

Boller: Pre-Columbian America

“Pre-Columbian America” originally appeared as chapter two in *Not So!* by Paul F. Boller, Jr., Professor of History Emeritus at Texas Christian University. The book was published in 1985.

Boller confronts the frequently distorted image of North America prior to the massive white European onslaught initiated by explorer Christopher Columbus in 1492. The pre-Columbian human existence is commonly understood to be some sort of enchanted Shangri-La wherein its inhabitants lived in perfect harmony amongst themselves and humble partnership within the natural environment. *In truth, there was no such paradise.*

Interesting and informative, “Pre-Columbian America” includes a big bonus. Studiers of history take note. At the heart of Boller’s article is an indictment of one of the chief impediments to learning authentic history. *Unfortunately, today’s skewed form of political correctness has become integral with many Americans’ “knowledge” of certain historical events.*

Boller notes in the preface of his book that “the chronicles of American history are strewn with myths, legends, fables, folklore, misinformation, and misconceptions.” Some of these falsifications, according to Boller, are “inadvertent” distortions of truth while others are “deliberate” modifications for an agenda of deception. *Students of history must be on constant guard against tainted versions of the past, whether incidental or purposeful.*

Into his admonition regarding perverted political correctness Boller weaves warning of a related factor which additionally undermines learning history as it should be learned. Decontextualism (also referred to as presentism) is “the moralizing passion for judging past generations by present-day standards.”

All people and episodes of history are entitled to the unalienable right of judgement founded on the total bank of knowledge available at that precise past moment—and no further. To fantasize that a crystal ball existed for all to see the future (and then adjust present actions accordingly) is both smug and self-righteous which, frankly, deviates from intelligent study. Boller quotes noted historian Paul Fussell: “Understanding the past requires pretending that you don’t know the future.” Easy? No. Essential? *Absolutely.*

Boller concludes: "...in history there are no absolutes. [T]he historian deals with probabilities, not finalities." Indeed, the responsible study of history generates more questions than answers. It recognizes infinitely many variances of gray—from very light to very dark—but sends any episodes of unpolluted white or black out the door as imposters. *Approaching historical study as a contest of cultural superiority is subversive to genuine scholarship.*



Until Columbus reached the New World the people he called "Indians" lived in peace and harmony with nature and with one another.

Not so.

The Spanish (and later the French and English) conquest of the New World following Columbus brought death, destruction, exploitation, and slavery with it, but it is sentimental condescension to hold that until Columbus the Indians lived idyllic lives of "balanced and fruitful harmony," as one writer put it, with the natural world and each other. "One should not pull the pendulum all the way over," warned Alvin M. Josephy, Indian specialist, "and pretend that pre-Columbian America was a paradise with no ills or vices—which . . . it was not."¹

There were, to be sure, peaceful tribes in pre-Columbian America, like the Hopis of the Southwest and the Slaves of subarctic Canada. Most Indian tribes, however, were familiar, long before Columbus, with the kinds of wickedness that had beclouded European (and Asian and African) history for centuries: aggression, warfare, torture, persecution, bigotry, slavery, tyranny. By the time of the Columbus Quincentenary in 1992, however, it had become orthodox wisdom with many Americans to look back on the pre-Columbian Indians as morally superior to the 16th-century Europeans who came in Columbus's wake and to lament rather than celebrate the so-called "discovery of America." (Columbus, not

Adam, was apparently the original sinner: "In Chris's landfall, we sinned all.") The pre-Columbian Indians had their virtues, of course, and their achievements, particularly in the arts and agriculture, were tremendous. But they also knew war, conquest, torture, exploitation, and despotism long before Columbus, and their treatment of the natural world fell far short of the standards demanded by conscientious environmentalists in the United States in the 1990s.

Was John Collier, the New Deal's Commissioner of Indian Affairs, being accurate when he asserted that the pre-1492 Indians lived in "perfect ecological balance with the forest, the plain, the desert, the waters and animal life"?² Not exactly. It is certainly true that Indians who lived on a primitive level did less damage to the environment than those who developed more complex economies, but even simple hunters and gatherers, who moved around a lot in their quest for food, left a lot of garbage behind them. Small semi-nomadic tribes, moreover, practiced "slash and burn" agriculture that involved making a clearing in a forest by stripping the bark along the base of trees, letting them die, and then burning them. More complex Indian societies, of course, altered the environment even more drastically. The Maya of Central America, according to some scholars, overused the land and deforested the countryside, thereby bringing about climatic and ecological changes that contributed to their own decline. In building large cities, moreover, and in developing networks of roads and canals, the Maya, as well as the Aztecs and Incas, "left marks on the landscape that were still visible centuries later."³

