

"When Worlds Collide" by Thomas C. Tirado, a paper presented in Cuba, October, 2000

"When Worlds Collide:

A Clash of Cultures during the Age of Discovery"

by

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[Delivered in Spanish. This is a translation.]

Thank you very much...

I am very pleased and excited to be here in Holguín and to have an opportunity to address this conference.

Please be patient with my Spanish.

Contrary to what some might think when they read the title, "Cuando los mundos chocan," my talk is not about the recent international imbroglio over little Elián González...

...although a few months ago, I was ready to drive to Miami, invade Little Havana and grab Elián myself, and take him to his loving father and stepmother.

Instead, my presentation deals with certain aspects of and comments on the "Encuentro de culturas durante la Edad del Descubrimiento."

Before I go any further, however, I would like to thank my new-found friends, Cosme Casals Corella and Miguel Esquivel, who, among other things, are teaching me how to enjoy those wonderful Cuban cigars, that strong Cuban coffee, and, of course, those enticing mojitos.

I would like to thank the organizers of Biotur 2000 for the invitation to speak on a subject that has occupied my academic career for nearly four decades...

...and it started here in Cuba.

Forty years ago I made my first trip to your wonderful country. Back in 1960, I was a college activist who had been captivated by the amazing events taking place just 90 miles south of our border.

As a student of Latin American history, I could feel the historicity of the moment...

...and with five other classmates, I accepted an invitation from your new government, issued to the youth of America, to visit your country.

I remember the time very well...one of my professor, who had written many articles and even a book about Cuba, told us to go immediately, "Before it was too late," he said.

His assessment of the first year of the new regime was, "Fidel Castro is like all the other insurgents in Cuba's history. He will be lucky if he lasts another year."

Nineteen years later I returned to Cuba to observe the 20th anniversary of the Revolution.

By now I had lost some of the hot-tempered enthusiasm of my youth,

...and realism had replaced idealism.

After all, in 1979, I was established in my career as a university professor, I had a family, a mortgage, car payments, and increasing responsibilities as an active historian.

I had become "the establishment," against which I had once rebelled, and my hair was turning gray fast.

Today, 40 years after my first visit, although my hair is about as gray as it can become, there is still a little rebel in me.

After all, am I not here in Cuba?

[Now in retirement, I do not spend time or energy on all of those meaningless "what-could-have-been" or "what-might-have-been."

Instead, my attitude is: "The wine may be bitter but it is my wine."]

My mother is 97 years old. Forty years ago it was she who drove me to the airport in Chicago to catch a plane to Miami, and then on to Havana.

Saying her goodbyes to me at the gate, she cautioned, "Now Tommy (she's the only person in the world who still calls me "Tommy"), you behave yourself and don't get into any trouble."

"Of course," I assured her...

Last month when I told her I was returning to Cuba, she said, "You be careful in Cuba and stay out of trouble."

Mothers! Don't they have a way of putting us in our places no matter how old we are.

My presentation today represents what I have learned after 35 years of teaching.

These are my opinions...they do not pretend to be new ideas...

...I represent no one but myself.

...in reality, I am more a Columbus archivist than historian.

Some of you may know that I am responsible for the creation and maintenance of an award-winning Internet Web site and database on Columbus.

As its contribution to the 500th Anniversary of The Encounter of Two Worlds, in 1989, at my urging, my university created and installed The Computerized Information Retrieval System (CIRS) on Columbus and the Age of Discovery.

CIRS is a text retrieval system containing over 1100 text articles from magazines, journals, newspapers, speeches, official calendars and other sources from around the world relating to various encounter themes.

Awarded the status of an "Official Project" by the U.S. Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission, the Spain '92 Commission, and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, CIRS and its databases were made available to with a computer and a MODEM.

[I brought a complete copy of all of the files on a CD which I have given to Dr. Esquivel.]

Initially, I created the database to deal with the plethora of articles appearing in the years leading up to the Quincentenary.

I had hoped to consolidate all of the literature in one easily reachable location, more or less, an electronic archive.

But I was a novice...not even having the technical words in my vocabulary to describe to the academic computing services what I wanted.

...nor did the software exist

...nor did the Internet, we used BITNET

Now, twelve years later--- recognizing the importance of the database and, incidentally, having spent \$125,000 on the project...

...my University agreed to seal the database and make it accessible in perpetuity as an electronic historical archive.

Within a few years, the National Endowment for the Humanities recognized it as a "kid-safe zone" and awarded the Columbus site "...one of the 20 best educational Web sites on the Internet."

