

## Good Guy or Dirty Word?

Revisionists see Christopher Columbus as a precursor of ecological despoliation and Indian genocide

By JOHN ELSON

"No man has done more to change the course of human history than Christopher Columbus." That was the conclusion of Edward Channing's 1905 classic, *History of the United States*. To generations of American schoolchildren, Columbus has been the all-time heroic figure portrayed by Channing and, more romantically, by Washington Irving in 1828: "a man of great and inventive genius" whose "ambition was lofty and noble." No wonder that Pope Pius IX wanted to make the discoverer of America a saint, or that more places in the English-speaking world are named for the Admiral of the Ocean Sea than for any other historical personage except Queen Victoria.

How the pendulum has swung. In some quarters nowadays, the name of the man who sailed the ocean blue in 1492 is a downright dirty word. Russell Means, the Native American activist, says the explorer "makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent." In a new revisionist biography, *The Conquest of Paradise* (Knopf; \$24.95), author and environmentalist Kirkpatrick Sale portrays Cristóbal Colón (to name Columbus correctly) as a grasping fortune hunter, a mediocre sailor and an incompetent governor of Spain's New World colonies, whose legacy to the Indians he "discovered" was rapine, servitude and death.

In the U.S. and Latin America, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to the New World is still two years away, but already it is marred by snappish and divisive quarrels over the meaning of the event. Native American zealots like Means see Columbus as a precursor of exploitation and conquest. Hispanic Americans want to use the quincentenary to stress the glories of Spanish culture in the New World. Environmentalists see the anniversary as a reminder that the arrival of Europeans meant the despoliation of the New World and as a potential inspiration to modern-day Americans to save what is left of the hemisphere's threatened landscape.

The Columbus anniversary has also sparked religious battles. In May the governing board of the predominantly Protes-



*El Almirante Christopher Colon Descubre la Isla Española, y haze poner una Cruz, etc.*

The great explorer greets native Tainos on Hispaniola island

Is the quincentenary of 1492 a time for penitence or jubilation?

tant National Council of Churches resolved that the quincentenary should be a time for penitence rather than jubilation. "For the descendants of the survivors of the subsequent invasion, genocide, slavery, 'ecocide' and exploitation of the wealth of the land," read the resolution, "a celebration is not an appropriate observance of this anniversary." Mario Paredes, executive director of the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center, called the council's statement a "racist depreciation of the heritages of most of today's American peoples, especially Hispanic."

At its annual meeting in Washington last week the National Conference of Catholic Bishops also joined the Columbus fray, in a pastoral letter on the evangelization of the Americas. The text acknowledged that indigenous Americans' encounter with Europeans was "harsh and painful." Nonetheless, the bishops went on, "the effort to portray the history of the encounter as a totally negative experience in which only violence and exploitation of the native peoples were present is not an accurate interpretation of the past."

If anything, the Columbus controversy is more intense in Latin America and the Caribbean. Fidel Castro has renounced his own Hispanic background to declare himself an Indian and denounce the conquerors for raping and enslaving "our people"—the ultimate, perhaps, in expropriation. Conservative prelates of the Latin American Catholic bishops' conference (CELAM), which will meet in Santo Domingo in 1992, are pushing for an anniversary declaration that stresses the heroism of missionaries who tried to defend the Indians from conquistadorial cruelty. But CELAM will also sponsor a "people's tribunal" of minority representatives and leftist adherents of liberation theology, who propose to pass judgment on 500 years of European conquest.

In truth, there is much to censure and correct in the record that begins with Columbus. U.S. textbooks are just beginning to give proper emphasis to pre-Columbian cultures. Sale's iconoclastic biography is as one-sided as a lawyer's brief, but the evidence of European disdain for the conquered Eden and its inhabitants is hard to challenge. Between 1492 and 1514, as a result of disease and accumulated atrocities, the native Taino population on the island of Hispaniola shrank from an estimated 8 million to 28,000. By 1560 the Taino were extinct.

But good history calls for careful distinctions. In the Jesuit weekly *America*, Rutgers Professor James Muldoon has argued that the National Council of Churches' resolution is unhistorical. The council blamed Europeans for introducing slavery into the various new worlds they encountered, ignoring evidence that the Aztec and Inca empires were also based on forced servitude. The resolution virtually ignores a reality highlighted by the Catholic bishops' pastoral: that the evils condemned by the council were first noted, in angry detail, by early Spanish defenders of Indian rights like the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas.

