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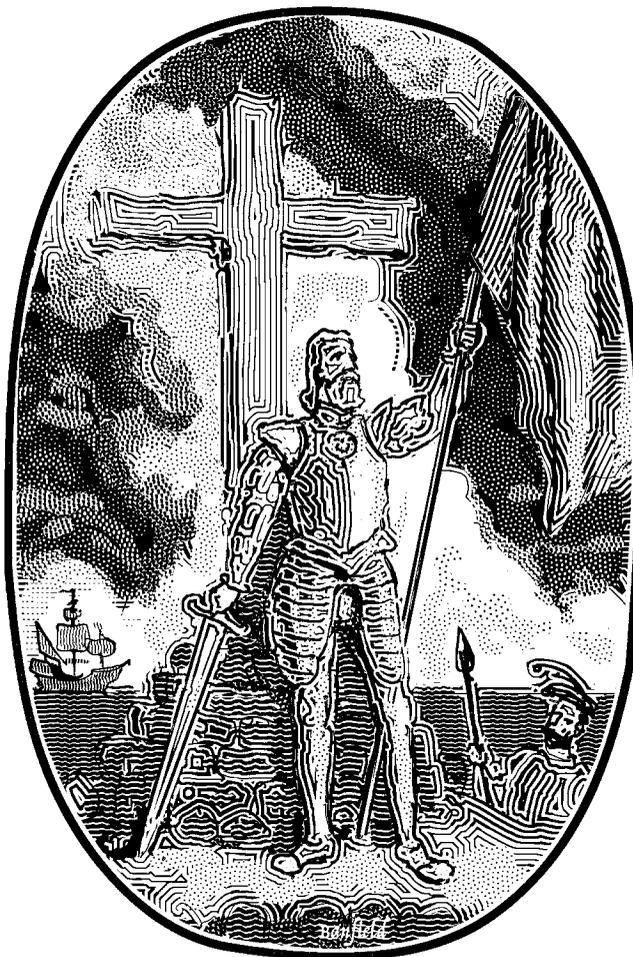
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Essay by Robert Royal

# DISCOVERING COLUMBUS

*Heroes and history in an ideological age.*



**B**ARTOLOMÉ DE LAS CASAS, A DOMINICAN friar active in the early years of the European missionary efforts in the Americas, earned the name “Defender of the Indians” because of his passionate diatribes against exploiters of native peoples in the New World. Along with other philosophers and theologians in Spain, Rome, and elsewhere in the Old World, he drew on classical and Christian traditions to argue that the newly encountered peoples were rational beings—human persons—who had rights and warranted respect on both secular and religious grounds. Naturally, his stance drew the ire of vested political and economic interests, which he stoutly resisted and rebutted. He also knew Christopher Columbus personally and, despite being highly critical of some of the things he did, spoke of his “sweetness and benignity.” Las Casas defended Columbus against people who blamed him for the disorders and violence that occurred follow-

ing the first Spanish contacts with indigenous peoples. The great explorer’s missteps, las Casas said, were the result of ignorance of divine law and misjudgments about how to proceed: “Truly. I would not dare blame the admiral’s intentions for I knew him well and I knew his intentions were good.”

During the riots that took place in the United States following the death of George Floyd this spring, several statues of Columbus were toppled. After the statue in Milwaukee fell, video circulated of people—mostly young white women—taking turns stomping on it. This was presumably because they saw him as a killer of native peoples who introduced slavery and racism into the Americas. Whatever the reason, however, it’s quite certain that, unlike las Casas, the mobs knew little or nothing about the person against whom they raged. And probably didn’t much care to, because it is now taken as self-evident that the whole history of Western exploration and expansion

is nothing but a tale of exploitation, imperialism, and “white” supremacy. Any attempt to sort out the good and bad present in the discovery of the Americas, as in all things human, amounts to making excuses for genocide and racism.

