

Except from America: The Best Last Hope (Vol. 1)  
by William J. Bennett AMERICA

Europe. Less impressive were the "spices" Columbus presented, for the fabled riches of the Indies were not to be seen in his collection of common American plants. Then the company adjourned for a *Te Deum* at the chapel royal. The last line—*O Lord, in Thee have I trusted, let me never be confounded*—moved the brave mariner to tears.<sup>25</sup>

If only Columbus had stopped there, at that chapel! Nothing that would happen in the remaining thirteen years of his life would add to his fame. Much that he did detracted from it. He proceeded to lead a second, third, and fourth voyage to the New World. The second voyage—the largest—proceeded with seventeen ships. Although he would continue to explore and claim rich islands in the Caribbean, and to range as far as modern-day Panama on the North American mainland, his record as an administrator was a dismal one. After the third voyage, he had even been arrested and returned to Spain in chains! Columbus added immeasurably to mankind's store of knowledge. Yet he never quite realized that his *otro mundo* was not, in fact, a part of Asia, but an entirely new continent.

The tragic turn in his relations with the Indians cannot be avoided. More importantly, the relations of the Indians with the Spanish settlers for whom Columbus opened the way would turn vicious. The gentle Tainos were not the only new people Columbus encountered. The fierce Caribs—whose warlike ways included cannibalism—presented a challenge to the benign intentions with which Columbus had set forth. Soon, the failure to produce a rich trove of spices reduced the Spanish colonial enterprise to grubbing for gold and enslaving Indians in order to get it. Columbus appealed, vainly, for a better quality of settler. After the initial voyage, in which only three crewmen had been recruited from Spain's prisons, many of those who came to the New World were criminals. Who else could be recruited? When tales of the Indians' wiping out the first settlement at Navidad came back to Spain, the initial enthusiasm for conversion of the Indians cooled.

The results of Columbus's voyages of discovery are truly incalculable. From this new land, Europe received maize, tomatoes, peppers, peanuts, yams, and turkeys. The introduction of the potato, alone, revolutionized European agriculture. Millions were fed from these new crops of the New World. This ironically fueled European dominance. Europeans introduced

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WESTWARD THE COURSE

into the New World wheat, apples, and grapes, as well as pigs and horses. Horses, in particular, became the basis for an entire hunting culture among the Indians of the Great Plains.<sup>26</sup> The courageous and incredibly skilled Plains Indians rode mounts that were all descended from those brought over by the Spaniards.

Columbus's discoveries opened the way for a "triangle trade" that would develop over the centuries. Ships from England and Europe would travel to the "Gold Coast" of Africa to pick up slaves for the dreaded, deadly "Middle Passage" westward across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and, in time, to the English colonies on the Atlantic seaboard of North America. American colonists would then exchange raw materials—tobacco, cotton, and timber—for slaves—and the ships would return eastward across the Atlantic.

To the modern complaint that Columbus brought slavery to the New World and that the Europeans' diseases wiped out indigenous peoples, a response is due. Slavery was a pervasive fact of life among the Europeans, but also particularly among the Arabs, the Africans, and the Indians themselves. In Asia, slavery had always existed. It seems hard to credit an attack on Columbus that singles him out for what was then a fairly universal practice. As much as we deplore slavery today, we cannot ignore the moral development of the West from our present vantage point outside the context of history. It was from the very experience of administering a far-flung empire that Spanish scholars began to elaborate universal doctrines of human rights that led, eventually, to the abolition of slavery in the West.<sup>27</sup> A counter-challenge might be offered: Who, in Columbus's time, did *not* practice slavery? One might conclude that far from being slavery's *worst* practitioners, westerners led the world to end the practice.

The very frightful consequences of smallpox and measles—which would continue to take their toll among Indians well into the nineteenth century—could hardly have been known by the European explorers of Columbus's day. Very little of the germ theory of disease was then known. And when it did become known, vaccines to protect against them were the product of that European culture—that same exploring, seeking spirit of Columbus—that is now so widely attacked. Even if Europeans of Columbus's time had had the scientific knowledge to test for diseases, the