Stripped of its pious rhetoric, Muldoon argues, the council's resolution amounts to a "condemnation of the entire history of the modern world." As such, it represents a peculiar form of intellectual masochism, selectively judging the past by the imperfect standards of the present. Moreover, even sweeping apologies for historical sins are unlikely to satisfy the angry advocates of belated justice for Native Americans, some of whom would settle for nothing less than canceling the festivals entirely. —With reporting by Cathy Booth/Miami and Michael P. Harris/Washington





## The Spanish Empire — in the Americas — Colonization or Exploitation?

Critical Thinking: In this section you will analyze opposing viewpoints on the legitimacy of the Spanish colonial empire in the New World.

Many of the cultural achievements of Native American peoples such as the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas were impressive. However, the level of technology in the Americas was far more primitive than that of Europe. In the estimate of one historian today, "By A.D. 1500, the New World had reached the stage of civilization that Egypt and Mesopotamia had attained about 2500 B.C.": Given the superiority of European technology, did 16th-century Spain have the right to create a colonial empire in the Americas? The Spaniards of that period debated the issue themselves. Two men who were deeply involved in this debate were Juan Gir6s de Sepulveda (hu6in h6 n6s' d6 sa pil'va d6j and Bartolom6 de Las Casas (b6ir 6'6'6 ma' d6 las k6's6s6l. Las Casas (1474-1566) was a priest who participated in the Spanish colonizing of the West Indies. He later became known as the "Apostle of the Indies" and "Protector of the Indians" because he criticized Spanish colonial policies in the New World. He sent his account of Spanish brutality to the ruler of Spain, Charles V, who in 1550 gathered a tribunal of lawyers and theologians to discuss the claims of Las Casas. Sepulveda (14907-1573) gave evidence at the tribunal against Las Casas' charges. The first of the following readings is an excerpt from Sepulveda's book, *The Second Democrates, or Concerning the Just Cause of the War Against the Indians*.

The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men; for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races and the most merciful, between the most intemperate [lacking in self-control] and the moderate and temperate, and, I might even say, between apes and men.

Compare, then, these gifts of prudence, talent, magnanimity [generosity], temperance, humanity, and religion with those possessed by these half-men in whom you will barely find the vestiges [traces] of humanity, who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs. Well, then, if we are dealing with virtue, what temperance or mercy can you expect from men who are committed to all types of intemperance and base [morally low] frivolity [foolishness], and eat human flesh? And do not believe that before the arrival of the Christians they lived in the pacific [peaceful] kingdom of Saturn [ruler of the Golden Age in Classical mythology] which the poets have invented; for, on the contrary, they waged continual and ferocious war upon one another

with such fierceness that they did not consider a victory at all worthwhile unless they satisfied their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies.

*The Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World...*

Furthermore these Indians were otherwise so cowardly and timid that they could barely endure the presence of our soldiers, and many times thousands upon thousands of them scattered in flight like women before Spaniards so few that they did not even number one hundred. . . . Although some of them show a certain ingenuity [skill] for various works of artisanship [craftsmanship], this is no proof of human cleverness, for we can observe animals, birds, and spiders making certain structures which no human accomplishment can competently [adequately] imitate. . . . They have established their nation in such a way that no one possesses anything individually, neither a house nor a field, which he can leave to his heirs in his will, for everything belongs to their masters whom . . . they call kings (chiefs), and by whose whims they live, more than by their own, ready to do the bidding and desire of these rulers and possessing no liberty. And the fulfillment of all this, not under pressure of arms but in a voluntary and spontaneous way, is a definite sign of the servile [slavish] and base soul of these barbarians. . . .

They live as employees of the king, paying, thanks to him, exceedingly high taxes. . . . And if this type of servile and barbarous nation had not been to their liking and nature, it would have been easy for them, as it was not a hereditary [by right of birth] monarchy, to take advantage of the death of a king in order to obtain a freer state and one more favorable to their interests; by not doing so, they have stated quite clearly that they have been born to slavery and not to civic and liberal [free] life. Therefore, if you wish to [subdue] them . . . to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the ones they had, who were barbarous and impious [wicked] and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith.

The second reading is an excerpt from Las Casas' *Destruction of the Indies*, a book that became famous because it spread an account of Spain's brutal treatment of the Native Americans.

