

Themes and issues in american history 1492-1789

[History](#), [American History](#)



Themes and Issues in American History September 27, 2006 1492-1789 The Indians were a hospitable and sharing race and sharing was part and parcel of their culture. They were not influenced by the frenzy of the day, capitalism and feudalism. Columbus was motivated by his quest for gold to pay his backers. Gold was the new currency of the day, better than land because it could buy anything. After the wholesale slaughter of the Indians with no gold to show for it, Columbus and the Spaniards sought slaves under the premise that it was Christian like to do so.

Slave labor and cruelty allowed millions of Indians to die between 1494 and 1508. It is amazing how cruel the Spaniards were and how docile and civilized the Indians were. Yet, we honor Columbus as a hero and adventurer. Columbus Day is dripping in blood of an innocent peaceful people. The early English settlements were also rife with terrorism of the Indian population. They looked for any small infraction by the Indians in order to severely punish the entire population and then would confiscate land and treasure.

It reminded me that war throughout all the ages from Columbus to the present has been fought for reasons far and above the inconsequential initial grievance. Hitler and Poland, Israel and Lebanon, US and Iraq are all examples. As in the Spanish conquest, all the gold and blood did not change Spain's ranking in the world. The Indian civilization was in fact much greater developed than the European civilization of its day. They had peace, prosperity, and development.

Had their people been left alone without the European influence of slaughter, enslavement, and disease it might well have been the utopian society of its

day. Who were the real savages and why to this day are the “Indians” still portrayed as primitive beings? Were the Incas, Mayans, Iroquois, Mohawk and other descendants of the great Bering Sea trek any less celebrated than the great civilizations in history, the Greeks or Romans? The Virginians of 1619 were desperate for labor in order to grow enough food to stay alive and tobacco for export.

Hunger was so prevalent that many colonists reverted to cannibalism. They couldn't force the Indians to work for they were outnumbered and the Indians were tough and resourceful. White servants were not brought over in sufficient quantities to matter and after a period of time their contract of work would expire. The free white settlers, many who were craftsman and men of leisure were little inclined to work the land. In fact John Smith in the earliest settlements had to resort to a kind of martial law to force them to work the fields for survival.

It was probably the first utterance to what would become the mantra of the 20th century, “it's not my job.” Edmond Morgan in his book *American Slavery, American Freedom* summed up the narrow mindedness of the early settlers feeling of superiority over the “savages” of the land; that they were capable of inflicting much terror on the Indian population which proved their superiority, however they couldn't hunt or grow corn to survive. Black slaves were the answer. By 1619 over 1, 000, 000 blacks had already been brought from Africa to South America and the Caribbean to work the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

Fifty years before Columbus the Portuguese took African blacks to Lisbon which was the start of the regular trade in slaves. Once again it was the superior European methods in cruelty that enabled them to conquer a civilization that was their equal in both societal and evolutionary practices. It was easier to make Africans slaves as they were far from home, exposed to immense cruelty, and generation after generation were raised to believe their in-superiority through racial hatred and the color line where white was master and black was slave.

American slavery and cruelty was fed by the frenzy of profit to be made from capitalistic agriculture. By 1800 between 10 to 15 million blacks had been transported to America. It is also estimated that Africa lost 50 million people to death and slavery in those centuries we call the beginning of modern civilization. It took physiological and physical methods to keep the slaves from revolting. They included racism based on color, cruel discipline, the break up of the slave family, and the creation of discrimination through the creation of a privileged group of slaves by separation of house slaves and field slaves.

Also slaves themselves were lulled into submission through religion and the tribal understanding of the rule of law. Fear of rebellion and the joining of poor white servants and settlers with black slaves against the ruling class were rampant in these times. Laws were created that specifically addressed the white and black class line. It enabled the ruling whites of the day to give some respectability to the poor white laborers by making them feel superior in status to blacks and thus allowing slavery to flourish.

As the country grew the disparity between the rich and the poor, the slave and the free man continued to grow. In 1676 one hundred years before the American Revolution, Bacons Rebellion showed this tumultuous period of time. The frontiersmen were pushed further west as the prime land along the coast was controlled by the elite. As they were pushed further west they encountered more Indians who were hostile to their land grab. The frontiersmen were an impoverished class resenting the taxation, land rents, and privilege of the ruling class who showed their inability and unwillingness to protect them from the Indians.

