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COMMENTARY

Christopher Columbus, Great American

Attacks on the explorer are aimed at Western civilization.



By Angela Rocco DeCarlo

Christopher Columbus was an American-style entrepreneur. He conceived his project alone, suffering in poverty for nearly a decade while raising the money to sail west in search of a backdoor route to the Indies of the East. Most of us can't begin to grasp the scope of Columbus's insatiable curiosity, intellectual drive and accomplishments of navigation. Most of us couldn't find the hamper without a GPS. Leaving dry land in August 1492 Columbus depended entirely on his brilliant mind, experience and research to guide him. It was common knowledge no one had ventured into that vast expanse of water—lately called the Atlantic—and lived to tell the tale. Columbus believed he could do it. He read Ptolemy and Marco Polo. His copy of Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly's "Imago Mundi" contained 898 margin notes in Columbus's own hand.

Europeans had been accustomed to traveling over land to China, Japan and India to trade for goods. After the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims of the expanding Ottoman

Empire in 1492, those ventures became dangerous. The sea became the salvation of European trade. After three months at sea Columbus disembarked in a place no European knew existed. He believed he had reached the Indies, when in fact he was in the Caribbean. He never set foot on the North American continent. It was a monumental achievement, just not the one he was hoping for.

Today when everything is instantly known—or we think it is—it is impossible to understand how 15th-century European attitudes shaped Columbus. He hoped the profits from his voyage could finance the liberation of the Holy Land from Muslim domination. He also hoped to spread the word of God.

It's intellectually dicey to judge those who lived hundreds of years ago according to modern norms. Doctors who routinely infected women during childbirth out of ignorance of the germ theory of disease are not reviled today. But European explorers who were similarly ignorant about how diseases are spread are routinely abused for the illnesses that befell inhabitants of the New World from lack of natural immunity. The Columbian exchange benefited Old World and New by spreading knowledge of science, agriculture and nutrition. Without Columbus, the Renaissance may not have succeeded. Without his discoveries, Italians wouldn't have marinara sauce, the Irish wouldn't have mashed potatoes, and the Swiss wouldn't have chocolate. Because America and its freedoms exist, children no longer contract polio and many other diseases. America saved the world from totalitarianism twice in the last century. Today Columbus's reputation is under siege. But those seeking to delegitimize the Genoan explorer's legacy may actually have a larger target in mind. Statues of Columbus and tributes to his achievements are in many ways proxies for the Western tradition of freedom, liberty and the rule of law. America had better protect Columbus and win this war. There is no one else to save the world next time around.

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