As for animals, there is no doubt that many tribes prior to Columbus, did their hunting selectively, not wastefully. But some tribes, like the Arapaho of eastern Colorado, used a pell-mell system in seeking game. They started grass fires on the prairies in order to stampede herds of bison into death traps, and then butchered the best animals and left the rest for the vultures. Some anthropologists, moreover, believe that the hunting methods of early immigrants from Asia contributed to the extinction of several animal species, including the horse (genus *Eohippus*), that once roamed North America. The European invaders, to be sure, behaved even more recklessly than the Indians as they took over the New World, but the pre-Columbian Indians were by no means environmental pur-

ists, and many of them eventually took up the European ways of dealing with plants and animals after Columbus's landfall.⁴

When it came to social arrangements, most pre-Columbian Indian tribes were no more free, open, and egalitarian than the European monarchies of the 15th century. Some tribes, to be sure, were fundamentally peace-loving and even democratic in their ways, but most of them were authoritarian in structure, with a privileged few ruling the roost and calling the tune, just as in Europe. Inca civilization, according to Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, was a "pyramidal and theocratic society" with a "totalitarian structure" in which the individual had no importance and virtually no existence." Its foundation he noted, was a "state religion that took away the individual's free will and crowned the authority's decision with the aura of a divine mandate that turned the Tawantinsuy [Inca empire] into a beehive."⁵ Mayan civilization and Aztec society—and countless far less sophisticated Indian cultures—were similarly despotic in nature, though none of them practiced state terrorism on as large a scale as the Inca did.

Among the pre-Columbian Indians there was a dearth of what some U.S. moralizers in the 1990s regarded as "politically correct behavior." There was, for one thing, plenty of "elitism" with little or no empowerment for the less privileged. Among the Natchez, for example, a small elite, consisting of a chief (the Great Sun), his relatives (Suns), nobles, and honored men, ran things as they pleased, while the masses, called "stinkards" (French translation of a Natchez term), did as they were told. There was also "ageism" among some Indian tribes. The Crees and the Chippewayans of Central Canada abandoned or even strangled senior citizens who couldn't keep up with tribal migrations. Sexism, too, was rife, as it was with the European conquerors. Women in some of the subarctic groups did most of the heavy work—dragged the toboggans, built the shelters, gathered the firewood and didn't get to eat until the men had finished their meals. Cruel and unusual punishments, moreover, were not at all uncommon in pre-Columbian America. Some of the tribes in the Iroquois Confederacy punished adultery by having the male offender's ears or lips cropped or the end of his nose cut off. For murder the penalty was death, and if the murderer fled, a male member of his family was killed in his place.⁶

Neither war nor slavery was unknown in pre-Columbian Amer-

ica. Highly complex civilizations like the Aztec, Maya, and Toltec were, as Texas writer Elmer Kelton noted, “built on a sea of blood, on massive human sacrifice, on warfare, brutal conquest and enslavement.” But it wasn’t only the sophisticated societies of Central and South America which resorted to violence.⁷ “Warfare was common on both continents,” according to Alvin Josephy, “and was a principal preoccupation among some Indian societies.”⁸ The Natchez of Mississippi, for one, were chronically warlike. “War was a man’s proper occupation,” observed anthropologist Oliver LaFarge of the Natchez. “Their fighting was deadly, ferocious, stealthy if possible, for the purpose of killing—men, women, or children, so long as one killed—and taking captives, especially strong males, whom one could enjoy torturing to death.”⁹ Indian tribes everywhere tended to regard outsiders with suspicion—as barbarians, “sons of she-dogs,” enemies, alien spirits—and deserving of death. Cheyennes fought Crows mainly because they were different, and the Crows fought back for the same reason. Pawnees similarly fought the Sioux and the Cheyennes, while the Blackfeet, it is said, fought just about everybody. The warring tribes slaughtered men, women, and children, sometimes in disputes over hunting grounds, but sometimes simply because their foes belonged to other tribes. “Certainly since there has been recorded history—or even Indian legends,” wrote Kelton, “there has been incessant intertribal warfare. The carnage was sometimes unspeakable in its horrors, long before Columbus ever got his feet wet.”¹⁰

Many Indian tribes were so busy fighting one another that they were unable to put up an effective defense against the European invaders arriving after Columbus. Some Indians, in fact, sided with the invading whites because they wanted to get even with rival chiefs and bands that had been abusing them. Hernán Cortés conquered the mighty Aztec empire with fewer than six hundred men not only because of better weapons, but also because the Tlascalans and other native peoples who were being exploited by the Aztecs were willing to help the Spaniards. “There is not one foot of land in this country,” declared Kelton, “that in the past has not been claimed by one Indian tribe or another, in most cases a succession of tribes in the ebb and flow of history, the cycles of conquest and defeat. It has been bought with blood, over and over again.” The European invasion of the New World, in short, “did not introduce

conquest and subjugation to this continent. That was already here. It only brought a new set of conquerors, far more numerous, and far better armed.”¹¹

