

Columbus, Stay Home!

A bitter debate over his 500th anniversary

The executive director of the Christopher Columbus Quincentenary Jubilee Commission is picking his words carefully. "We don't call it a celebration," says James Kuhn. "We call it a commemoration." Of what? "Specifically the 500th anniversary of the voyages to the New World," he explains. Oh, Columbus's great discovery? No, says Kuhn, "I refer to it as an 'encounter.' I may have even said discovery in the past but now I refer to it as an encounter."

With friends like these, Christopher Columbus is in for a bad year.

It didn't start out that way. The drums were in place for traditional ruffles and flourishes: replicas of the cockleshell caravels, museum exhibits, two Hollywood movies, a tide of academic books and articles. But somehow the hoopla curdled. Kuhn's Quincentenary Commission, funded partially by Congress, is trying to regroup after the resignation of its chairman and an investigation of its finances. Groups ranging from the National Council of Churches to the American Indian Movement have denounced the festivities. Museums that thought they had booked crowd-pleasing at-

tractions now find themselves mired in controversy. When Atlanta's SciTrek museum opened an exhibit of a scale-model Niña last month, pickets paraded outside until officials agreed to add panels on the life and times of Native Americans. In Washington, the National Endowment for the Humanities took a look at a proposed television documentary, found scripts that painted the historic voyage and its aftermath as a genocidal campaign and canceled the federal funding.

In books and speeches, Columbus himself comes in for almost nothing but abuse.

He is called a rapist and plunderer, a slave trader, a mass murderer comparable to Adolf Hitler and Pol Pot. Ecologist and historian Kirkpatrick Sale set the tone in his recent book on Columbus, "The Conquest of Paradise," denouncing the admiral for every sin but littering: lovelessness, avarice, duplicity, paranoia, ferocity and cruelty. Sale even accuses Columbus of being a "wretched mariner," heedless of his ships and reckless in challenging ill winds.

The problem is that Columbus did all those things—and more. "He was one of the most complicated personalities in the annals of history," says University of Georgia geographer Louis DeVorse, author of an

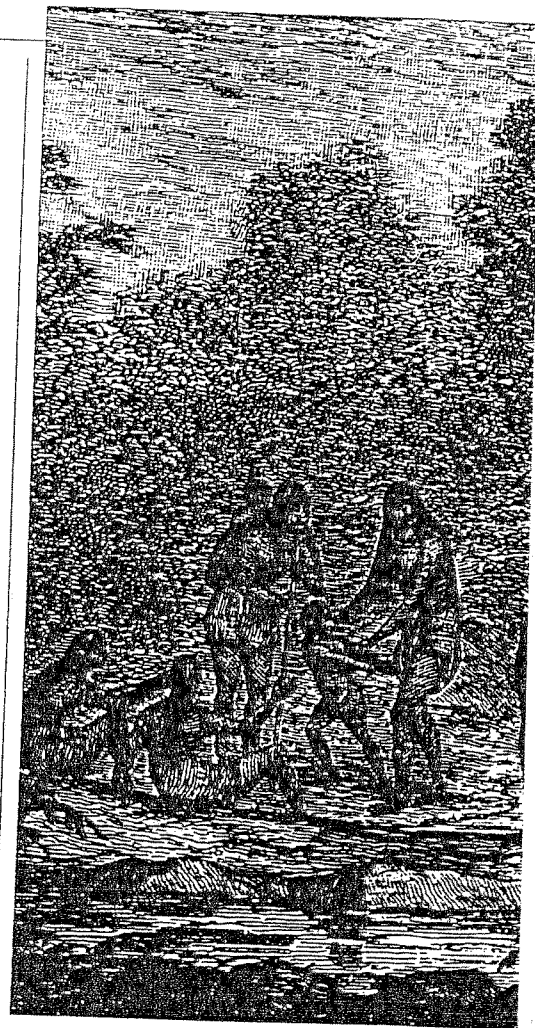
upcoming guide to "Age of Discovery" research at the Library of Congress. In one bold stroke, Columbus changed the world, irrevocably linking the Old and the New. His were the quintessential voyages across uncharted waters, adventures that carried the imagination of Western man to the moon and beyond. The conquistadors followed in his wake; their journeys were the proximate cause of tragedy, most particularly the end of Aztec and Inca civilizations—millions died as their immune systems were over-

matched by the diseases Europeans brought with them. The Spaniards didn't set out to wipe out the natives. Indeed their deaths were inconvenient, leading to another horror: the importing of African slaves to the Western Hemisphere.