## Weaponizing History

**I**T USED TO BE POSSIBLE TO ASSUME THAT any person who had graduated from high school (even grade school) would be familiar with at least a few real facts about what happened in 1492. That this is no longer the case reflects failing educational institutions, to be sure, but also, it needs to be said, an anti-American—even an anti-Western and often anti-Christian—impulse within the West itself. You don’t need to believe that, say, the French or Communist revolutions, for example, benefitted the human race to take the trouble to know dates like 1789 or 1917 and



something about what they mean. Yet the year in which a far greater change came into the world—beginning the colossal process by which the various nations and continents truly became one global, interconnected *world*—is now, for many, something to be ashamed of, even to denounce.

When the first edition of my book *1492 and All That* appeared in 1992, the contrarian view was already starting to take hold. During the 1992 quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage, many of us who had tried to think through what it meant—both good and bad—found it difficult to say anything positive about it in print, on television and radio, or even in academic settings without being scolded. More than three decades later, scholars have done what they are meant to do: uncover even more of the rich, inspiring, frightening, appalling, glorious, and inglorious features of the Age of Discovery. But there exists something approaching a taboo about saying anything positive about Columbus or any of the other European explorers. People ready to condemn him for every ill that has occurred on these shores, strangely, would never think of *crediting* him with the many goods that have been achieved as well. And it would not be stretching things to say that the blanket rejection of Columbus has become something of a poorly informed metaphor for the repudiation of virtually all of Western history.

And it doesn't stop there. As historian Wilfred McClay has observed:

The pulling down of statues, as a form of symbolic murder, is congruent with the silencing of dissenting opinion, so prevalent a feature of campus life today. In my own academic field of history, it is entirely of a piece with the weaponizing of history, in which the past is regarded as nothing more than a malleable background for the concerns of the present, and not as an independent source of wisdom or insight or perspective.

He adds:

Those caught up in the moral frenzy of the moment ought to think twice, and more than twice, about jettisoning figures of the past who do not measure up perfectly to the standards of the present—a present, moreover, for which those past figures cannot reasonably be held responsible. For one thing, as the Scriptures warn us, the measure you use is the measure you will receive. Those who expect moral perfection of

others can expect no mercy for themselves, either from their posterity or from the rebukes of their own inflamed consciences.

Shakespeare's Hamlet had the old Christian wisdom as well as mere human decency exactly right when he observed: "Use every man after his desert and who shall 'scape whipping?"

These truths have even greater significance if we consider that what is at stake is not merely the historical evaluation of Columbus or Europe or "white privilege," but the meaning of civilization itself. Given the universal evidence of human sinfulness and imperfection, we put ourselves in the position of preferring to have no cultural roots at all if we demand only to allow into public spaces and permissible discourse what we believe—on unclear grounds—is now the perfection of moral vision. One of the central things

**It disturbs some people to learn that slavery, genocide, imperialism, even ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism were present in the Americas long before any outsider ever set foot there.**

I sought to demonstrate in 1993 is that the radical critique of the West could not have happened without the very values—equality, human dignity, liberty—that spring from the Western tradition itself, and more specifically the Christian understanding that sees every human person as a child of God, a vision that has existed in no other civilization.

#### Slavery and Conquest

**S**LAVERY, FOR EXAMPLE, HAS BEEN A universal in human history from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to China, classical Greece and Rome, as well as Russia, the scattered kingdoms of Central Africa, the First Nations of Canada, various other North American tribes, the great empires of the Mayans and Aztecs, the Ottoman Empire, and the antebellum American South. Chattel slavery—outright "ownership" of other human beings—which is often said to have been invented in the American South, actually can be dated back at least to the Code of Hammu-

rabi (1750 B.C.) and ancient Egypt. Slavery's elimination, on the other hand, was almost entirely the work of "white" Christians like Las Casas, beginning close to the time of the discovery of the Americas, and later British Quakers and Methodists drawing on Biblical sources. It still exists, of course, but in places lacking a Christian sensibility.