Principally for that reason, the editors of Microsoft's *Encarta Encyclopedia* asked me to write the official entry on Cristóbal Colón for the next edition, which I did...it is available on the Columbus Web site.

Being a product of the American public school system, I had never heard anything negative about Columbus.

After all, if he were not a hero why were there so many cities named after him?

And never once in my history books were Europeans ever called "Invaders."

In the 1980's, however, when a growing number of articles critical of Columbus began appearing in the popular press, I was shocked. It was like an epiphany.

"Why all of this 'Columbus bashing'?"

After all, hadn't the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition been a celebration, a show of confidence in the future?

...and wasn't Columbus a symbol of American success?

...Of hope in the future?

...of a new age about to begin?

Columbus represented only good things.

Earlier in the century, Columbus symbolism had given Americans an instant mythology.

After all, we had rejected our indigenous roots and we wanted something to replace hated England...

...especially after they burned Washington, DC in 1812.

One hundred years after the Chicago World's Fair, however, one could hardly find the word "celebration" in any of the literature.

Though it may seem like it had happened overnight, that the great discoverer had become a villain, there were those at the end of the 19th century who were already criticizing Columbus

Justin Winsor, for example, wrote, "The age created him and the age left him. There is no more conspicuous example in history of a man showing the path and losing it..."

...Columbus left his new world "a legacy of devastation and crime."

But are we burdening Columbus with more guilt than any one man should have to shoulder?

...Shouldn't it be shared more broadly?

In fact, to argue that Columbus was acting in the accepted manner of his time is to concede that he was not superior to his age.

We are not the first to criticize Columbus.

There were those in his own time, like Queen Isabella who criticized him.

And, of course, there was Father Bartolomé de las Casas, "Apostle of the Indies."

Writing several decades after the discovery, he was able to recount in detail and with awe "the most outstanding feat man has ever seen."

He admired Columbus as a navigator and a man of unswerving faith in God.

But his admiration did not blind him to Columbus' failings, particularly concerning his role in the brutal and repressive handling of the Indians.

It was Las Casas who left history the firmest evidence on which to judge the dark side of Columbus and the tragic consequences of the discovery.

He wondered why Columbus "a man good by nature and of good intentions should have been so blind in so clear a matter"

Today, 508 years later, historians are addressing the consequences of his actions.

But when we describe the Columbus legacy or any other historical event, are we not really describing ourselves?

Doesn't the way we commemorate the past tell us more about who we are than about the event we are commemorating?

Never has the adage been truer: "The idol is the measure of the worshiper"

This attitude became evident in 1992 when educators began to call the contact between the Old World and the New not a "discovery" but an "Encounter".

From the standpoint of indigenous Americans and descendants of Africans, it was time to discard the sanitized storybook version of Europeans bringing civilization and Christianity to America...

...in favor of a clearer recognition of all sides of the Encounter

...in other words, the whole global impact, both good and evil

Even before the first sounds of the Quincentenary were heard, it was no longer "politically correct" to glorify Columbus and 16th century European culture at the expense of Indians, Africans, and even women.

Regardless of where one stood on Columbus, that is, was he a hero or a villain, one of the major undeniable consequences of the contact between the two hemispheres was death and destruction of the indigenous populations.

Recognizing this, most organizations in 1992, except for the National Italian American Foundation, ceased promoting Columbus as a hero.

Even corporate sponsors began abandoning official projects...

...and educators, ministers, environmentalists and other groups began denouncing any expenditure on the Quincentenary.

Around the world "Commemoration" replaced the word "Celebration."

Cuba, in fact, was one of the countries that maintained that celebrating Columbus was, in effect, celebrating the triumph of colonialism.

Elsewhere, others were suggesting that the very word "colonialismo" was derived from "Colón".

How true became the words of my friend Dr. Francisco Morales Padrón, native of the Canary Islands and professor of history at the University of Sevilla.

Working with him on a university project entitled "In Search of Columbus," I came to appreciate his view of history.

Out of his small but potent book, *Cristóbal Colón: Almirante de la Mar Océana*, came these words in 1988:

Cualquier aspecto de la biografía de Cristóbal Colón se convierte en tema polémico o, por lo menos, en un asunto en el que no se muestran acordes los especialistas. Pocos personajes históricos han sido tan controvertidos. Se discute sobre cuál fue el lugar de su nacimiento y dónde yacen sus restos, cuál fue su lengua, su formación cultural, el origen de su proyecto navegador, sus andanzas anteriores a 1492, su vida en Portugal, el lugar por donde ingresó en España, el año de su arribo a La Rábida..., todo.