Complicating matters further is that the attempt to assess Columbus and his proper place—shall we mourn, celebrate or both?—comes in the midst of an acrimonious debate in American intellectual life. This controversy pits those anxious to prove the evils of Eurocentric thinking and action against those who treat all attacks on

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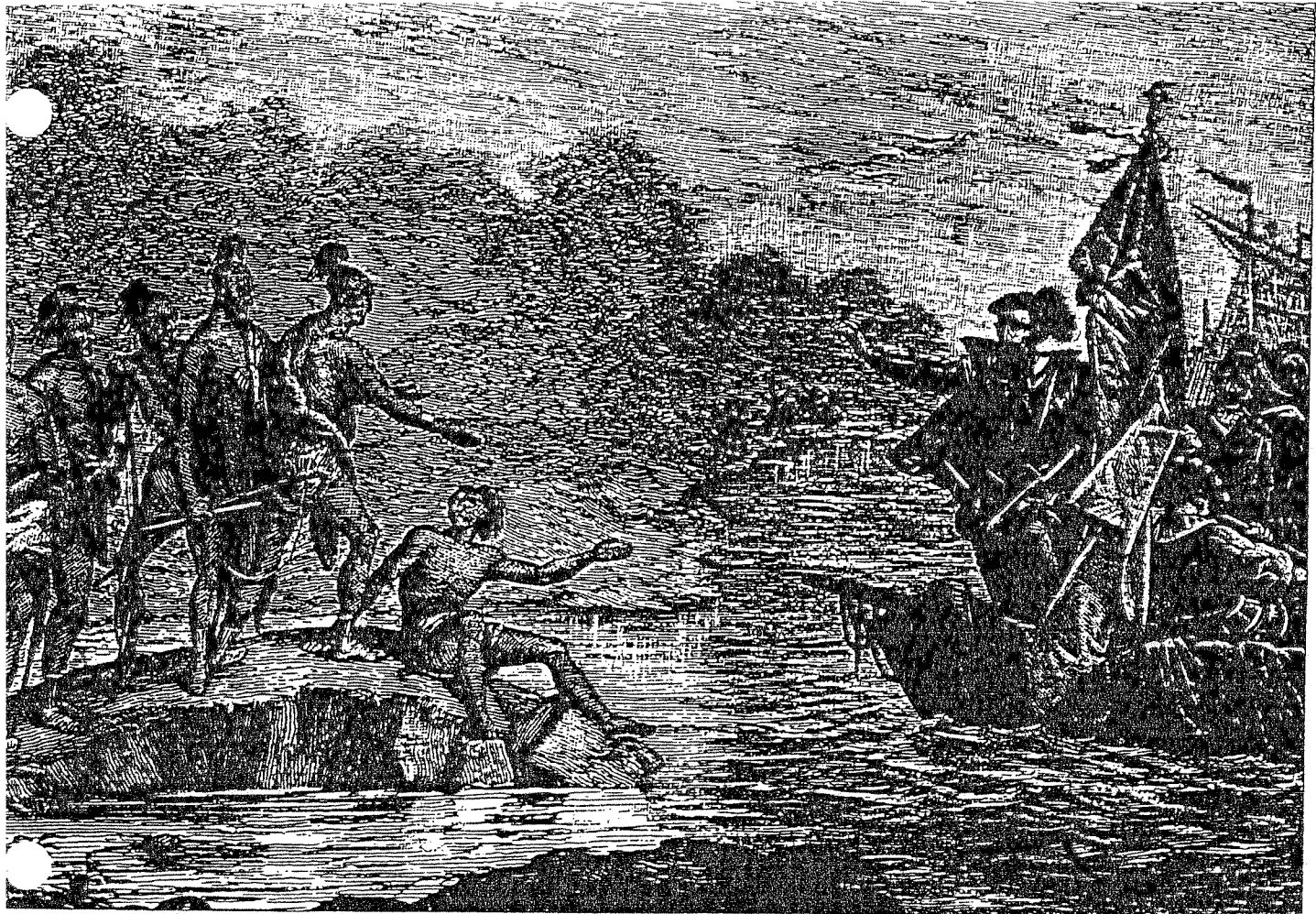
PROF. DAURIL ALDEN



