**Excerpted Reading from *A Patriot’s History of the United States* by Larry Schwiekart and Michael Allen**

**CHAPTER ONE**

**The Age of European Discovery**

God, glory, and gold—not necessarily in that order—took post-Renaissance Europeans to parts of the globe they had never before seen. The opportunity to gain materially while bringing the Gospel to non-Christians offered powerful incentives to explorers from Portugal, Spain, England, and France to embark on dangerous voyages of discovery in the 1400s. Certainly they were not the first to sail to the Western Hemisphere: Norse sailors reached the coasts of Iceland in 874 and Greenland a century later, and legends recorded Leif Erickson’s establishment of a colony in Vinland, somewhere on the northern Canadian coast. Whatever the fate of Vinland, its historical impact was minimal, and significant voyages of discovery did not occur for more than five hundred years, when trade with the Orient beckoned.

Marco Polo and other travelers to Cathay (China) had brought exaggerated tales of wealth in the East and returned with unusual spices, dyes, rugs, silks, and other goods. But this was a difficult, long journey. Land routes crossed dangerous territories, including imposing mountains and vast deserts of modern-day Afghanistan, northern India, Iran, and Iraq, and required expensive and well protected caravans to reach Europe from Asia. Merchants encountered bandits who threatened transportation lanes, kings and potentates who demanded tribute, and bloodthirsty killers who pillaged for pleasure. Trade routes from Bombay and Goa reached Europe via Persia or Arabia, crossing the Ottoman Empire with its internal taxes. Cargo had to be unloaded at seaports, then reloaded at Alexandria or Antioch for water transport across the Mediterranean, or continued on land before crossing the Dardanelles Strait into modern-day Bulgaria to the Danube River. European demand for such goods seemed endless, enticing merchants and their investors to engage in a relentless search for lower costs brought by safer and cheaper routes. Gradually, Europeans concluded that more direct water routes to the Far East must exist.

The search for Cathay’s treasure coincided with three factors that made long ocean voyages possible. First, sailing and shipbuilding technology had advanced rapidly after the ninth century, thanks in part to the Arabs’ development of the astrolabe, a device with a pivoted limb that established the sun’s altitude above the horizon. By the late tenth century, astrolabe technology had made its way to Spain. Farther north, Vikings pioneered new methods of hull construction, among them the use of overlapping planks for internal support that enabled vessels to withstand violent ocean storms. Sailors of the Hanseatic League states on the Baltic coast experimented with larger ship designs that incorporated sternpost rudders for better control. Yet improved ships alone were not enough: explorers needed the accurate maps generated by Italian seamen and sparked by the new inquisitive impulse of the Renaissance. Thus a wide range of technologies coalesced to encourage long-range voyages of discovery.

Political changes, a second factor giving birth to the age of discovery, resulted from the efforts of several ambitious European monarchs to consolidate their possessions into larger, cohesive dynastic states. This unification of lands, which increased the taxable base within the kingdoms, greatly increased the funding available to expeditions and provided better military protection (in the form of warships) at no cost to investors. By the time a combined Venetian-Spanish fleet defeated a much larger Ottoman force at Lepanto in 1571, the vessels of Christian nations could essentially sail with impunity anywhere in the Mediterranean. Then, in control of the Mediterranean, Europeans could consider voyages of much longer duration (and cost) than they ever had in the past. A new generation of explorers found that monarchs could support even more expensive undertakings that integrated the monarch’s interests with the merchants’.

Third, the Protestant Reformation of 1517 fostered a fierce and bloody competition for power and territory between Catholic and Protestant nations that reinforced national concerns. England competed for land with Spain, not merely for economic and political reasons, but because the English feared the possibility that Spain might catholicize numbers of non-Christians in new lands, whereas Catholics trembled at the thought of subjecting natives to Protestant heresies. Therefore, even when economic or political gains for discovery and colonization may have been marginal, monarchs had strong religious incentives to open their royal treasuries to support such missions.

**Portugal and Spain: The Explorers**

Ironically, one of the smallest of the new monarchical states, Portugal, became the first to subsidize extensive exploration in the fifteenth century. The most famous of the Portuguese explorers, Prince Henry, dubbed the Navigator, was the brother of King Edward of Portugal. Henry (1394–1460) had earned a reputation as a tenacious fighter in North Africa against the Moors, and he hoped to roll back the Muslim invaders and reclaim from them trade routes and territory.

