty European empires, the concept of the nation-state has led to a great proliferation.
of countries so that today our very divided world has a so-called United Nations, with a current membership of some 150 polities.

Nationalism is the ideology that justifies, rationalizes, and even makes holy this division of the world’s people into so many contentious and quite often warring realms. Especially since the French Revolution, the fires of nationalism often have burned out of control in the souls of men. Scholars have seen a direct link between nation-state rivalries on the one hand and the devastating wars characterizing the modern era of human history on the other.

Why has modern man allowed himself to get so caught up in nation-state rivalries? Why has his costly, bloody, seemingly endless form of King-of-the-Mountain been our favorite international game? It hardly seems fair to suggest that a Genoan in the late 15th century, a Genoan in the late 19th century, and a Genoan in the late 20th period. Nevertheless, it is true that the man Morison would have us see as a bearer of Christ also was a bearer of the conquistadors and their sins. In those days it was his patron, and he did his bidding.

Columbus stands as symbol, too, for the Europeanization of the world. He and those who followed him in the colonizing centuries to come carried European languages, religion, values, and cultural norms to the Americas, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. What they carried most of all was a sense of European superiority, a sort of cultural yardstick that could be—and was—used to measure non-European peoples everywhere and adjudge them to be somehow gravely deficient. So strong was the grip of ethnocentrism that few challenged it in any serious or sustained way until the birth of cultural anthropology in the late 19th century.

With the sort of cultural anthropology practiced by Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict came the idea of cultural relativism—the refusal to make any prior assumptions regarding the superiority or inferiority of any given culture vis-à-vis another. Even so, Eurocentric theories of value continued to be applied by many, and apologists for empire continued to be popular even after most of the Old European empires had been broken up in the post-World War II period.

Few articulated the European position that Europeanization, whatever its failings, had been a net plus for the world more forcefully than Winston Churchill. In his History of the English-Speaking Peoples, he celebrated the diffusion of English language, law, government, and culture throughout the globe. Yet, what was the balance sheet on Anglicization? What had all this exploration, colonization, commercialization, industrialization, and development accomplished? The title of the final book of his four-volume work answers the question succinctly: out of it all had come the emergence of The Great Democracies.

Many in the Third World, however, have interpreted the coming of Columbus and his fellow explorers very differently. To them, Europeanization more often is synonymous with exploitation both of indigenous peoples and of resources. There is hardly any rejoinder to the contention that Europeanization of the New World has resulted in a net loss in the number of distinct human cultures. This trend began early, when whole tribes sometimes disappeared from Caribbean islands as a result of the Spanish conquest, and continues today. Upwards of 100 distinct human cultures already have been obliterated in Brazil alone because of attempts to destroy the rain forests and impose European patterns of agriculture, cattle-raising, and economic development.

Where indigenous peoples have not been destroyed outright, they generally have seen their cultures profoundly altered by contacts with the Europeans, resulting in an anthropological tragedy of enormous proportions. By the time of the conceptual and theoretical breakthroughs of the 20th-century anthropologists, many cultures no longer were around to be studied. Often, those that were had been so altered by Europeanization that it no longer could be certain just what was being studied. If it is true that one learns to be more fully human by studying human cultures in their vast array of forms, then some portion of our very humanity already has been lost in this process of Europeanization.

Moreover, culture worldwide is being more and more Europeanized, Americanized, and thus homogenized with every passing day. Will we really be better off, happier, more fulfilled, more fully human when we teach the whites. The invaders burst into this paradise of the ‘noble savage,’ plundering, slaughtering, and stealing land. Of all the burdens of guilt that white Americans must bear, we are frequently told, injustice committed against the Indians. Las Casas tells us of the systematic depopulations, as men and women literally were worked to death and their children died from a lack of milk or even were drowned by their mothers in acts of sheer desperation. He relates many horrible stories. For example, “Two of these so-called Christians met two Indian boys one day, each carrying a parrot; they took the parrots and for fun beheaded the boys.” Even though he had been an eyewitness to such deeds, after the fact, Las Casas hardly could believe what he had seen. “My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature, and now I tremble as I write.” Millions had perished, he reports, from war, slavery, and the work in the mines.

As Howard Zinn reminds us in A People’s History of the United States, what Columbus and his men did to people in the Caribbean, “Cortes did to the Aztecs of Mexico and Pizarro to the Incas of Peru.” Even if the European brutality was less in English America than in New Spain, the English settlers could be cruel enough in their own right and were so from the earliest days. When Richard Greenville landed his seven ships in Virginia in 1585, the Indians who greeted him were hospitable. However, when one of them stole a small silver cup, the entire Indian village was sacked and burned. Why, Zinn asks, should this American history be told only from a European point of view and in a way that justifies the brutal deeds of the conquerors? What about the conquered? Who tells their story? What about the victims?