Por otra parte, pocas personas existen en la historia con una actividad que haya tenido mayor trascendencia, y pocas personas con una biografía tan cargada de misterios. Por eso, sigue apasionando a historiadores y a novelistas. Su vida reúne ingredientes sobrados como para parecer una novela, y todos los posibles desafíos o puntos oscuros como para provocar al historiador.

Columbus sailed out of the Middle Ages, from a world that still believed that the Earth was the center of the Universe...

...and that the ocean sea that washed the shores of Western Europe was the same body of water that washed the shores of Cathay (China).

Columbus, nearly alone in his belief, was convinced that the distance that separated Europe from the Indies was only 3000 miles.

Upon his return to Iberia in the Spring of 1493, imagine how excited the Spaniards were to learn that the far East was only a month away from the Canary Islands.

The Portuguese, who, for the same reason they had rejected Columbus' Enterprise of the Indies in the first place,

... again rejected the idea that he had reached the other side of the world.

From the time of his first voyage and during his next three trips to the Indies--in fact, for the rest of his life--Columbus believed that he had discovered the Indies.

Look how desperately he searched for a passage through what he considered islands blocking his way to mainland Cathay.

In calculating the circumference of the globe he seriously underestimated its real size; he overestimated the size of the Eurasian continent; and he placed Japan too far east of China

Because of these mistakes, the landfall was exactly where he thought it should be according to his image of the world...

...though the Great Navigator was approximately 150 degrees off target

Though I am open to suggestions, presently I believe that Columbus never went in search of a new world.

The idea of a "New World" was not part of European Medieval mentality.

But the desire to discover a direct trade route to the Far East had become a necessity in light of the growing menace of the Muslims in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

I believe that there is ample evidence in his words and deeds to suggest that Columbus truly believed that he was on the verge of discovering the lands about which Marco Polo had written two hundred years earlier

For example, think about the suffering he endured during the frustrating search for a passage during his 3rd and 4th voyages,

...or his pathetic begging at court for royal help,

...or his personal sacrifices, damaging his own health

...or being away from his family.

My assessment is that Columbus, for whatever reason, was unable to grasp intellectually why he could not find Marco Polo's world.

This turmoil may be due to the fact that intellectually he was a product of the Middle Ages

...but professionally he was a part of the bourgeois world of trade and commerce

On the one hand, his Enterprise of the Indies had been based upon the works of ancient authorities and on the Bible, ...

...but on the other hand, it represented the desires of the bourgeoisie who were being forced out of the marketplaces in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Upon his return in the Spring of 1493, however, it appeared as though Columbus had fulfilled the Medieval dream of circumventing the Muslim monopoly on the spice trade.

Never again during his lifetime would Columbus enjoy greater fame or popularity than in that year.

Impressed by his discovery, the Spanish sovereigns did not hesitate to give "The Admiral of the Ocean Seas" command of a large colonizing expedition of over 1200 persons.

But unfortunately, this was the beginning of his troubles, and...

...within a few years he had lost even his titles.

A master at the helm, on land he was like a duck out of water.

As an administrator of a land colony he was a disaster, totally incapable of controlling the colonists whose avarice and greed blinded them.

Moreover, Columbus was stubborn...and anti-empirical.

Once set on a course he rarely changed it...

At one point he even forced his men to swear that Cuba was a promontory of mainland China despite evidence to the contrary.

When evidence began to accumulate that the newly discovered lands were not part of Asia---and others, like Amérigo Vespucci, began to say so, Columbus held fast, refusing to recognize the obvious

In sharp contrast, Vespucci, who was from the very heart of the Renaissance, Florence, subscribed to the new science of the age, empiricism

...that is, one must base conclusions on facts...

...not faith, nor tradition, nor the scriptures.

Spending more time with the natives and exploring more of the islands and the hinterland than Columbus, Vespucci reached a different conclusion.

Even though initially believing that he, too, was in the lands of Marco Polo, for Vespucci, the facts did not add up to an "Old World"...

In 1502 he wrote, "I have found in these southern lands a continent. One can with good reason call it a "New World"

At this point it seems as though Columbus had discovered the Indies...

...but Vespucci had discovered a New World.

Few events in history have had so profound an impact on the entire world.

Of Columbus it has been said that, as an individual, only Jesus of Nazareth has had greater influence on the course of human events.