A true Renaissance man, Henry immersed himself in mapmaking and exploration from a coastal center he established at Sagres, on the southern point of Portugal. There he trained navigators and mapmakers, dispatched ships to probe the African coast, and evaluated the reports of sailors who returned from the Azores.4 Portuguese captains made contact with Arabs and Africans in coastal areas and established trading centers, from which they brought ivory and gold to Portugal, then transported slaves to a variety of Mediterranean estates. This early slave trade was conducted through Arab middlemen or African traders who carried out slaving expeditions in the interior and exchanged captive men, women, and children for fish, wine, or salt on the coast.

Henry saw these relatively small trading outposts as only the first step in developing reliable water routes to the East. Daring sailors trained at Henry’s school soon pushed farther southward, finally rounding the Cape of Storms in 1486, when Bartholomeu Dias was blown off course by fantastic winds. King John II eventually changed the name of the cape to the Cape of Good Hope, reflecting the promise of a new route to India offered by Dias’s discovery. That promise became reality in 1498, after Vasco de Gama sailed to Calicut, India. An abrupt decline in Portuguese fortunes led to her eclipse by the larger Spain, reducing the resources available for investment in exploration and limiting Portuguese voyages to the Indian Ocean to an occasional “boatload of convicts.”Moreover, the prize for which Portuguese explorers had risked so much now seemed small in comparison to that discovered by their rivals the Spanish under the bold seamanship of Christopher Columbus, a man the king of Portugal had once refused to fund.

Columbus departed from Spain in August 1492, laying in a course due west and ultimately in a direct line to Japan, although he never mentioned Cathay prior to 1493. A native of Genoa, Columbus embodied the best of the new generation of navigators: resilient, courageous, and confident. To be sure, Columbus wanted glory, and a motivation born of desperation fueled his vision. At the same time, Columbus was “earnestly desirous of taking Christianity to heathen lands.” He did not, as is popularly believed, originate the idea that the earth is round. As early as1480, for example, he read works proclaiming the sphericity of the planet. But knowing intellectually that the earth is round and demonstrating it physically are two different things.

Columbus’s fleet consisted of only three vessels, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, and a crew of ninety men. Leaving port in August 1492, the expedition eventually passed the point where the sailors expected to find Japan, generating no small degree of anxiety, whereupon Columbus used every managerial skill he possessed to maintain discipline and encourage hope. The voyage had stretched to ten weeks when the crew bordered on mutiny, and only the captain’s reassurance and exhortations persuaded the sailors to continue a few more days. Finally, on October 11, 1492, they started to see signs of land: pieces of wood loaded with barnacles, green bulrushes, and other vegetation. A lookout spotted land, and on October 12, 1492, the courageous band waded ashore on Watling Island in the Bahamas, where his men begged his pardon for doubting him.

Columbus continued to Cuba, which he called Hispaniola. At the time he thought he had reached the Far East, and referred to the dark-skinned people he found in Hispaniola as Indians. He found these Indians “very well formed, with handsome bodies and good faces,” and hoped to convert them “to our Holy Faith by love rather than by force” by giving them red caps and glass beads “and many other things of small value.” Dispatching emissaries into the interior to contact the Great Khan, Columbus’s scouts returned with no reports of the spices, jewels, silks, or other evidence of Cathay; nor did the khan send his regards. Nevertheless, Columbus returned to Spain confident he had found an ocean passage to the Orient.

Reality gradually forced Columbus to a new conclusion: he had not reached India or China, and after a second voyage in 1493—still convinced he was in the Pacific Ocean—Columbus admitted he had stumbled on a new land mass, perhaps even a new continent of astounding natural resources and wealth. In February 1493, he wrote his Spanish patrons that Hispaniola and other islands like it were “fertile to a limitless degree,” possessing mountains covered by “trees of a thousand kinds and tall, so that they seem to touch the sky.” He confidently promised gold, cotton, spices—as much as Their Highnesses should command—in return for only minimal continued support. Meanwhile, he continued to probe the Mundus Novus south and west. After returning to Spain yet again, Columbus made two more voyages to the New World in 1498 and 1502.

Whether Columbus had found parts of the Far East or an entirely new land was irrelevant to most Europeans at the time. Political distractions abounded in Europe. Spain had barely evicted the Muslims after the long Reconquista, and England’s Wars of the Roses had scarcely ended. News of Columbus’s discoveries excited only a few merchants, explorers, and dreamers. Still, the prospect of finding a waterway to Asia infatuated sailors; and in 1501 a Florentine passenger on a Portuguese voyage, Amerigo Vespucci, wrote letters to his friends in which he described the New World. His self-promoting dispatches circulated sooner than Columbus’s own written accounts, and as a result the term “America” soon was attached by geographers to the continents in the Western Hemisphere that should by right have been named Columbia. But if Columbus did not receive the honor of having the New World named for him, and if he acquired only temporary wealth and fame in Spain (receiving from the Crown the title Admiral of the Ocean Sea), his place in history was never in doubt. Historian Samuel Eliot Morison, a worthy seaman in his own right who reenacted the Columbian voyages in 1939 and 1940, described Columbus as “the sign and symbol [of the] new age of hope, glory and accomplishment.”

