

■ COLUMBUS'S LEGACY

Genocide in The Americas

DAVID E. STANNARD

A few years ago, in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky described the ways in which modern societies discriminate between "worthy and unworthy victims"—for example, outrage in the U.S. press over Khmer Rouge atrocities against "worthy" victims in Cambodia; silence about Indonesia's murder of hundreds of thousands of "unworthy" people in East Timor, up to a third of the native population. Today, we are being treated to a similar hypocrisy. Expressions of horror and condemnation over "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia and Herzegovina routinely appear on the same newspaper page or television news show as reports of the latest festivities surrounding the Columbian quincentennial. Bosnians and Croatians are "worthy victims." The native peoples of the Americas never have been. But of late, American and European denials of culpability for the most thoroughgoing genocide in the history of the world have assumed a new guise.

It has become fashionable to acknowledge what for almost five centuries was ignored but what outspoken native people today have made it impossible to disregard—that the voyages of Columbus launched a bloodbath—while at the same time explaining away or even justifying the slaughter. Thus, noted anthropologist Marvin Harris describes the post-Columbian devastation, both in the West Indies and throughout the Americas, as accidental, an "unintended consequence" of European exploration. It was disease that killed off the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas, disease innocently carried in the breath and on the bodies of the European adventurers. As Alfred Crosby, a leading scholar on the impact of disease in history, recently put it, "The first European colonists . . . did not want the Amerindians to die," but unfortunately the natives "did not wear well."

Like the histories of so many conquering peoples, this is a comforting lie. Epidemic disease undeniably contributed in large measure to the carnage, but in many volumes of testimony the European explorers themselves detail their murderous intentions and actions. In the Caribbean and in Meso- and South America they enslaved the native people, chaining them together at the neck and marching them in columns to toil in gold and silver mines, decapitating any who did not walk quickly enough. They sliced off women's breasts for sport and fed their babies to the packs of armored wolfhounds and mas-

tiffs that accompanied the Spanish soldiers. "They would test their swords and their manly strength on captured Indians," wrote a Spanish eyewitness to the massacres, "and place bets on the slicing off of heads or the cutting of bodies in half with one blow."

On the island of Española, under Columbus's governorship, 50,000 native people died within a matter of months following the establishment of the first Spanish colony. That is the proportional equivalent of 1.5 million dead Americans today—more than twice the number of U.S. battle deaths in the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined. When the Caribbean holocaust exhausted itself around 1535, the extermination, in number of deaths and proportion of the population affected, vastly exceeded that of any of the hideous genocides that have occurred in the twentieth century against Armenians, Jews, Gypsies, Ibos, Bengalis, Timorese, Cambodians, Ugandans and others.

Between 60 million and 80 million Amerindians perished before the seventeenth century.

By that time, however, destruction on an even grander scale was under way in Mexico and Central America. In November of 1519, Hernando Cortés and his accompanying conquistadors became the first Westerners to gaze upon the magnificent Aztec city of Tenochtitlán, an island metropolis far larger and more dazzling than anything they had ever seen in Europe. Less than two years later that incredible city, which had had at least five times the population of either London or Seville at the time, was a smoldering ruin.

Tenochtitlán, with its 350,000 residents, had been the jewel of an empire that contained numerous exquisite cities. All were destroyed. Before the coming of the Europeans, central Mexico, radiating out from those metropolitan centers over many tens of thousands of square miles, had contained about 25 million people—almost ten times the population of England at the time. Seventy-five years later hardly more than 1 million were left. And central Mexico, where 95 out of every 100 people perished, was typical. In Central America the grisly pattern held, and even worsened. In western and central Honduras 95 percent of the native people were exterminated in half a century. In western Nicaragua the rate of extermination was 99 percent—from more than 1 million people to less than 10,000 in just sixty years.

And then the holocaust spread to South America. Before the arrival of the Europeans the population of what today are Peru and Chile was somewhere between 9 million and 14 million. A century later it was barely 500,000. In Brazil and the rest of the continent the story was the same.