What Columbus did was more than simply crossing of an ocean.

As a direct result of his voyage, two hitherto disconnected and unknown worlds came together.

Columbus remade the World; his four voyages of discovery were the high point of the Age of Discovery and ushered in the Modern Age as well.

Alfred Crosby, author of *European Ecological Imperialism*, had this to say:

My view is that it is nearly impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Encounter. Its significance towers far above [considerations of] the fate of this or that group of humans. This Encounter marks one of the major discontinuities in the course of life on this planet. [To measure] its influence [would require] reference to a scale of time far greater than historians or archaeologists normally need, i.e. reference to what geologists and paleontologists...have been calling of late "deep time." To find changes comparable to those wrought by Columbus and [his followers] we have to go back [in time], far back, beyond recorded time to events marking the divisions between the periods of geological history.

Clearly, Columbus and the Europeans of the 15th and 16th centuries did usher in the most profound changes that Planet Earth had ever experienced since the appearance of humans.

Historian William McNeill, in concert with Crosby, had this to say:

We ought not to celebrate the discovery of America in 1492---that had been done long before. What Columbus did was to change the world in which he lived and the world in which the American Indians lived by connecting the two in a way that has lasted for half a millennium. When Columbus came to the end of his journey, however mistaken he was in calling this land the Indies, he inaugurated a profound change in human history and identity.

McNeill goes on to say, "The entire history of Europeans in America stems from Columbus's First Voyage."

"The Viking discovery of Newfoundland almost five centuries earlier proved to be a dead-end."

"Pre-Columbian Portuguese, Welsh, Irish, English, and Venetian voyages to America are modern-made myths, phantoms which left not one footprint on the sands of time."

"But Columbus's First Voyage proved to be the avant-garde for thousands of followers who...were ready to hurl themselves on the New World in search of gold and glory."

But the story of Columbus is incomplete not because of missing or conflicting documentation...

...It is incomplete because that is the nature of history.

All works of history, it has been said, are interim reports.

...History does not exist in itself.

What people did in the past cannot be frozen in time like an insect in a drop of amber.

An event can never be a moment captured and immutable through time.

Even today, with the sophistication of modern technology, pointing the video camera in a different direction will give viewers a totally different "truth."

Even though the facts on Columbus are familiar to all of us and have not changed in hundreds of years, history has meaning only when it relates to each generation.

But perspectives change along with succeeding generations, making history a child of the times.

Do we judge those of the past? Of course we do...

...and we have a right to do so.

Every generation asks questions about the past that those in the past never asked of themselves...

...and we must continue to ask questions if there is any hope of improving humankind.

What a study of the Age of Discovery has taught us is that we must think about the consequences of our actions, about future generations.

Today, for example, we recognize how fragile earth's ecosystem is...

...and we have started asking important questions about the health of the planet.

The ecological legacy of the Europeans is one of the important lessons of history...

...and one of the reasons that we are here today talking about biodiversity.

In my country there is a very popular TV show called **Star Trek**.

The crew of the spacecraft **Voyager** are bound to uphold what is called the Prime Directive.

Simply stated, it reads, "You will not intervene in the natural order of other life forms."

The lesson learned in the 24th century was if there is life to be discovered in distant galaxies, let us hope that the discoverers are guided by a Prime Directive...

...preventing them from destroying that life form either intentionally or unintentionally.

Too bad Spain, England, or France did not have a Prime Directive when they arrived in a distant and hitherto unknown world.

Though all European nations perpetrated atrocities on the Indians, the opprobrium of history had fallen hardest on the Spanish.

Though this may be unfair, their cruelty was the first, establishing a woeful pattern...

...and it was especially relentless.

Ever since, Spain has had to bear the burden of what came to be known as the Black Legend, a burden of violence and destruction.

The enormity of this offense requires that the indictment not be dismissed in a footnote to history.

While recognizing the physical beauty of the Indians upon first contact, Columbus wrote in his journal, "They are fit to be ordered about and made to work"

Two years later, in 1494, he shipped 550 Tainos to Spain for sale as slaves, fulfilling a promise he had made in a letter to a financial backer.

Columbus looked upon slavery as an economic expedient as he began to despair of finding gold in sufficient quantity to satisfy the crown and support the colony

He proposed to make regular shipments of humans in exchange for cattle and provisions for the struggling outpost at La Isabella.

Though the Europeans had not yet developed true racial prejudices based on skin color, they did divide the world into Christians and infidels.