Once Columbus blazed the trail, other Spanish explorers had less trouble obtaining financial backing for expeditions. Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1513) crossed the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean (as he named it). Ferdinand Magellan (1519–22) circumnavigated the globe, lending his name to the Strait of Magellan. Other expeditions explored the interior of the newly discovered lands. Juan Ponce de León, traversing an area along Florida’s coast, attempted unsuccessfully to plant a colony there. Pánfilo de Narváez’s subsequent expedition to conquer Tampa Bay proved even more disastrous. Narváez himself drowned, and natives killed members of his expedition until only four of them reached a Spanish settlement in Mexico.

Spaniards traversed modern-day Mexico, probing interior areas under Hernando Cortés, who in 1518 led a force of 1,000 soldiers to Tenochtitlán, the site of present-day Mexico City. Cortés encountered powerful Indians called Aztecs, led by their emperor Montezuma. The Aztecs had established a brutal regime that oppressed other natives of the region, capturing large numbers of them for ritual sacrifices in which Aztec priests cut out the beating hearts of living victims. Such barbarity enabled the Spanish to easily enlist other tribes, especially the Tlaxcalans, in their efforts to defeat the Aztecs.

Tenochtitlán sat on an island in the middle of a lake, connected to the outlying areas by three huge causeways. It was a monstrously large city (for the time) of at least 200,000, rigidly divided into nobles and commoner groups. Aztec culture created impressive pyramid-shaped temple structures, but Aztec science lacked the simple wheel and the wide range of pulleys and gears that it enabled. But it was sacrifice, not science, that defined Aztec society, whose pyramids, after all, were execution sites. A four-day sacrifice in 1487 by the Aztec king Ahuitzotl involved the butchery of 80,400 prisoners by shifts of priests working four at a time at convex killing tables who kicked lifeless, heartless bodies down the side of the pyramid temple. This worked out to a “killing rate of fourteen victims a minute over the ninety-six-hour bloodbath.” In addition to the abominable sacrifice system, crime and street carnage were commonplace. More intriguing to the Spanish than the buildings, or even the sacrifices, however, were the legends of gold, silver, and other riches Tenochtitlán contained, protected by the powerful Aztec army.

Cortés first attempted a direct assault on the city and fell back with heavy losses, narrowly escaping extermination. Desperate Spanish fought their way out on Noche Triste (the Sad Night), when hundreds of them fell on the causeway. Cortés’s men piled human bodies—Aztec and European alike—in heaps to block Aztec pursuers, then staggered back to Vera Cruz. In 1521 Cortés returned with a new Spanish army, supported by more than 75,000 Indian allies. This time, he found a weakened enemy who had been ravaged by smallpox, or as the Aztecs called it, “the great leprosy.” Starvation killed those Aztecs whom the disease did not: “They died in heaps, like bedbugs,” wrote one historian. Even so, neither disease nor starvation accounted for the Spaniards’ stunning victory over the vastly larger Aztec forces, which can be credited to the Spanish use of European style disciplined shock combat and the employment of modern firepower. Severing the causeways, stationing huge units to guard each, Cortés assaulted the city walls from thirteen brigantines the Spaniards had hauled overland, sealing off the city. These brigantines proved “far more ingeniously engineered for fighting on the Aztecs’ native waters than any boat constructed in Mexico during the entire history of its civilization.”18 When it came to the final battle, it was not the brigantines, but Cortés’s use of cannons, muskets, harquebuses, crossbows, and pikes in deadly discipline, firing in order, and standing en masse against a murderous mass of Aztecs who fought as individuals rather than a cohesive force that proved decisive.

Spanish technology, including the wheel-related ratchet gears on muskets, constituted only one element of European military superiority. They fought as other European land armies fought, in formation, with their officers open to new ideas based on practicality, not theology. Where no Aztec would dare approach the godlike Montezuma with a military strategy, Cortés debated tactics with his lieutenants routinely, and the European way of war endowed each Castilian soldier with a sense of individual rights, civic duty, and personal freedom nonexistent in the Aztec kingdom. Moreover, the Europeans sought to kill their enemy and force his permanent surrender, not forge an arrangement for a steady supply of sacrifice victims. Thus Cortés captured the Aztec capital in 1521 at a cost of more than 100,000 Aztec dead, many from disease resulting from Cortés’s cutting the city’s water supply. But not all diseases came from the Old World to the New, and syphilis appears to have been retransmitted back from Brazil to Portugal.

