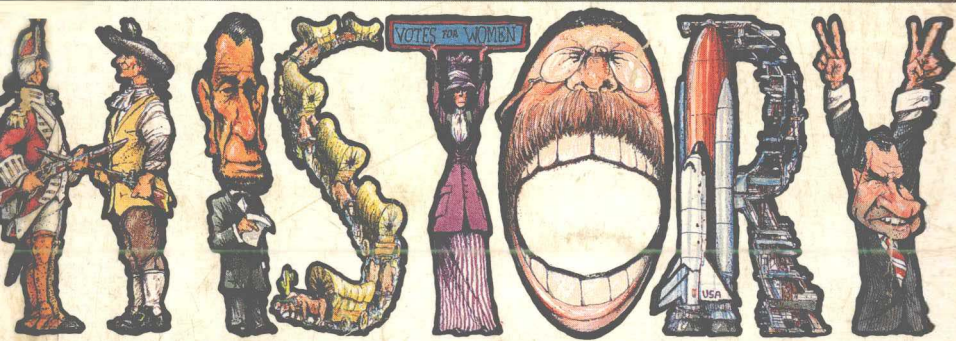


THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT



Everything You Need
to Know about American History
but Never Learned

KENNETH C. DAVIS

DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

Everything You Need
to Know about American History
but Never Learned

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Introduction

Back in the early 1960s, when I was growing up, there was a silly pop song called *What Did Washington Say When He Crossed the Delaware?* Sung to a tarantella beat, the answer was something like “Martha, Martha, there’ll be no pizza tonight.” Of course, these lyrics were absurd; everybody knew Washington only ate cherry pie.

On that December night in 1776, George may have told himself that if this raid on an enemy camp in Trenton, New Jersey, didn’t work, he might be ordering a last meal before the British strung him up. But as the general rallied his ragged, barefoot troops across the icy Delaware, one of his actual comments was far more amusing than those lyrics. Stepping into his boat, Washington—the plainspoken frontiersman, not the marbled demigod—nudged 280-pound General Henry “Ox” Knox with the tip of his boot and said, “Shift that fat ass, Harry. But slowly, or you’ll swamp the damned boat.”

According to A. J. Langguth’s fascinating history of the Revolution, *Patriots*, that is how Knox himself reported the story after the war. I certainly never heard that version of the crossing when I was in school. And that’s too bad, because it reveals more of Washington’s true, earthy nature than all the hokey tales about cherry trees and nonexistent prayer vigils in Valley Forge. And that’s the point of this book: much of what we remember about our history is either mistaken or fabricated. That is, if we remember it at all.

For all too many Americans who dozed through American History 101, the Mayflower Compact might as well be a small car. Reconstruction has something to do with silicone implants. And

the Louisiana Purchase means eating out at a Cajun restaurant. In recent years, several writers have enjoyed remarkable success by lambasting Americans' failure to know our past. Americans were shown to be know-nothings in the books *Cultural Literacy* and *The Closing of the American Mind*.

Well, we're probably not as dumb as these books would have us. But the sad truth is clear: we are no nation of scholars when it comes to history. On the 1988 hustings, for instance, vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle had trouble fielding a question about the Holocaust—fumbling the facts as to when and to whom it happened.

Another highly publicized example of our "historical illiteracy" was the 1987 survey of high school juniors that exposed astonishing gaps in what these seventeen-year-olds knew about American history and literature. A third of the students couldn't identify the Declaration of Independence as the document that marked the formal separation of the thirteen colonies from Great Britain. Only 32 percent of the students surveyed could place the American Civil War in the correct half century.

But why dump on the kids? While there are constant warnings issued about the yawning gaps in the education of American students, another question looms larger. Would their parents score any higher? Most thirty-seven-year-olds or forty-seven-year-olds might not do any better on a similar pop quiz. Don't ask for whom the gap yawns. The gap yawns for thee.