Death of this magnitude eventually becomes incomprehensible. Thus, sometimes the vignette is more revealing, such as the case in Peru of one Roque Martín, who, in the words of

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Pedro de Cieza de León, the Spanish chronicler of the Inca conquest, kept "the quarters of Indians hanging on his porch to feed his dogs with, as if they were wild beasts."

All told, it is likely that between 60 million and 80 million people from the Indies to the Amazon had perished as a result of the European invasion even before the dawning of the seventeenth century. Although much of that ghastly population collapse was caused by the spread of European diseases to which the native peoples had no immunity, an enormous amount of it was the result of mass murder. A good deal, as well, derived from simply working the enslaved native laborers to death.

On this last point, the conquerors of the southern half of the New World were forerunners of those twentieth-century Germans who extinguished the lives of what they called "useless eaters" in the Nazi camps. In both cases, from the so-called silver mountain of Potosí in the sixteenth-century Andes to the synthetic rubber factory of Auschwitz in the 1940s, the slave drivers calculated that it was cheaper to work people to death by the tens of thousands and then replace them than it was to maintain and feed a permanent captive labor force. The life expectancy of Indians forced to labor in the South American silver mines was, therefore, about the same as that of Jewish and other forced laborers at Auschwitz—three to four months.

Yet, while it is patently untrue that the Spanish and Portuguese did not wish to kill the indigenous peoples whom they enslaved and burned and hacked to death and fed to their dogs, it is true that most of them placed some value on the Indians as a source of labor, and thus did not desire their immediate extermination. And therein lies the major difference between the Spanish invasion to the south and the British invasion of what are now the United States and Canada. The British—and, following their lead, nineteenth-century white Americans—quite openly sought nothing less than the complete annihilation of the Indian.

The number of people living north of Mexico prior to the European invasion remains a subject of much academic

debate, with most informed estimates ranging from a low of about 7 million to a high of 18 million. There is no doubt, however, that by the close of the nineteenth century the indigenous population of the United States and Canada totaled around 250,000. In sum, during the years separating the first arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century and the infamous massacre at Wounded Knee in the winter of 1890, between 97 and 99 percent of North America's native people were killed.

The English who settled Jamestown early in the seventeenth century looked upon a New World quite different from the one that had greeted the Spanish. There was no gold or silver, and native population densities were much lower than in most of Mexico and Central and South America. With relatively little in the way of mineral riches to exploit, and with a population explosion under way in the British Isles, North America offered just one thing to the English: land, or what a later generation of Europeans would call *Lebensraum*.

Since the Indians stood in the way of unlimited access to North America's magnificent landmass, the Indians would have to be eliminated. And so they were. In Virginia, following on the heels of the inevitable epidemics, the British initiated a relentless series of purges. They burned entire Indian towns and surrounding cornfields. They poisoned whole communities. And they capped off these homicidal enterprises by abducting Indian women and children for sale in the slave markets of the Indies, an unusually farsighted genocidal technique, since it prevented population recovery.

After a half-century or so of this, Virginia's largest Indian confederation was "so rowted, slayne and dispersed," wrote one British colonist, "that they are no longer a nation." By 1697 the native population of Virginia was less than 1,500; prior to the arrival of the Europeans it had numbered in the tens of thousands, perhaps upward of 100,000.

In New England as elsewhere, disease laid the groundwork for the massacres that followed. The epidemics were regarded by the English as the handiwork of God. For most colonists, however, the Lord needed a helping hand. One after another after another, Indian towns and villages were attacked and



burned, their inhabitants murdered or sold into foreign slavery. As William Bradford, the pious governor of Plymouth Colony, described the reaction of the settlers to one such mass immolation:

It was a fearful sight to see [the Indians] thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and [the settlers] gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them

By the close of the seventeenth century there was, at most, one native person of New England alive for every twenty who had greeted the English colonists less than a hundred years earlier—a 95 percent die-off.

Andrew Jackson boasted, 'I have on all occasions preserved the scalps of my killed.'