Western tradition as a threat to civilization itself. In the shorthand of the times, this is another example of the skirmishing called political correctness.

Discussion about Columbus has never been untroubled. He was a prickly character at best, enigmatic and often evasive; he spent his last years in failure and disgrace, ill and at least half mad. Within 50 years of his death, the revisionist friar Bartolomé de las Casas was writing eloquently of the atrocities committed under Columbus and his successors as governors. Indians were tortured and killed, hunted in the hills, fed to the white men's dogs. Millions died, mostly from smallpox, diphtheria and whooping cough. It was a cruel time.

But that's the point: even if Columbus set all that evil in motion, he can't be called the sole or even the chief villain. Latin American historian Dauril Alden of the University of Washington says that Columbus "was a product of his times." He was beastly to the Indians and beastly to his sailors. When he caught his men stealing gold, he ordered the amputation of their noses or ears. Moderns can look back at such behavior with revulsion; but applying a moral code that wasn't then in place doesn't help explain Columbus or put his actions in any sort of context.



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"Every generation," Alden says, "rethinks its historical past through a prism that reflects its own concerns. But I object to overloading Columbus with responsibility for everything that happened. He was interested in discovery, in wealth and prestige. He wasn't interested in genocide."

But context isn't everything; the Indians did die in appalling numbers. "He represents the worst of his era," says leading revisionist Jack Weatherford of Macalester College. "We should honor those who rise above their times." Some Native American groups have organized their own events. The newly formed 1992 Alliance has declared "The Year of the Indigenous People" beginning next January. More than

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PROF. JACK WEATHERFORD

200 groups are planning native commemorations. In New York City, the Native American Council will hold a weeklong festival and sponsor an hour of silence on Oct. 12 to emphasize the environmental damage caused by Columbus's heirs. (Ecol-

ogy was another cause unknown in Columbus's time.) These groups would also like to reverse the axiom that losers don't get to write history. Among other things, they're proposing model curricula, public-service spots and consulting services that will carefully balance all public displays.

"We don't want window dressing," says 1992 Alliance coordinator Suzan Harjo. "We want our views made prominent."

As long as a variety of views can be expressed, the debate over Columbus and his legacy may pay pedagogical dividends. Remember, this is a nation where the average eighth grader can't name the century in which the Civil War took place or find Mexico on a map with either hand.

Any enhanced appreciation of the multiple layers of history is a bonus. Indiana University professor Helen Nader, a past chair of the American Historical Association's Columbus committee, thinks that a good brawl will help her cause. "No cameras or

'Smirk of superiority': After a shipwreck, help from a Carib chief

reporters come when I give a lecture, but if somebody is protesting they do," she says. "The more statements, the more open discussion, the better."

In the end, we are left with the kind of question that might enliven a parlor game: is mankind better off because the Europeans settled the Americas or would things have been better if they had never come? It's 1992 and the Aztecs stand astride the hemisphere, handsome, proud and committed to their nasty habit of human sacrifice. In Europe, mature democracies might anguish over whether they should export their ideology to an indigenous people who obey totalitarian chiefs. Or maybe things would have worked out differently. It's been 500 years. Time enough to remember, as Princeton anthropologist Jorge Klor de Alva says, that "we're descended from both sides, the conqueror and the conquered. This should be a time of great reflection." There is pride and sorrow enough for all.

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