The reason for these common historical shortcomings is simple. Most of us learned history from textbooks that served up the past as if it were a Hollywood costume drama. In schoolbooks of an earlier era, the warts on our Founding Fathers' noses were neatly retouched. Slavery also got the glossy make-over—it was merely the misguided practice of the rebellious folks down South until the "progressives" of the North showed them the light. American Indians got the same portrayal in textbooks that you saw in B-movies.

Truth isn't so cosmetically perfect. Our historical sense is frequently skewed, skewered, or plain screwed up by myths and misconceptions. Schools that packaged a tidy set of simplistic historical images are largely responsible for fostering these Amer-

ican myths. There was a tendency to hide the less savory moments from our past, the way a mad aunt's photo gets pulled from the family album. If anyone thinks it only happens in George Orwell's *1984*, take a look at the official Chinese version of the June 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square. How will Chinese history books tell that in ten or twenty years?

The gaping chasms in our historical literacy have been reinforced by images from pop culture. Books, movies, and television have magnified the myths and make-overs. But looking past these myths is revealing. The real picture is far more interesting than the historical tummy-tuck.

This book's intent is to bridge those chasms with some simple, accessible answers to basic questions about American history. This single volume is obviously not an encyclopedic history of America. For simplicity, I have used a question-and-answer approach, and there are literally shelves of books about each of the questions I have included. My intent is to refresh the shaky recollection or reshape the misconception with some simple answers. Or, in some cases, to point the way to longer answers.

The book is organized along chronological lines, moving from America's "discovery" by Europe to more recent events, including the fallout from the Iran-Contra affair. I have attempted to focus on the sort of basic questions that the average person might have, emphasizing names, places, and events that we vaguely recall as being important, but forget exactly why. The reader is welcome to read the book straight through as a narrative history, or to use it as a reference book by dipping into a particular question or period. Because wars have been central, shaping events in our history, and because many people lack a sense of what actually happened during these wars, I have included a series of chronologies that condense the events of the major conflicts in American history. Also scattered throughout the book are "American Voices," which are selected quotes, passages from books, speeches, and court decisions that reflect the spirit of the times.

Following the seeming ambivalence of the American public about the 1988 election, it also seemed appropriate to include an election primer that explains some of the more mysterious ele-

ments of the process, from caucuses and delegate counts to the nearly mystical electoral college. A second appendix presents a quick guide to the American presidents. An annotated list of sources for each chapter offers a selective rather than an exhaustive bibliography. The books cited are either widely accepted standards or recent works that offer fresh insights or update accepted wisdom. I have also tried to single out those critically well-received books written for the general reader rather than the specialist, such as James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, a masterful single-volume history of the Civil War. A general bibliography lists books that cover broader periods and themes.

In some cases, these sources take very specific political viewpoints. While I have attempted to present a spectrum of opinions on those issues where there is no broad consensus, I have tried to avoid any particular stance. If there is an underlying theme here, it is that the struggle for power is the essence of history. The battle between those holding power—whether it be the power of land, money, church, or votes—and the have-nots—the poor, the weak, the disenfranchised, the rebellious—is the main thread in the drama of history.

A second thread is one that our schools sadly bury, either out of laziness or owing to a shortfall in imaginative teaching. This is the impact of personality in history. At many turning points, it was the commanding presence of an individual—Washington, Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, the Roosevelts, and Susan B. Anthony, to name a few—that determined events, rather than the force of any idea or movement. Great ideals and noble causes have died for lack of a champion. At other times, the absence of a strong personality has had the reverse effect. For example, if a dominant president had emerged in the years before the Civil War, instead of a string of mediocrities, Lincoln's emergence might have been stillborn.

I came to this project with the same misconceptions many people may have about our past. I have learned a great deal about the Americans who shaped the country, and it hasn't always been a pleasant discovery. The simple view of men like Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt as beatified heroes of the American epic doesn't always stand up to scrutiny. The American story is not

that simple. There are moments in our past that can breed feelings of cynicism and disgust. Yet there are other moments that evoke pride and admiration.

