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HAIL COLUMBUS, DEAD WHITE MALE.

The 500th anniversary of 1492 is approaching. Remember 1492? "In Fourteen Hundred Ninety-Two/ Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Discovery and exploration. Bolivar and Jefferson. Liberty and democracy. The last best hope for man.

The left is not amused.

In Madrid the Association Of Indian Cultures announces that it will mark the occasion with acts of "sabotage." In the U.S. the Columbus in Context Coalition declares that the coming event provides "progressives" with their best political opening "since the Vietnam War." The National Council of Churches (Nee) condemns the "discovery" as "an invasion and colonization with legalized occupation, genocide, economic exploitation and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence." One of its leaders calls for "a year of repentance and reflection rather than a year of

celebration."

For the left, the year comes just in time. The revolutions of 1989 having put a dent in the case for the degeneracy of the West, 1992 offers a welcome new point of attack. The point- is the Origin. The villain is Columbus. The Crime is the discovery--the rape--of America.

The attack does, however, present the left with some rather exquisite problems of political correctness. After all, Columbus was an agent of Spain, and his most direct legacy is,Hispanic America. The denunciation of the Spanish legacy as one of cruelty and greed has moved one Hispanic leader to call the NCC's resolution "a racist depreciation of the heritages of most of today's American peoples, especially Hispanics."

That same resolution opened an even more ancient debate between Protestants and Catholics over the colonization of the Americas. For Catholics like historian James Muldoon, the (Protestant) attack on Columbus and on the subsequent missionary work of the (Catholic) church in the Americas is little more than a resurrection, a few centuries late, of the Black Legend that was a staple of anti-Catholic propaganda during the Reformation.

The crusade continues nonetheless. Kirkpatrick Sale kicked off the anticelibration with his anti-Columbus tome, *The Conquest of Paradise*. The group Encounter plans to celebrate 1992 by sailing three ships full of Indians to "discover" Spain. Similar merriment is to be expected wherever a quorum gathers to honor 1492.

The attack on 1492 has two parts. First, establishing the villainy of Columbus and his progeny (i.e., us). Columbus is "the deadest whitest male now offered for our detestation," writes Garry Wills. "If any historical figure can appropriately be loaded up with all the heresies of our time--Eurocentrism, phallocentrism, imperialism, elitism and all bad-things-generally-ism--Columbus is the man."

Therefore, goodbye, Columbus? Balzac once suggested that all great fortunes are founded on a crime. So too all great civilizations. The European conquest of the Americas, like the conquest of other civilizations, was indeed accompanied by great cruelty. But that is to say nothing more than that the European conquest of America was, in this way, much like the rise of Islam, the Norman conquest of Britain and the wide-spread American Indian tradition of raiding, depopulating and appropriating neighboring lands.

The real question is, What eventually grew on this bloodied soil? The answer is, The great modern civilizations of the Americas--a new world of individual rights, an ever expanding circle of liberty and, twice in this century, a savior of the world from totalitarian barbarism.

If we are to judge civilizations like individuals, they should all be hanged, because with individuals

it takes but one murder to merit a hanging. But if one judges civilizations by what they have taken from and what they have given the world, a non-jaundiced observer--say, one of the millions in Central Europe and Asia whose eyes are turned with hope toward America would surely bless the day Columbus set sail.

Thus Part I of the anti-'92 crusade is calumny for Columbus and his legacy. Part II is hagiography, singing of the saintedness of the Indians in their pre-Columbian Eden, a land of virtue, empathy and ecological harmony. With Columbus, writes Sale, Europe "implanted its diseased and dangerous seeds in the soils of the continents that represented the last best hope for humankind--and destroyed them."

Last best hope? No doubt, some Indian tribes (the Hopis, for example) were tree-hugging pacifists. But the notion that pre-Columbian America was a hemisphere of noble savages is an adolescent fantasy (rather lushly, if ludicrously, animated in *Dances with Wolves*).

Take the Incas. Inca civilization, writes Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, was a "pyramidal and theocratic society" of "totalitarian structure" in which "the individual had no importance and virtually no existence." Its foundation? "A state religion that took away the individual's free will and crowned the authority's decision with the aura of a divine mandate turned the Tawantinsuyu [Incan empire] into a beehive."

True, the beehive was wantonly destroyed by "semiliter-ate, implacable and greedy swordsmen." But they in turn represented a culture in which "a social space of human activities had evolved that was neither legislated nor controlled by those in power." In other words, a culture of liberty that endowed the individual human being with dignity and sovereignty.

Is it Eurocentric to believe the life of liberty is superior to the life of the beehive? That belief does not justify the cruelty of the conquest. But it does allow us to say that after 500 years the Columbian legacy has created a civilization that we ought not, in all humble piety and cultural relativism, declare to be no better or worse than that of the Incas. It turned out better.

And mankind is the better for it. Infinitely better. Reason enough to honor Columbus and bless 1492.

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