Now if we shall have shown that among our Indians of the western and southern shores there are important kingdoms, large numbers of people who live settled lives in a society, great cities, kings, judges, and laws, persons who engage in commerce, buying, selling, lending, and other contracts of the laws of nations, will it not stand proved that the Reverend Doctor Sepulveda has spoken wrongly and viciously against peoples like these? From the fact that the Indians are barbarians it does not necessarily follow that they are incapable of government and have to be ruled by others, except to be taught about the Catholic faith and to be admitted to the Holy Sacraments. They are not ignorant, inhuman, or bestial [savagel. Rather, long before they had heard the word *Spaniard* they had properly organized states, wisely



ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom. They cultivated friendship and, bound together in common fellowship, lived in populous cities in 15 which they wisely administered the affairs of both peace and war justly and equitably [fairly]. . . .

Next, I call the Spaniards who plunder that unhappy people torturers . . . searching for gold and silver lodes [ore deposits]. . . . For God's sake and man's faith in him, is this 20 the way to impose the yoke [rule] of Christ on Christian men? Is this the way to remove wild barbarism from the minds of barbarians? Is it not, rather, to act like thieves, cutthroats, and cruel plunderers and to drive the gentlest of peoples headlong into despair? The Indian race is not that barbaric, nor are 25 learning all the liberal [scholarly] arts, and very ready to accept, honor, and observe the Christian religion and correct their sins once priests have introduced them to the sacred mysteries [rites] and taught them the word of God.

The Indians are our brothers, and Christ has given his life for them. Why, then, do we persecute them with such inhuman savagery when they do not 30 deserve such treatment? The past, because it cannot be undone, must be attributed to our weakness, provided that what has been taken unjustly is restored.

Finally, let all savagery and apparatus of war, which are better suited to Muslims than Christians, be done away with. Let upright heralds [messengers] 35 be sent to proclaim Jesus Christ in their way of life and to convey the attitudes of Peter and Paul [early Christian missionaries]. The Indians will embrace the teaching of the gospel. Once they have embraced it, it is marvelous with what piety, eagerness, faith, and charity they obey Christ's precepts [laws] and venerate [treat with deep respect] the sacraments. For they are docile 40 [obedient] and clever, and in their diligence [industriousness] and gifts of nature, they excel most peoples of the known world.

**Is this the way  
to impose the  
yoke of Christ on  
Christian men?**

4. **Expressing problems.** How might Las Casas have weakened his case by requiring that the Spanish must restore what had been taken unjustly from the Indians? Discuss the validity of this requirement.

5. **Recognizing bias.** Las Casas argued against prejudice toward the Indians, but what bias did he display in the final paragraph of the excerpt from his book?

### PART B EXPRESSING OPINIONS

Determine your opinion of each of the following statements, indicating the response that best expresses your view. Be prepared to defend your opinions in classroom discussion.

1. The 16th-century Spanish were far more civilized than the native peoples they encountered in the New World.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
2. Slavery and brutality were accepted facts of life in the 16th century, so what the Spanish did should not be condemned.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
3. Technology is the most important indicator of whether a culture is primitive or advanced.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
4. A society in which, as Sepúlveda claimed about the Indians, "no one possesses anything individually," must be inferior to one based on private property.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
5. Las Casas claimed to believe that the Indians lived in societies that were "wisely ordered by excellent laws, religion, and custom." If he truly believed this, then he had no right to attempt to impose an alien culture on the Indians by Christianizing them.  
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree

## CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

### PART A ANALYZING THE READINGS

Answer each of the following questions.

1. **Identifying central issues.** What are three arguments that Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda used to justify enslaving the Native Americans?
2. **Identifying central issues.** What are three arguments that Bartolomé de Las Casas gave in attacking Spanish colonial policies in the New World?
3. **Distinguishing false from accurate images.** What four comparisons did Sepúlveda employ in lines 1–7 to express the inferiority of the Indians. What comparison did he use to dismiss the significance of the Indians' "ingenuity for various works of artisanship" (lines 29–34)? Discuss the appropriateness of each of these comparisons.

# MAYFLOWER COMPACT

1620

*Upon reaching their new home in America, the Pilgrims formed an agreement, vowing that each member of the community would submit to the laws and institutions that the community established. This agreement is known as the Mayflower Compact, named for the ship that brought the Pilgrims to America. The Mayflower Compact was the first document guaranteeing self-government ever signed in America, and its principles are very important to American political development.*

IN The Name of God, Amen.  
We, whose names are underwritten, the loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King *James*, by the Grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith, &c. Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; Do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better

Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid; And by Virtue hereof do enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions, and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general Good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience. In WITNESS whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at Cape Cod the eleventh of November, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord King James of England, France, and Ireland, the eighteenth and of Scotland, the fifty-fourth. *Anno Domini*, 1620