It disturbs some people to learn that slavery, genocide, imperialism, even ritual human sacrifice and cannibalism were present in the Americas long before any European or other outsider ever set foot there. But they were. Slavery was a part of Native American traditions, both before and after the arrival of Europeans. It was, of course, common in the large empires, as in empires on other continents. But it also existed in what is today Canada, particularly the Pacific Northwest, and almost everywhere. As late as the notorious Trail of Tears—the mid-19th-century series of forced relocations of several tribes from the American Southeast to west of the Mississippi—there were black slaves, owned by Native Americans, among those making the trek. A 2018 *Smithsonian* magazine article, "How Native American Slaveholders Complicate the Trail of Tears Narrative," recalls how awful that episode was, in which at least 4,000 died. The article also explains:

What you probably don't picture are Cherokee slaveholders, foremost among them Cherokee chief John Ross. What you probably don't picture are the numerous African-American slaves, Cherokee-owned, who made the brutal march themselves, or else were shipped en masse to what is now Oklahoma aboard cramped boats by their wealthy Indian masters. And what you may not know is that the federal policy of Indian removal, which ranged far beyond the Trail of Tears and the Cherokee, was not simply the vindictive scheme of Andrew Jackson, but rather a popularly endorsed, congressionally sanctioned campaign spanning the administrations of nine separate presidents.

And there was genocide by Native Americans as well, even among groups for whom any decent person will feel a great deal of sympathy. Amid this year's July 4th celebrations, controversy erupted over the American presidents represented on Mount Rushmore and even the U.S. government's ownership of the site. But the history of the place tells a melancholy tale. In 1776, the very year that the American colonies declared their independence, the Lakota Sioux conquered the Black



Hills, where Mount Rushmore is located. They wiped out the local Cheyenne who held it previously, and the Cheyenne had taken it themselves from the Kiowa. As one informed historian pointed out:

The Lakota Sioux arrived in the West after being on the losing end of a war with other tribes in Minnesota in the late 1700s. Known as the Lakota, or simply the Sioux, they waged genocidal war on other tribes before they took over the Black Hills from the Cheyenne.... [T]hey did the exact same thing that the United States did to drive the Lakota out.

It's very difficult to escape the network of human evils that have existed throughout history. The American author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote a highly influential book in 2015 on the history of racism and white supremacy, *Between the World and Me*, in the form of a kind of message to his son, Samori. The son was named after a late 19th-century African leader, Samori Ture, a devout Muslim who fought French colonialism in West Africa—but who also captured and sold black slaves, in time-honored African tradition, to finance his empire-building.

To recall such things is not to excuse Europeans or Christians who should have behaved better then and still should now. But it is to get a clearer picture of what we as a species have been, rather than the fictional representations of purely good and purely bad actors that have displaced the truth.

It's common today to charge Christians with violence or religious bigotry not only toward Native Americans, but even against Muslims. During the 2020 riots one Islamic group called for renaming St. Louis, Missouri, because the French king for whom the city is named—Louis IX of France (1214–1270)—had fought against both Jews and Muslims. In modern pluralistic societies, where large numbers of people with very different beliefs must try to live together in some sort of civic orderliness, such religious tensions obviously need to be avoided. But it's not so easy to transpose postmodern American concerns into the Middle Ages, let alone the Age of Discovery.

Few Westerners know of it, but in 1453—less than 40 years before Columbus arrived in the Caribbean—the Ottoman Turks finally overthrew Constantinople, capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for over a thousand years, and continued with further aggressions. This process had a long history.

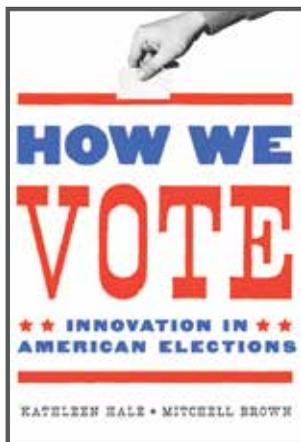
Muslims had repeatedly made incursions into the Holy Land, Spain (for 800 years), Rome, Sicily (where they ruled for almost a century), and elsewhere. It's no surprise, then, that Louis IX fought Muslims, even as he was beyond all dispute one of the most saintly and charitable of kings. In the context of his time, preventing Muslim advances preserved Christian civilization.