The controversy about whether the Indians may be seen best as innocent victims is certain to be a part of any commemoration of 1492 and what flowed from it. Historian Forrest McDonald believes it is the Europeans, not the Native Americans, who are more likely to be treated unfairly in our history books nowadays. “It is fashionable for today’s middle-class man of every manner of crime against the American Indians.” The latter are generally depicted as simple, peaceful, happy, and free people who were perfectly attuned to nature and had wondrous things to teach the whites. The invaders burst into this paradise of the ‘noble savage,’ plundering, slaughtering, and stealing land. Why has modern man allowed himself to get so caught up in nation-state rivalries? Why has his costly, bloody, seemingly endless form of King-of-the-Mountain been our favorite international game? It hardly seems fair to suggest that a Genoan in the late 15th century, a Genoan in the late 19th century, and a Genoan in the late 20th period. Nevertheless, it is true that the man Morison would have us see as a bearer of Christ also was a bearer of the conquistadors and their sins. In those days it was his patron, and he did his bidding.

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smallpox. Eventually, measles, malaria, yellow fever, and other infectious diseases killed off even more Native Americans. In McDonald's scenario, it is all a matter of disease, not morality. "No question of morality is involved: nothing the newcomers did, apart from simply being there, had anything to do with the demise of the red man." This contention is a sweeping one, and it hardly is shared by the bulk of today's historians. Eugene Genovese, for instance, does agree with McDonald on one point, but then stridently rebuts him on several others: "I have some sympathy for Professor McDonald's outburst against the silly moralizing that tries to make Americans out to be premature Nazis." History is replete with conquest and slaughter, and certainly not all of it is the work of Europeans. Some considerable portion has been of Mongol, Muslim, Hindu, Zulu, and Aztec origin, just to mention a few of the other perpetrators of history's most untoward deeds.

What Genovese strongly objects to is the McDonald position that is the Indians were somehow, "by European standards, dirty, treacherous, ignorant, and superstitious." Were the Indians as a whole really treacherous? "Toward whom?" Genovese asks. "About what? Did the United States government ever make a treaty with the Indians that it did not break? Were the Indians more treacherous than the princes of Renaissance Italy, those much admired benefactors of the early modern world? More treacherous than the Borgia Pope Alexander VI or his famous daughter Lucrezia?"

Europeans' legacy

This acrimonious debate about the moral questions involved in the European conquest of New World peoples will continue to form one of the many contexts in which we remember Columbus—and judge him. So, too, will all the questions having to do with the long-range environmental impact of the Europeanization of the world. Even if we object to "silly moralizing," we must admit that the Indians of North America lived here for perhaps 20-30,000 years with very little by way of environmental impact. By contrast, those of European descent have changed the environment tremendously in the five centuries of the Columbian period, especially the last two. It may well be that it is the bulldozer, not the cross, that now is our truest symbol. If, in an earlier time, we would not think of letting New World "savages" stand in our way, neither, later on, would we let nature herself. Again and again, nature has given way as we have bulldozed out what we thought would be our better future. Now, however, we have reached a point where we wonder out loud whether the environment can continue to absorb these devastating onslaughts from modern man. We wonder about our very vision of the world. Could it conceivably be bogus?

There is no going back. Those of European descent have created a history since 1492 and, like all histories, once made can't be unmade. In a real sense, for better or for worse, it is the story of that intrepid Genoan—and all he stood for then, all he stands for still, and all that we have made of what Europe long ago discovered. In these five centuries of the Columbian Age, we suspect that we have increasingly worshipped at shrines having little connection with the Christianity that Columbus dreamed of being the bearer.

At one shrine, we dutifully bow the knee to technology. We say a prayer, hoping against hope that we, even at this late date, are just one little technological innovation away from that very best world of our own imagining. At another shrine, we look backward before the nation-state. Billions of worshipers of every race and clime bow with ardently believing this god to be the answer. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that these wars of the modern age, so devastating both in human and material terms, have much to do with our nation-states or even with nationalism. After all, we can not really be expected to believe that we worship a god who has failed.

Yet, important as they are, these are really just some of many side altars. The altar that we approach now is for the worship of Europeanization itself. It has brought us and to the world all the wonders of progress—commercialization, industrialization, and vast improvements in the quality of life. This is the god who is multilingual, who has spoken to us at one time or another in Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, German, Italian, and many other tongues. On bended knee, we offer up our thanks for Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke, and Newton. With Churchill there beside us, we thank this god of ours for spreading the truths of democratic politics around the globe. This worship is good for us, makes us feel all right again, holds our little worlds together.

In due course, though, our worship ends, and our minds turn again to remembering Christopher Columbus after 500 years. "What are we to do? What are we to think? At least we know the answer to the first part of our query. We will celebrate. Of that we may be sure, even if we are a little more uncertain now as to just what it is that we will be celebrating—progress, genocide, democracy, plunder, what? The second question is even more troubling. We can not begin to answer it in one word, or a few, or even many. Before we take our leave of him, we look one last time into the eyes of the Genoan adventurer. Columbus, we ask, just what have you wrought?