Indian warfare brought slavery (common on both continents), ritual torture, and human sacrifice with it. The Tahltans of western Canada, who fought constantly with their neighbors, killed their male prisoners, but enslaved the women. On the Northwest coast, Indian chiefs who obtained slaves by capture liked to show their indifference to mere possessions by killing them with a special club known as the “slave killer.” The Iroquois tortured men they captured in battle but made use of women and children as slaves. The Mayan city-states, which seem to have engaged in continual warfare, ritually tortured their prisoners and then decapitated them. The Aztecs also went in for torture and sacrifice. Their belief that human blood and the human heart contained the vital energy for the sun’s motion and the earth’s fertility produced religious ceremonies in the capital city, Tenochtitlán, in which people captured in wars against surrounding cities and towns were sacrificed to the gods. For major events (installing an emperor or dedicating a new temple), thousands of captives, including women and children, proceeded through the streets, ascended the 114 steps of the great pyramid, and then were pressed down on the killing stone at the top so a priest could plunge the obsidian knife into their chests, tear out the still pulsing heart, and raise it to the sun. Their bodies were then sent rolling down the steps to be picked up by old men from the local temple and carried through the streets for dismemberment, distribution, and consumption. At one ceremony involving 20,000 captives, one of the priests finally collapsed from sheer exhaustion after hours of cutting out the bleeding hearts of the sacrificial victims. Like the Aztecs, the Mundurucú societies of the Amazon went in for cannibalism as well as ritual torture.¹² Their treatment of prisoners, according to anthropologist Louis Faron, “ranged from the exotic mutilation of shrinking heads to eating parts of the corpse.” After removing the brains and teeth of prisoners and closing their eyes with beeswax, the Mundurucú boiled the head and strung cords through the mouth and out of the nostrils.¹³

“Neither Cortés, nor Columbus, nor any other conquistador entered a static, timeless and peaceful world of innocents,” wrote historian Hugh Thomas in his absorbing study *Conquest: Mon-*

tezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico (1993). "The Tainos whom Columbus encountered seemed happy. But they had themselves come to the Caribbean Islands as conquerors and had driven out, or rather had driven into the west end of Cuba, the primitive inhabitants, the so-called Guanahatabeys (also known as Casimiroids). They themselves were menaced by the Caribs who, coming from the South American mainland, had been fighting their way up the lesser Antilles. The Caribs had already conquered the so-called Igneri culture in what are now called the Windward islands, and were beginning to threaten the Leewards, perhaps even Puerto Rico."¹⁴ Despite the dramatic clash of cultures after the arrival of the Spanish in the New World, historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., thought that in certain respects there was "little difference between the Europe and Mexico of 1492: little difference in the uses of power, in prescriptive inequalities, in coercion and torture, in imperialism and violence and destruction, in (to leap centuries forward to contemporary standards) the suppression of individual freedom and human rights. The record illustrates less the pitiless annihilation of an idyllic culture by a wrecking crew of aliens than it does the criminality of all cultures and the universality of original sin. Cruelty and destruction are not the monopoly of any single continent or race or culture."¹⁵

Without question, the Europeans treated the native population brutally after arriving in the New World. But they treated each other brutally, too; and the Indians themselves also dealt brutally with one another. Two wrongs do not make a right, of course, but awareness of both wrongs may help to guard against the feelings of moral superiority in judging other people that have always produced a great deal of misery in the world. Contempt for others in other times and places is not an especially promising basis for morality in any time or place.

Visiting Havana in the early 1990s, historian Schlesinger asked Fidel Castro how he viewed the Quincentennial. "We are critical," the Cuban leader told him, "Columbus brought many bad things." "If it weren't for Columbus you wouldn't be here," Schlesinger reminded him. "Well," said Castro, "Columbus brought good things as well as bad."¹⁶

Boller: Citations

1. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise* (New York, 1991); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Was America a Mistake?," *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1992): 20; Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., ed., *America in 1492* (New York, 1991), 6.
2. Paul W. Valentine, "Are We Dancing with Myths About Indians?," *Washington Post*, reprinted in *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 28, 1991, p. B7.
3. Stephan Thernstrom, "Hello, Columbus," *American School Board Journal* (Oct. 1991), 23; Josephy, *America in 1492*, 162; Paul Valentine, "Who Doomed the Maya?," *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 1991, pp. C1, C10.
4. Elmer Kelton, "Politically Correct or Historically Correct?," *The Roundup Magazine* (Sept.–Oct. 1993), 7.
5. Thernstrom, "Hello, Columbus," 21.
6. Oliver LaFarge, "Myths That Hide the American Indian," *American Heritage* 7 (Oct. 1956): 7; Valentine, "Are We Dancing with Myths About Indians?," B7; Olivia Vlahos, *New World Beginnings* (New York, 1970), 224–26.
7. Kelton, "Politically Correct or Historically Correct?," 6.
8. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr., *The Indian Heritage of America* (Boston, 1991), 28.
9. LaFarge, "Myths That Hide the American Indian," 8.
10. Kelton, "Politically Correct or Historically Correct?," 6.
11. *Ibid.*, 7, 9.
12. Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 87–110, 261–62.
13. Josephy, *America in 1492*, 193.
14. Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York, 1993), xiii.
15. Schlesinger, "Was America a Mistake?," 22.
16. *Ibid.*, 18.