During their first decade of settlement the Massachusetts colonists had instituted a law making it a crime to “shoot off a gun on any unnecessary occasion, or at any game except an Indian or a wolf.” The association of Indians with wolves was a common one. In 1703—by which time most of New England’s native people had long since been wiped from the face of the earth—Boston’s Rev. Solomon Stoddard urged the Massachusetts governor to train large packs of dogs to hunt down those who remained. Such “dogs would be an extreme terror to the Indians,” he noted, and would “catch many an Indian that would be too light of foot for us.” Recognizing that the faint of heart might think his plan “to hunt Indians as they do bears” to be a bit extreme, Stoddard acknowledged that he might agree “if the Indians were as other people,” but in fact the Indians were wolves “and are to be dealt withal as wolves.”

Following the Revolution, while virtually all of the new nation’s early leaders supported the Indian eradication effort, few did so with such evident glee as Andrew Jackson. Fond of calling native peoples “savage dogs” and boasting that “I have on all occasions preserved the scalps of my killed,” Jackson at one time supervised the mutilation of 800 or so Creek Indian corpses, cutting off their noses to count and preserve a record of the dead, and slicing long strips from their bodies to tan and turn into bridle reins. On another occasion he ordered his troops to slay all the Indian children they could find, once they had killed the women and men, because failure to do so allowed the possibility of group survival. Merely killing the women, he cautioned, was like pursuing “a wolf in the hammocks without knowing first where her den and whelps were.”

It was President Jackson as well who was responsible for the famous Trail of Tears, when U.S. Army troops drove the dwindling remnants of the Cherokee nation out of their homes and across the country in a march alongside which the Bataan Death March—the most notorious Japanese atrocity

in all of World War II—pales by comparison. Indeed, the 50 percent death rate on the Trail of Tears, like that of numerous other presidentially ordered death marches of Indian peoples, was approximately the same as that suffered by Jews in Germany, Hungary and Romania between 1939 and 1945.

Finally, there was California, geographically the last stop on the road west. When Mexico ceded it to the United States in 1848, 75 percent of the native population had already been wiped out during seventy-five years of Spanish rule. In the next twenty-five years the Americans presided over the annihilation of 80 percent of those Indians who had survived the Spanish. Under official gubernatorial directive urging the extermination of California’s Indians, native adults were hunted down like animals, while their children were enslaved. By the time the nineteenth century drew to a close, in California as throughout the country, the indigenous population was barely 1 or 2 percent of its former size; and that small fraction, largely locked away on impoverished reservations, constituted less than one-third of 1 percent of the nation’s overall population. Killing Indians—at least as far as the government was concerned—no longer seemed worth the trouble.

There are many ways to destroy a people. The United Nations Genocide Convention lists five techniques, ranging from mass murder to “deliberately inflicting on [a] group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.” Michael Marrus, a student of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews, puts it well when he writes: “It is clearly wrong to separate from the essence of the Holocaust those Jews who never survived long enough to reach the camps, or who were shot down by the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union, or who starved in the ghettos of eastern Europe, or who were wasted by disease because of malnutrition and neglect, or who were killed in reprisal in the west, or who died in any of the countless other, terrible ways—no less a part of the Holocaust because their final agonies do not meet some artificial standard of uniqueness.”

Even in Auschwitz, it is now recognized, more people died from hyperexploitation, malnutrition and disease than from gassing, hanging or shooting, and certainly few would deny that the “indirect” deaths were as much a part of Auschwitz’s genocidal purpose as were those that occurred “directly.” The same is true of the Euro-American genocide against the native peoples of the New World.

Nonetheless, says Charles Krauthammer in an essay in *Time*, while duly insisting that he would never “justify the cruelty of the conquest,” the fact is that “mankind is the better for it. Infinitely better. Reason enough to honor Columbus and bless 1492.” Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing in *The Atlantic* for September, hastens to add that while “in general, the European record in dealing with the indigenous peoples of the Americas was miserable—and indefensible. . . . there are benefits, too, and these require to be factored into the historical equation.” Had Europeans not conquered and destroyed the Aztecs and the Incas, Schlesinger contends, these societies of dazzling accomplishment might have continued indefinitely with their unpleasant practices of “ritual torture and human sacrifice.” Further, “they would most likely have pre-

served their collectivist cultures and their conviction that the individual had no legitimacy outside the theocratic state, and the result would have been a repressive fundamentalism comparable perhaps to that of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran."