There was a complex chain of oppression in Virginia. The Indians were plundered by the frontiersman, who were taxed and controlled by the Jamestown elite, who in turn were being exploited by England with the substandard prices being paid for the colonist's exports and the unfair monopolies of the English merchant seaman. Revolution anyone? But it was the fear of the poor white class servant joining with the black slave that pushed the country to the Revolutionary War of 1776.

As more and more people of white heritage came as servants, the exploitation by the ruling class became more vicious. In the 1600's and 1700's many poor European whites were coerced to come to the new world with promises, and lies, kidnapping and forced exile. Once they arrived they were treated no better than slaves and were forced into unreasonable contracts of servitude. The ruling government of the time sided with the wealthy elite who they themselves were part and parcel of. Escape was

easier than rebellion so laws were enacted and mechanisms for control were put in place.

It is quite clear that by the 1700's the distinction between rich and poor became sharper. In New York State alone Gov. Ben Fletcher gave ? of the land to 30 people. The colonies were growing fast in the 1700's. The population of 250, 000 in 1760 was 1, 600, 000 by 1770. Those were boom times for the big cities as manufacturing, agriculture, shipping and trade were expanded. The common working class was continuing to be taxed and oppressed and there were frequent outbreaks of disorder. The problem of control became more serious.

Many poor frontiersman ran away to join Indian tribes never to return preferring the freedom and fairness of the Indian culture. It became increasingly important to enact laws and to create instances that kept the Indians and the blacks in check by following a policy of aversion between the two races. Black slaves would be instructed to fight and kill Indians and Indians would capture run away slaves and return them for payment. The policy of racism was introduced to keep the poor whites from joining with the Negro slaves.

Interracial children were ostracized from society and interracial relationships punished and scorned. The birth of the middle class in America by the early 1700's was fueled by the growth of the colonial cities. The ruling elite protected the skilled white worker from competition from the Negro slave. This enabled a class of skilled, semi literate white people to prosper and to

form a buffer between the poor white and the black slave. It also gave “hope” to the poor whites that they too could be part of this elite class.

This bought loyalty and hope. The language of the ruling class of liberty and equality gave birth to the desire and purpose of fighting a war of revolution against England without ending slavery or inequality. To control rebellion, take over land, profits, and political power from the elite of the British Empire, it became the desire of the ruling elite of the colonies to initiate the revolutionary war. By creating a nation, a symbol of national unity, they showed future generations of leaders the advantages of combining paternalism with command.

After 1763 with Britain victorious over France in the French and Indian War, it left only the English and the Indians between the aspirations and desires of the colonial ruling elite. As the British increasingly created treaties and agreements with the Indians it became apparent that the British would be the blunt of the revolutionary nature of the people of the day. With the increasingly provocative taxes forced on the colonist to pay for the kings follies it was easy thus to mobilize the lower class energy by upper class politics.

The grievances were real. There is much symbolism with today's manipulation of WW1, WW2, and the war in Iraq. Boston was full of class anger in 1763, and the local tradesman wanted open air meetings where the population could participate in making policy (regardless of land ownership) on more equitable taxes, price gouging, and the election of ordinary people to government post. The rich of the late 1700's were aware of the tendency

of the poor people to side with the British against them so they adopted policies of appeasements.

They organized powerful unions, regulators (1760) and orators to take the case for independence to the countryside. They needed to exercise extreme caution as in their desire to install revolution against Britain that they did not empower the people to overthrow and destroy the property and class distinction of the rich. So people such as Samuel Adams advised “ No mobs- No confusion-No tumult. ” They used the friction of quartering the British troops and their taking of the colonist jobs as flash points.

The elite ruling colonials exposed unity with their common brethren against the tyranny of the British by the using powerful orators and pamphlets such as Thomas Paines, Common Sense. Each harsher measure of British control escalated the colonial rebellion to the point of revolution. Finally in 1774 the setting up of the Continental Congress (a illegal body) leading to the clash at Lexington and Concord in April of 1775, led to a vote of separation and organization of a committee to draw up the Declaration of Independence.

Adopted by Congress July 2 and proclaimed July 4, 1776, the Declaration was a tool to mobilize certain groups of Americans and ignoring others, to a cause. Government manipulation continues to this day through such tools as “ spin”. The call to arms from the town hall in Boston to all men to show up for military service with all its flaming radical language ignored the fact that the rich hired “ substitutes” to serve in their place. This inequality continued to shape the revolution and its aftermath.