In both Americas, colonists considered non-Christians as savages or sub-humans, belonging more to the beast world than the human.

This attitude, unfortunately, led to mistreatment, abuse, and forced labor...

...and, sadly, ended with extinction in many areas of the New World.

It was no wonder that surviving Indian nations of the Americas were in no mood to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus.

A headline in one Smithsonian publication read, "Should 1992 be a year of celebration, commemoration or lamentation?"

You will, of course, get a different answer depending upon the national origin of the person to whom you pose the question.

The Italians celebrated the occasion as a great achievement of a native son, a Genoese

The Spaniards celebrated the event as evidence of their superior culture and their crusading spirit, as a Christian enterprise.

Even the Portuguese were proud of the event because, after all, Columbus' success was a direct result of Portuguese maritime experiences in the Atlantic.

Portugal reminded us that Columbus was a product of Portuguese maritime traditions, not Spanish

American Indians and African Americans, however, hold a different view from that of the Europeans

To the Indians, the European discovery of America was nothing less than an "invasion of America."

It was, as the title of Russell Thornton's book suggests, "***The American Indian Holocaust.***"

And indeed, the islands of the Caribbean, as well as terra firma, experienced a genocide unparalleled in all of history...and made "Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent."

One Indian organization in Argentina wrote: "Why should we celebrate the 500th Anniversary? The Spaniards invaded our culture and forced us into colonial subjugation."

Bolivian Indians said, "The 5th centennial should not be considered as a triumph of Spain or the West. Rather, it is one of the darkest chapters in history."

Another group has stated, "Europe forced us to prostitute ourselves; after they poisoned our minds and filled us with lies, [the Europeans] committed unspeakable atrocities."

"Amerindia 92," a UNESCO organization, became involved in a heated debate.

Although there was a large contingency of Europeans on the commission, they were unable to prevent hostile comments by the American Indians and 3rd world membership

From the Peruvian members came the statement, "Do you really believe that we are going to participate in a fiesta to celebrate the initiation and continuation of genocide, colonization, and exploitation of our people?"

"Blinded by the glitter of gold and religious fanaticism the conquerors failed to recognize our cultures, civilizations, organizations, religions, and our very existence as anything other than the Work of the Devil."

"Spain ought to beg us for a pardon; it is not too late for King Juan Carlos to grant us the respect and dignity which we deserve."

And finally, the National Indian Council of the United States stated: "To celebrate this occasion is the equivalent of helping an assassin celebrate his crime."

And what about the African Americans? What possible reason do they have to celebrate the Age of Discovery?

To them the age was synonymous with exploitation and wholesale enslavement.

In conclusion, whatever the criticisms, it is nonetheless impossible to over-exaggerate the historical significance of Christopher Columbus.

The ultimate expression of the Columbian Legacy has been nothing less than global in its impact, much like the Internet in his time.

Though much has been written about the subsequent Columbian Exchange,

...that is, the exchange of plants and animals, of diseases, of human migration, and of cultural exchange,

...students of history should not forget that the discovery of a New World had an intellectual impact as well.

During the Age of Discovery (15th and 16th centuries), Western Europeans acquired the ability to exchange information with nearly all parts of the world.

As a prime mover of the age and one who led the way, Columbus deserves much recognition for the intellectual transformation that took place in his wake.

A new age was ushered in, the Modern Age, and after 1500 the world would never be the same, nor the human race.

We must not forget, however, that Columbus and other late Medieval adventurers had sailed away from a world that still believed that Earth was the center of the Universe.

This **geocentric** theory left little room for compromise throughout Western Christendom.

The idea that humankind inhabited a third rate planet that rotated daily on its axis and hurled itself through space at astronomical speeds around a fixed Sun was totally unacceptable to the Medieval mind.

Shortly after 1500, however, things began to change.

Soon the Polish astronomer Nicholas Copernicus published his work, ***On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres***, in which he challenged the prevailing **geocentric** view.

Advancing the **heliocentric** theory, Copernicus influenced many other great thinkers with his idea that the Earth and all other planets revolved around the Sun.

In the next century the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) advanced the Copernican theory significantly with observations made with a telescope.

In 1633, however, the Inquisition in Rome condemned Galileo for heresy.

The next thinker was the German Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). He too accepted the Copernican theory but went further by deducing that the orbits of the planets were elliptical and not circular.

Great thinkers, however, were not the only ones who questioned the traditional view of the world.