If Europeans resembled other cultures in their attitude toward conquest, they differed substantially in their practice and effectiveness. The Spanish, especially, proved adept at defeating native peoples for three reasons. First, they were mobile. Horses and ships endowed the Spanish with vast advantages in mobility over the natives. Second, the burgeoning economic power of Europe enabled quantum leaps over Middle Eastern, Asian, and Mesoamerican cultures. This economic wealth made possible the shipping and equipping of large, trained, well-armed forces. Nonmilitary technological advances such as the iron-tipped plow, the windmill, and the waterwheel all had spread through Europe and allowed monarchs to employ fewer resources in the farming sector and more in science, engineering, writing, and the military. A natural outgrowth of this economic wealth was improved military technology, including guns, which made any single Spanish soldier the equal of several poorly armed natives, offsetting the latter’s numerical advantage. But these two factors were magnified by a third element—the glue that held it all together—which was a western way of combat that emphasized group cohesion of free citizens. Like the ancient Greeks and Romans, Cortés’s Castilians fought from a long tradition of tactical adaptation based on individual freedom, civic rights, and a “preference for shock battle of heavy infantry” that “grew out of consensual government, equality among the middling classes,” and other distinctly Western traits that gave numerically inferior European armies a decisive edge. That made it possible for tiny expeditions such as Ponce de León’s, with only 200 men and 50 horses, or Narváez’s, with a force of 600, including cooks, colonists, and women, to overcome native Mexican armies outnumbering them two, three, and even ten times at any particular time.

More to the point, no native culture could have conceived of maintaining expeditions of thousands of men in the field for months at a time. Virtually all of the natives lived off the land and took slaves back to their home, as opposed to colonizing new territory with their own settlers. Indeed, only the European industrial engine could have provided the material wherewithal to maintain such armies, and only the European political constructs of liberty, property rights, and nationalism kept men in combat for abstract political causes. European combat style produced yet another advantage in that firearms showed no favoritism on the battlefield. Spanish gunfire destroyed the hierarchy of the enemy, including the aristocratic dominant political class. Aztec chiefs and Moor sultans alike were completely vulnerable to massed firepower, yet without the legal framework of republicanism and civic virtue like Europe’s to replace its leadership cadre, a native army could be decapitated at the head with one volley, whereas the Spanish forces could see lieutenants fall and seamlessly replace them with sergeants.

**Did Columbus Kill Most of the Indians?**

The five-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus’s discovery was marked by unusual and strident controversy. Rising up to challenge the intrepid voyager’s courage and vision—as well as the establishment of European civilization in the New World—was a crescendo of damnation, which posited that the Genoese navigator was a mass murderer akin to Adolf Hitler. Even the establishment of European outposts was, according to the revisionist critique, a regrettable development. Although this division of interpretations no doubt confused and dampened many a Columbian festival in 1992, it also elicited a most intriguing historical debate: did the esteemed Admiral of the Ocean Sea kill almost all the Indians? A number of recent scholarly studies have dispelled or at least substantially modified many of the numbers generated by the anti-Columbus groups, although other new research has actually increased them. Why the sharp inconsistencies? One recent scholar, examining the major assessments of numbers, points to at least nine different measurement methods, including the time-worn favorite, guesstimates.

1. Pre-Columbian native population numbers are much smaller than critics have maintained. For example, one author claims “Approximately 56 million people died as a result of European exploration in the New World.” For that to have occurred, however, one must start with early estimates for the population of the Western Hemisphere at nearly 100 million. Recent research suggests that that number is vastly inflated, and that the most reliable figure is nearer 53 million, and even that estimate falls with each new publication. Since 1976 alone, experts have lowered their estimates by 4 million. Some scholars have even seen those figures as wildly inflated, and several studies put the native population of North America alone within a range of 8.5 million (the highest) to a low estimate of 1.8 million. If the latter number is true, it means that the “holocaust “or “depopulation” that occurred was one fiftieth of the original estimates, or 800,000 Indians who died from disease and firearms. Although that number is a universe away from the estimates of 50 to 60 million deaths that some researchers have trumpeted, it still represented a destruction of half the native population. Even then, the guesstimates involve such things as accounting for the effects of epidemics—which other researchers, using the same data, dispute ever occurred—or expanding the sample area to all of North and Central America. However, estimating the number of people alive in a region five hundred years ago has proven difficult, and recently several researchers have called into question most early estimates. For example, one method many scholars have used to arrive at population numbers—extrapolating from early explorers’ estimates of populations they could count—has been challenged by archaeological studies of the Amazon basin, where dense settlements were once thought to exist. Work in the area by Betty Meggers concludes that the early explorers’ estimates were exaggerated and that no evidence of large populations in that region exists. N. D. Cook’s demographic research on the Inca in Peru showed that the population could have been as high as 15 million or as low as 4 million, suggesting that the measurement mechanisms have a “plus or minus reliability factor” of 400 percent! Such “minor” exaggerations as the tendencies of some explorers to overestimate their opponents’ numbers, which, when factored throughout numerous villages, then into entire populations, had led to overestimates of millions.