Of course, it is idle to speculate about the "might have been," a flimflam construction that is quite likely wrong but impossible to disprove. And one needn't romanticize the pre-Columbian world. Let us remember that ritual torture and human sacrifice were common practices in the Old World at the very same time that they characterized Aztec and Inca society. The sixteenth-century European habit of killing heretics and witches by the thousands was clearly human sacrifice to the jealous Christian god, yet no one has proposed that genocide against Europeans at the time would have had some "benefits . . . to be factored into the historical equation."

More seriously and more generally, to attempt to mitigate culpability for genocide by applauding the end result—as Krauthammer and Schlesinger and others in effect do—is to follow down a treacherous path. Would similar historical explanations proffered by the grandchildren of German storm troopers and S.S. doctors get so polite a hearing, or is this simply the prerogative of victors? Indeed, so bombarded are most Americans with the unexamined ideology of "worthy" and "unworthy" victims—so unwilling is this country to face up to the underside of its own historical experience—that only by imaginatively substituting the word "Jew" or the collective name of some other group of worthy victims each time "Indian" or "native" appears in essays such as this is there any hope of recognizing the grotesque nature of what in truth is being honored on this and every October 12.

Moreover, the devastation is far from finished. Year in and year out confirmed reports are published of the torture, enslavement and murder of Indians in Central and South America—almost 10,000 dead and "disappeared" annually in Guatemala alone during much of the 1980s, the proportional equivalent of more than 300,000 American deaths each year—virtually all of it carried out with the complicity of the United States government. And here at home native people, many of them suffering life-threatening Third World levels of hunger, disease and impoverishment, remain in constant struggle against federal and state and local government agencies for control of the meager lands and resources they still have.

If a moment of reflection can be found amid the din of quinquennial self-congratulation, it will be worth recalling that the year 1992 is not only the 500th anniversary of Columbus's first voyage to the New World. It is also the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazis' conversion of Auschwitz from a prisoner-of-war and concentration camp into an extermination center. It is no exaggeration to say that glorifying the one is little different from venerating the other. □

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■ WHAT CLINTON COULD DO

Unpacking the Supreme Court

HERMAN SCHWARTZ

What difference would a Bill Clinton victory make to the federal judiciary? One obvious answer is that he would reverse the tide of conservative appointments made under Reagan and Bush. Also, his next Supreme Court nominee would not have to pass the antiabortion litmus test, thus denying the anti-*Roe v. Wade* justices now on the Court the additional vote they need to overrule it.

All that is true enough, but there is another important area in which a Democratic President could make a difference. The Reagan and Bush administrations and the conservative Rehnquist Court have not only diminished constitutional rights; they have also mounted a devastating attack against social welfare and civil rights laws.

The elements of this one-two punch strategy are, first, the Supreme Court restrictively interprets a federal statute counter to Congressional intentions, or it upholds administrative regulations designed to undermine the statute. Then, when Congress tries to overturn the Court's action and reinstate the law as it was intended to operate, the President vetoes or threatens to veto the new measure. Unable to muster the necessary two-thirds vote to override, Congress is thwarted.

A Clinton Administration would block this pincer movement on both fronts, regardless of the present or future composition of the Court. It would almost certainly repeal most if not all of the regressive administrative regulations, obviating the need for those victimized by the regulations to go to court at all. And it would remove the presidential veto threat hanging over Congress's efforts to overturn Supreme Court rulings that frustrate its clear intentions.

Ending this two-pronged conservative squeeze on liberal Congressional action is at least as important, if not more so, as coping with the Court's constitutional decisions. In the modern mixed-economy/welfare state, these nonconstitutional federal statutory matters touch every aspect of our lives. While such hot-button constitutional issues as abortion, church-state relations and capital punishment draw the most attention, the bulk of the Court's work is devoted to interpreting and applying federal statutes. In the 1990-91 term, for example, fifty-eight out of seventy-four civil cases dealt with such laws. And as one would expect, given the nature of the Bush Administration and the current composition of the Court, a very large proportion of these have been interpreted in a harsh, reactionary way.

Perhaps the clearest example of how this operates is *Rust v. Sullivan*, the abortion gag-rule case. Although constitutional

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