For decades, navigators and even illiterate seaman had come to doubt many conclusions of the ancient authorities.

As ships returned to their ports from the newly-found lands and oceans, a new picture of the world began to emerge.

Basing their conclusions on hard core empirical evidence ~~not on theory, scriptures, tradition, or reputation~~—these sailors constructed a new world as learned through their own experiences.

They had learned that there was far more water than land on the face of the Earth and that the Earth was much larger than hitherto believed.

Furthermore, the belief that the Earth was spherical had been confirmed repeatedly.

Now, contrast this picture with that of today.

As beneficiaries of this scientific revolution, school children throughout the world have a more accurate image of the Universe than the most learned scholars of the Ancient, Medieval, and Early Renaissance periods.

Consider also the manner in which new information is handled today.

Within minutes of its revelation, new information enters the information super highway of the Internet and television and radio broadcasting.

Almost instantly it appears in our homes and offices...

... every place there is a computer monitor or TV set.

Reflect for a moment upon the spectacular show from outer space in July, 1994.

Almost simultaneously with the scientific community, over a billion people in a worldwide audience watched in awe as the Comet P/Shoemaker-Levy 9 crashed onto the surface of Jupiter.

"This program is coming to you live from Jupiter," excited announcer remarked.

This once-in-a-lifetime experience was, in itself, remarkable.

What made it even more amazing, however, was that this new information entered the global knowledge base at the same moment it revealed itself to the scientific world.

Contrast the above phenomenon with the Middle Ages, a time during which there was no mechanism for disseminating new, uncensored, and raw information.

In a segmented Europe with no public school system, no newspapers or news magazines, no TV satellite stations, there was no means by which new information could enter the knowledge base easily.

It was in the interest of the Church and allies in feudal Europe to retain power by controlling ideas that threatened the *status quo*.

By 1500, however, a new class of people had emerged, the bourgeoisie.

Merchants, bankers, shipbuilders and others allied themselves with ambitious monarchs, successfully challenged the power of the old order.

Having been the major beneficiaries of Medieval commerce, the bourgeoisie now embraced the Age of Discovery enthusiastically.

This was especially true after 1453 when the Christian Constantinople fell to the Muslim Turks.

For the first time North Italian merchants found themselves excluded from the marketplaces of the East.

Their only hope of reacquiring lost markets was to seek new trade routes around the Muslim-controlled lands, hence the modern Age of Discovery

Though there had been other ages of discovery in the past, the 15th century affected Europe profoundly.

Barely 50 years earlier the moveable type printing press had come into use throughout Europe.

Sadly, the lack of widespread education kept Christian Europe from utilizing the wonders of the printing press to disseminate knowledge.

As late as the middle of the 16th century illiteracy contributed to the difficulty of absorbing the new and exciting information that flooded Europe from around the world.

With such alacrity did this new information arrive that the European knowledge base was unable to assimilate it.

For example, by chance the first natives that the Europeans encountered were among the most primitive societies in the whole world.

The first impressions made during the initial Encounter were so deeply engraved in the collective mind of the Europeans that subsequent and more accurate images could not obliterate the earlier ones.

More than a generation after the initial contact, when the Spaniards encountered the more sophisticated natives of *terra firma*, the earlier images of "barbarian" still persisted in their minds.

In today's terminology, the rudimentary system became overloaded with information.

Although finding new trade routes to Old World marketplaces was a motivation for Columbus and others, no one thought about finding new lands or new nations.

What a shock it was, then, finding a whole hemisphere filled with millions of PEOPLE!

Since all peoples of the world had been accounted for as having descended from the sons of Noah, these natives must be pre-Diluvium subhuman.

In fact, not until 45 years later did the Vatican under Pope Paul II issued a Papal Encyclical positing that the natives were rational beings with a soul.

The 1537 statement explained that the Indians had descended from sinful Babylonians who, during the Great Flood, fell off a mountaintop, grabbed onto a tree limb, and floated to the New World.

The Europeans simply could not see the true indigenous societies for what they were.

Or, perhaps the Europeans did not want to see anything more than primitive societies.

Evidence abounds that they cared little for these alien cultures.

Instead, they saw the words "labor force" written across the bodies of the natives.

Thus, the native cultures as well as the native population began to disappear as the invaders advanced into the hinterland.

In what can only be described as one of the greatest Holocausts of all time, disease and other conquest- and invasion-related activities led to the destruction of tens of million of natives.

Only today are we realizing the enormity of the loss of people and the inestimable loss of culture.