2. Native populations had epidemics long before Europeans arrived. A recent study of more than 12,500 skeletons from sixty-five sites found that native health was on a “downward trajectory long before Columbus arrived.” Some suggest that Indians may have had a nonvenereal form of syphilis, and almost all agree that a variety of infections were widespread. Tuberculosis existed in Central and North America long before the Spanish appeared, as did herpes, polio, tick-borne fevers, giardiasis, and amebic dysentery. One admittedly controversial study by Henry Dobyns in Current Anthropology in 1966 later fleshed out over the years into his book, argued that extensive epidemics swept North America before Europeans arrived. As one authority summed up the research, “Though the Old World was to contribute to its diseases, the New World certainly was not the Garden of Eden some have depicted.” As one might expect, others challenged Dobyns and the “early epidemic” school, but the point remains that experts are divided. Many now discount the notion that huge epidemics swept through Central and North America; smallpox, in particular, did not seem to spread as a pandemic.

3. There is little evidence available for estimating the numbers of people lost in warfare prior to the Europeans because in general natives did not keep written records. Later, when whites could document oral histories during the Indian wars on the western frontier, they found that different tribes exaggerated their accounts of battles in totally different ways, depending on tribal custom. Some, who preferred to emphasize bravery over brains, inflated casualty numbers. Others, viewing large body counts as a sign of weakness, deemphasized their losses. What is certain is that vast numbers of natives were killed by other natives, and that only technological backwardness—the absence of guns, for example—prevented the numbers of natives killed by other natives from growing even higher.

4. Large areas of Mexico and the Southwest were depopulated more than a hundred years before the arrival of Columbus. According to a recent source, “The majority of Southwesternists…believe that many areas of the Greater Southwest were abandoned or largely depopulated over a century before Columbus’s fateful discovery, as a result of climatic shifts, warfare, resource mismanagement, and other causes.” Indeed, a new generation of scholars puts more credence in early Spanish explorers’ observations of widespread ruins and decaying “great houses” that they contended had been abandoned for years.

5. European scholars have long appreciated the dynamic of small-state diplomacy, such as was involved in the Italian or German small states in the nineteenth century. What has been missing from the discussions about native populations has been a recognition that in many ways the tribes resembled the small states in Europe: they concerned themselves more with traditional enemies (other tribes) than with new ones (whites).

Technology and disease certainly played prominent roles in the conquest of Spanish America. But the oppressive nature of the Aztecs played no small role in their overthrow, and in both Peru and Mexico, “The structure of the Indian societies facilitated the Spanish conquest at ridiculously low cost.” In addition, Montezuma’s ruling hierarchical, strongly centralized structure, in which subjects devoted themselves and their labor to the needs of the state, made it easy for the Spanish to adapt the system to their own control. Once the Spanish had eliminated Aztec leadership, they replaced it with themselves at the top. The “common people” exchanged one group of despots for another, of a different skin color.

By the time the Aztecs fell, the news that silver existed in large quantities in Mexico had reached Spain, attracting still other conquistadores. Hernando de Soto explored Florida (1539–1541), succeeding where Juan Ponce de León had failed, and ultimately crossed the Mississippi River, dying there in 1542. Meanwhile, marching northward from Mexico, Francisco Vásquez de Coronado pursued other Indian legends of riches in the Seven Cities of Cibola. Supposedly, gold and silver existed in abundance there, but Coronado’s 270-man expedition found none of the fabled cities, and in 1541 he returned to Spain, having mapped much of the American Southwest. By the 1570s enough was known about Mexico and the Southwest to attract settlers, and some two hundred Spanish settlements existed, containing in all more than 160,000 Europeans.

Traveling with every expedition were priests and friars, and the first permanent building erected by Spaniards was often a church. Conquistadores genuinely believed that converting the heathen ranked near—or even above—the acquisition of riches. Even as the Dominican friar and Bishop of Chiapas, Bartolomé de Las Casas, sharply criticized his countrymen in his writings for making “bloody, unjust, and cruel wars” against the Indians—the so-called Black Legend—a second army of mercy, Spanish missionaries, labored selflessly under harsh conditions to bring the Gospel to the Indians. In some cases, as with the Pueblo Indians, large numbers of Indians converted to Christianity, albeit a mixture of traditional Catholic teachings and their own religious practices, which, of course, the Roman Church deplored. Attempts to suppress such distortions led to uprisings such as the 1680 Pueblo revolt that killed twenty-one priests and hundreds of Spanish colonists, although even the rebellious Pueblos eventually rejoined the Spanish as allies.