The downfall of Constantinople in 1453 sent shockwaves throughout Europe. In Spain, one reason why Columbus's sponsors, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, converted or expelled Muslims by fits and starts was fear of Ottoman support for rebels. And it didn't stop there. Muslim invaders pressed on to the Balkans and other Western territories, even reaching Vienna in 1683, where they were only turned back by the last-minute arrival of Polish cavalry.

### Noble and Ignoble Savages

IF REVISIONIST VIEWS OF EUROPEAN NATIONS in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance tend to make them look like nothing so much as *Game of Thrones*, recent scholarship about pre-Columbian America makes much of the New World appear not so very different. Our picture of native peoples in

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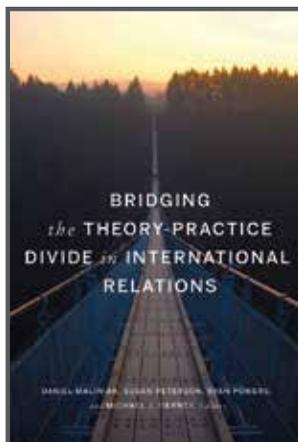


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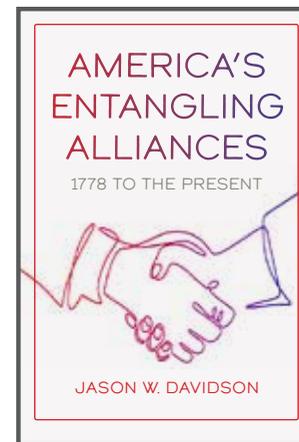


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the English-speaking world has been strongly shaped by images of the relatively thinly settled Indian lands that the English colonists encountered (especially after diseases from Europe felled large percentages of native communities). It was from them that we derived the notion of the “noble savage”: physically fit, independent, living lightly on the land. That picture is not entirely wrong—for a rather small segment of indigenous populations. It depends, however, on focusing on small tribes (about 100,000 natives lived in all of what is now New England in the early 1600s, about one sixth the current population of Boston) and ignoring continual tribal warfare with its scalplings, kidnappings, and torture of captives. Most of the native settlements along the New England shores, for example, were protected by ramparts from attacks by warriors of other tribes.

When it comes to the large city-states and even empires that have been uncovered in Meso- and South America in recent decades, the argument for a universal human nature (and not an entirely happy one) across differences of culture, place, and age gains significant support. People who have actually looked into, say, Aztec civilization know that Tenochtitlán—the core of today’s Mexico City—appeared to the earliest Spanish ex-

plorers, some of whom had sailed to the most opulent Mediterranean cities, as far richer in buildings, population, foodstuffs, and various cultural achievements than any city in Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It was also the center of an empire—perhaps containing as many as 5 million people—built by conquest over neighboring peoples and maintained by human sacrifice to bloodthirsty gods who required human blood to maintain the equilibrium of the world.

The other great civilizations of the Americas—Olmecs, Toltecs, Maya, Incas—also produced impressive urban centers and political, economic, and social networks. So much so that as archaeologists and others have uncovered the remains of those civilizations estimates of the population of the Americas have soared wildly. Some of the increase is doubtless owing to the desire of some scholars to compensate—overcompensate, say other scholars—for the relatively small numbers once thought accurate. Estimates now range from 8 to almost 120 million inhabitants. Obviously discrepancies of more than an order of magnitude call into question the methods used to produce them. But it is now beyond dispute that large urban centers existed with extensive networks and surrounding areas to feed and supply them.

But it’s also beyond dispute that these cities were not situated in an unsullied earthly paradise. They cultivated, but also depleted, natural resources; fought typical wars of conquest with one another; rose, flourished, declined, and disappeared, just like human habitations in other parts of the world. Most practiced slavery. They changed whole parts of the natural landscape—from the high plain of Mexico City to the riverbanks of the Amazon. That a much more idealized version of native peoples has survived all these discoveries reflects a hunger in postmodern Western culture for something “other” and purer. But projecting your needs onto other peoples, and ignoring their actual lives, dehumanizes them in a sense. No people will long be held in esteem—once real history enters into the picture—if they are held up as an unreal idealization that has never existed since the Garden of Eden, owing to the sinfulness, limited vision, and weakness of our universal human nature.