Explorers had to receive from the king a license that entitled the grantee to large estates and a percentage of returns from the expedition. From the estates, explorers carved out ranches that provided an agricultural base and encouraged other settlers to immigrate. Then, after the colonists had founded a mission, the Spanish government established formal forts (presidios). The most prominent of the presidios dotted the California coast, with the largest at San Diego. Royal governors and local bureaucrats maintained the empire in Mexico and the Southwest with considerable autonomy from Spain. Distance alone made it difficult for the Crown to control activities in the New World.

A new culture accompanied the Spanish occupation. With intermarriage between Europeans and Indians, a large mestizo population (today, referred to as Mexican or Hispanic people) resulted. It generally adopted Spanish culture and values.

**The Pirates of the Caribbean**

Despite frantic activity and considerable promise, Spanish colonies grew slowly. Southwestern and Mexican Spanish settlements had a population of about 160,000 by the 1570s, when the territory under the control of the king included Caribbean islands, Mexico, the southwestern part of today’s United States, large portions of the South American land mass, and an Indian population of more than 5 million. Yet when compared to the later rapid growth of the English colonies, the stagnation of Spain’s outposts requires examination. Why did the Spanish colonies grow so slowly? One explanation involves the extensive influence in the Caribbean and on the high seas of pirates who spread terror among potential settlers and passengers. A less visible and much more costly effect on colonization resulted from the expense of outfitting ships to defend themselves, or constructing a navy of sufficient strength to patrol the sea-lanes. Pirates not only attacked ships en route, but they also brazenly invaded coastal areas, capturing entire cities. The famous English pirate Henry Morgan took Portobelo, the leading Spanish port on the American Atlantic coast in 1668, and Panama City fell to his marauders in 1670–71. Sir Francis Drake, the Master Thief of the unknown world, as the Spaniards called him, “became the terror of their ports and crews” and he and other “sea dogs” often acted as unofficial agents of the English Crown.

Other discouraging reports dampened Spanish excitement for settling in the New World. In1591, twenty-nine of seventy-five ships in a single convoy went down trying to return to Spain from Cuba; in 1600 a sixty-ship fleet from Cádiz to Mexico encountered two separate storms that sank seventeen ships and took down more than a thousand people; and in 1656 two galleons collided in the Bahamas, killing all but fifty-six of the seven hundred passengers. Such gloomy news combined with reports of piracy to cause more than a few potential Spanish settlers to reconsider their plans to relocate in Mexico. Another factor that retarded Spain’s success in the New World was its rigid adherence to mercantilism, an economic theory that had started to dominate Europe. Mercantilism held that wealth was fixed (because it consisted of gold and silver), and that for one nation to get richer, another must get poorer.

Spain thoroughly embraced the aspects of mercantilism that emphasized acquiring gold and silver. Spanish mines in the New World eventually turned out untold amounts of riches. Francisco Pizarro transported 13,000 pounds of gold and 26,000 pounds of silver in just his first shipment home. Total bullion shipped from Mexico and Peru between 1500 and 1650 exceeded 180 tons. Yet Spain did not view the New World as land to be developed, and rather than using the wealth as a base from which to create a thriving commercial sector, Spain allowed its gold to sit in royal vaults, unemployed in the formation of new capital.

Spanish attitudes weighed heavily upon the settlers of New Spain, who quickly were outpaced by the more commercially oriented English outposts. Put another way, Spain remained wedded to the simplest form of mercantilism, whereas the English and Dutch advanced in the direction of a freer and more lucrative system in which business was less subordinated to the needs of the state. Since the state lacked the information possessed by the collective buyers and sellers in the marketplace, governments inevitably were at a disadvantage in measuring supply and demand. England thus began to shoot ahead of Spain and Portugal, whose entrepreneurs found themselves increasingly enmeshed in the snares of bureaucratic mercantilism.

**France in the New World**

France, the last of the major colonizing powers, abandoned mercantilism more quickly than the Spanish, but not as rapidly as the English. Although not eager to colonize North America, France feared leaving the New World to its European rivals. Following early expeditions along the coast of Newfoundland, the first serious voyages by a French captain into North America were conducted under Jacques Cartier in 1534. Searching for the fabled Northwest Passage, a northerly water route to the Pacific, he sailed up the St. Lawrence, reaching the present site of Montreal. It was another seventy years, however, before the French established a permanent settlement there.

Samuel de Champlain, a pious cartographer considered one of the greatest inland explorers of all time, searched for a series of lakes that would link the Atlantic and Pacific, and in 1608 established a fort on a rocky point called Quebec (from the Algonquin word “kebec,” or “where the river narrows”). Roughly twenty years later, France chartered the Company of New France, a trading firm designed to populate French holdings in North America. Compared to English colonial efforts, however, New France was a disappointment, in no small part because one of the most enthusiastic French groups settled in the southeastern part of the United States, not Canada, placing them in direct contact with the powerful Spanish. The French government, starting a trend that continued to the time of the Puritans, answered requests by religious dissidents to plant a colony in the southernmost reaches of North America. Many dissenters born of the Protestant Reformation sought religious freedom from Catholic governments. These included French Protestants known as Huguenots. Violent anti-Protestant prejudices in France served as a powerful inducement for the Huguenots to emigrate.

Huguenots managed to land a handful of volunteers in Port Royal Sound (present-day South Carolina) in 1562, but the colony failed. Two years later, another expedition successfully settled at Fort Caroline in Florida, which came under attack from the Spanish, who slaughtered the unprepared inhabitants, ending French challenges to Spanish power in the southern parts of North America. From that point on, France concentrated its efforts on the northern reaches of North America—Canada—where Catholicism, not Protestantism, played a significant role in French Canadian expansion alongside the economics of the fur trade.

French colonization trailed that of the English for several reasons. Quebec was much colder than most of the English colonial sites, making it a much less attractive destination for emigrants. Also, the conditions of French peasants in the 1600s were better than that of their English counterparts, so they were less interested in leaving their mother country. Finally, the French government, concerned with maintaining a large base of domestic military recruits, did not encourage migration to New France. As a result, by 1700, English colonists in North America outnumbered French settlers six to one. Despite controlling the St. Lawrence and Mississippi rivers, New France, deprived by its inland character of many of the advantages available to the coastal English settlements, saw only a “meagre trickle” to the region. As few as twenty-seven thousand French came to Canada in 150 years, and two-thirds of those departed without leaving descendants there.

Even so, New France had substantial economic appeal. Explorers had not found gold or silver, but northern expeditions discovered riches of another sort: furs. Vast Canadian forests offered an abundance of highly valued deer, elk, rabbit, and beaver skins and pelts, harvested by an indigenous population eager to trade. Trapping required deep penetration into forests controlled by Indians, and the French found that they could obtain furs far more easily through barter than they could by deploying their own army of trappers with soldiers to protect them. Thus, French traders ventured deep into the interior of Canada to exchange knives, blankets, cups, and, when necessary, guns with the Indians for pelts. At the end of a trading journey, the coureurs de bois (runners of the woods) returned to Montreal, where they sold the furs to merchants who shipped them back to Europe. That strategy demanded that France limit the number of its colonists and discourage settlement, particularly in Indian territories. France attempted to deal with natives as friends and trading partners, but quickly realized that the Indians harbored as much enmity for each other as they did for the Europeans. If not careful, France could find itself on the wrong end of an alliance, so where possible, the French government restrained colonial intrusions into Indian land, with the exception of missionaries, such as Jacques Marquette (1673) and René de La Salle (1681).

**The English Presence**

Despite the voyages of John Cabot, English explorers trailed in the wake of the Portuguese, Spanish, and French. England, at the beginning of the sixteenth century “was backward in commerce, industry, and wealth, and therefore did not rank as one of the great European nations.” When Queen Elizabeth took the throne in 1558, the situation changed: the nation developed a large navy with competent—often skilled—sailors. Moreover, profits from piracy and privateering provided strong incentives to bold seamen, especially “sea dogs” like John Hawkins and Francis Drake, to join in plundering the Spanish sea-lanes.

By that time, the English reading public had become fascinated with the writings of Humphrey Gilbert, especially A Discourse to Prove a Passage by the North-West to Cathaia and the East Indies (1576), which closed with a challenge to Englishmen to discover that water route.

In 1578, Elizabeth granted him rights to plant an English colony in America, but he died in an attempt to colonize Newfoundland. Walter Raleigh, Gilbert’s half brother, inherited the grant and sent vessels to explore the coast of North America before determining where to locate a settlement. That expedition reached North Carolina in the summer of 1584. After spending two months traversing the land, commenting on its vegetation and natural beauty, the explorers returned to England with glowing reports. Raleigh supported a second expedition in 1585, at which time one hundred settlers landed at Roanoke on the Carolina coast. When the transports had sailed for England, leaving the colony alone, it nearly starved, and only the fortunate arrival of Drake, fresh from new raiding, provided it with supplies. Raleigh, undeterred by the near disaster, planned another settlement for Roanoke, by which time Richard Hakluyt’s Discourse on Western Planting (1584) further ginned up enthusiasm for settling in the region.