#### More Than a Blank Slate

**T**HAT APPLIES TO CURRENT CRITICS OF the past as well. If you’re going to pull down statues of Columbus because he and the culture out of which he came were

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imperfect, what ideals will you offer in their place? In a review of *1492 and All That*, the great Oxford historian J.H. Elliott suggested that it was regrettable that a book like it even needed to be written. But it did. And still does—now partly re-written and amplified to reflect some of the historical work that has been done in intervening years and to freshen arguments that may prevent us from making rash, destructive judgments about some crucial moments in our historical development.

A remarkable shift in how we view human history has become dominant since my book first appeared. For the past two centuries, there had been a widespread belief in human progress, driven by science, technology, and pragmatic uses of reason. There remained some sense that great men—Columbus, Isaac Newton, and Thomas Jefferson among them—could alter the course of history.

Much of that understanding simply melted away in the anti-Western ideological triumphs of the past 50 or so years. Columbus has become, for many today, a blank slate on which to project the loves and hatreds of our time: Euro-centrist, racist, imperialist, “genocidal maniac,” and so on. An otherwise sober historian has even tried to portray him as a kind of Don Quixote figure who read too many chivalric romances in his youth, and then as a poor, unlettered, and ambitious adult sought, now as a kind of Sancho Panza, to make his fortune carrying out fantastic feats of derring-do on the high seas. That Columbus could lead a respectable historian into such elaborate nonsense reflects the ways that the voyages that inaugurated

“the world” can make even the soberest minds slightly intoxicated.

But there’s worse. The Enlightenment belief in ever-advancing progress—unreliable, incomplete, and deluding a vision though it was—has been replaced by a crushing materialism, joined incoherently with visions of a technologized human future. There’s no better example of the process than the worldwide success of Yuval Noah Harari’s *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011), which dismisses virtually all of history as a mere prelude to a post-human future that seems to leave him and his millions of readers untroubled, though untethered to anything recognizably congenial to *Homo sapiens*.

Part of the difficulty in properly assessing Christopher Columbus the man is that it took a complex, driven figure to carry out what he eventually did. So it’s possible to say he was ambitious—because he was. And sought honors—which he did. And wealth, too. And that there were religious motives mixed in with these others. Columbus, like many in his time, was a strong believer whose faith deepened as he grew older—not exactly an unknown phenomenon even today. But his religious side has looked, at least to many recent historians, like either a hypocritical cover for worldly motives or a benighted medieval superstition that he’d clung to well into what was then the Renaissance. Yet the notion of preaching the Gospel to all nations and using the riches of the East to recover Jerusalem from the Muslims—however strange an aspiration to modern eyes and ears—made perfect, even sublime sense in his day.

A modern reader need not be a believer to understand that the mentality of someone—and such an unusual someone, in a different age, half a millennium ago—should not be reduced to categories that come easily to mind for us. Indeed, anyone who would want to understand both the man and the things he achieved—and didn’t achieve—should expect to have to step outside at least some habitual assumptions. If that doesn’t happen, we will be proceeding under a schizophrenia that afflicts much of the Western world today: we take the principles of human dignity and liberty as self-evident—which they are not, anywhere outside the Christian civilization of the West—and at the same time repudiate the very source of the things we hold as most morally certain.

I am quite aware that there are many people who don’t care about such efforts, who only want to feel the thrill of sweeping condemnations of imperfect historical figures, who like ourselves were deeply shaped by their own times, with their own contemporary insights and myopia, as well as occasional steps toward something greater than they could articulate. Yet it’s always worth the effort to pursue truth over uninformed emotion. And besides, the history of both the Native American peoples and the Europeans who came to these shores is much more interesting and instructive than simple morality tales.

*Robert Royal is president of the Faith & Reason Institute. This essay is adapted from the Introduction to his new book, Columbus and the Crisis of the West (Sophia Institute Press).*

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