Settlers received stock in Raleigh’s company, which attracted 133 men and 17 women who set sail on three ships. They reached Roanoke Island in 1587, and a child born on that island, Virginia Dare, technically became the first European born in America. As with the previous English expedition, the ships, under the command of the governor, John White, returned to England for more supplies, only to arrive under the impending threat of a Spanish invasion of England—a failed invasion that would result in the spectacular defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, leaving England as the predominant sea power in the world. Delays prohibited the supply ships from returning to Roanoke until 1591, when John White found the Roanoke houses standing, but no settlers. A mysterious clue—the word croatoan carved on a tree—remains the only evidence of their fate. Croatoan Indians lived somewhat nearby, but they were considered friendly, and neither White nor generations of historians have solved the puzzle of the Lost Colony of Roanoke. Whatever the fate of the Roanoke settlers, the result for England was that by 1600 there still were no permanent English colonies in America.

**Foundations for English Success in the New World: A Hypothesis**

England had laid the foundation for successful North American settlements well before the first permanent colony was planted at Jamestown in 1607. Although it seemed insignificant in comparison to the large empire already established by the Spanish, Virginia and subsequent English colonies in Massachusetts would eclipse the settlement of the Iberian nations and France. Why?

It is conceivable that English colonies prospered simply by luck, but the dominance of Europe in general and England in particular—a tiny island with few natural resources—suggests that specific factors can be identified as the reasons for the rise of an English-Atlantic civilization: the appearance of new business practices, a culture of technological inquisitiveness, and a climate receptive to political and economic risk taking.

One of the most obvious areas in which England surpassed other nations was in its business practices. English merchants had eclipsed their Spanish and French rivals in preparing for successful colonization through adoption of the joint-stock company as a form of business. One of the earliest of these joint-stock companies, the Company of the Staple, was founded in 1356 to secure control over the English wool trade from Italian competitors. By the 1500s, the Moscovy Company (1555), the Levant Company (1592), and the East India Company (1600) fused the exploration of distant regions with the pursuit of profit. Joint-stock companies had two important advantages over other businesses. One advantage was that the company did not dissolve with the death of the primary owner (and thus was permanent). Second, it featured limited liability, in which a stockholder could lose only what he invested, in contrast to previous business forms that held owners liable for all of a company’s debts. Those two features made investing in an exciting venture in the New World attractive, especially when coupled with the exaggerated claims of the returning explorers. Equally important, however, the joint-stock feature allowed a rising group of middle-class merchants to support overseas ventures on an ever-expanding basis.

In an even more significant development, a climate receptive to risk taking and innovation, which had flourished throughout the West, reached its most advanced state in England. It is crucial to realize that key inventions or technologies appeared in non-Western countries first; yet they were seldom, if ever, employed in such a way as to change society dramatically until the Western societies applied them. The stirrup, for example, was known as early as a.d. 400–500 in the Middle East, but it took until 730, when Charles Martel’s mounted knights adopted cavalry charges that combat changed on a permanent basis. Indeed, something other than invention was at work. As sociologist Jack Goldstone put it, “The West did not overtake the East merely by becoming more efficient at making bridles and stirrups, but by developing steam engines…[and] by taking unknown risks on novelty.” Stability of the state, the rule of law, and a willingness to accept new or foreign ideas, rather than ruthlessly suppress them, proved vital to entrepreneurship, invention, technical creativity, and innovation. In societies dominated by the state, scientists risked their lives if they arrived at unacceptable answers.

Still another factor, little appreciated at the time, worked in favor of English ascendancy: labor scarcity ensured a greater respect for new immigrants, whatever their origins, than had existed in Europe. With the demand for labor came property rights, and with such property rights came political rights unheard of in Europe. Indeed, the English respect for property rights soon eclipsed other factors accounting for England’s New World dominance. Born out of the fierce struggles by English landowners to protect their estates from seizure by the state, by the 1600s, property rights had become so firmly established as a basis for English economic activities that its rules permeated even the lowest classes in society. English colonists found land so abundant that anyone could own it. When combined with freedom from royal retribution in science and technological fields, the right to retain the fruit of one’s labor—even intellectual property—gave England a substantial advantage in the colonization process over rivals that had more than a century’s head start. These advantages would be further enhanced by a growing religious toleration brought about by religious dissenters from the Church of England called Puritans.

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