Generally speaking, Americans have behaved worse than our proudest boosters proclaim. On the other hand, Americans have also shown a capacity to be better than the worst claims of their detractors. Barely two hundred years old, America is still young in the broad sense of history, even though the pace of history has accelerated radically as the twentieth-century techno-revolution has transformed media, travel, and communications. The history of this country is not necessarily a continuum moving toward a perfectly realized republic. More accurately, history has acted like a pendulum with long swings creating a flux in one direction or another. America remains shockingly divided along racial and economic lines. One can look at that rift and feel pessimism. But the optimist points to the distance America has come in a relatively brief time. Of course, that is small consolation to those who have always received the short end of the stick.

Perhaps what is more important is the commitment to an acknowledgment of the true American dream. Not the one about the house with two cars in the driveway and a barbecue in the backyard, but the dream Jefferson voiced two hundred years ago. Even though his vision of "all men created equal" was probably different from our modern understanding, it remains the noblest of dreams and the greatest of aspirations. The struggle to fulfill that dream has been a long, strange trip. And it is never over.

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C h a p t e r

O n e

Brave New World

- Who really “discovered” America?
- If he wasn’t interested in the Bahamas, what was Columbus looking for in the first place?
- So if Columbus didn’t really discover America, who did?
- Okay, the Indians really discovered America. Who were they, and how did they get here?
- If Columbus was so important, how come we don’t live in the United States of Columbus?
- Where were the first European settlements in the New World?
- If the Spanish were here first, what was so important about Jamestown?
- What was the Northwest Passage?

- What was the Lost Colony?
- When and how did Jamestown get started?
- Did Pocahontas really save John Smith's life?
- What was the House of Burgesses?
- Who started the slave trade?
- Who were the Pilgrims, and what did they want?
- What was the Mayflower Compact?
- Did the Pilgrims really land at Plymouth Rock?
- Highlights in the development of New England
- Who started New York?
- Did the Indians really sell Manhattan for \$24?
- How did New Amsterdam become New York?
- When did the French reach the New World?
- Why is Pennsylvania the Quaker State?
- What were the thirteen original colonies?

Few eras in American history are shrouded in as much myth and mystery as the long period covering America's discovery and settlement. Perhaps this is because there were few objective observers on hand to record so many of these events. There was no "film at eleven" when primitive people crossed into Alaska. No correspondents were on board when Columbus's ships reached land. Historians have been forced instead to rely upon accounts written by participants in the events, witnesses whose views can politely be called jaundiced. This chapter covers some of the key events during several thousand years of history.

However, the spotlight is on the development of what would become the United States, and the chapter ends with the thirteen original colonies in place.

Who really “discovered” America?

“In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” We all know that. But did he really discover America? The best answer is, “Sort of.”

A national holiday and two centuries of schoolbooks have left the impression of Christopher Columbus as the intrepid sailor and man of God (his given name means “Christ-bearer”) who was the first to reach America, disproving the notion of a flat world while he was at it. Italian-Americans who claim the sailor as their own treat Columbus Day as a special holiday, as do Hispanic Americans who celebrate *El Día de la Raza* as their discovery day. It would be unthinkable to downplay the importance of Columbus’s voyage, or the incredible heroism and tenacity of character his quest demanded. Even the astronauts who flew to the moon had a pretty good idea of what to expect; Columbus was sailing, as “Star Trek” puts it, “where no man has gone before.”

However, rude facts do suggest a few different angles to his story.

After trying to sell his plan to the kings of Portugal, England, and France, Columbus doggedly returned to Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, who had already said no once. Convinced by one of their ministers that the risks were small and the potential return great, and fueled by an appetite for gold and fear of Portugal’s lead in exploration, the Spanish monarchs later agreed. Contrary to myth, Queen Isabella did not have to pawn any of the crown jewels to finance the trip.

Columbus set sail on August 3, 1492, from Palos, Spain, aboard three ships, *Niña*, *Pinta*, and *Santa María*, the last being his flagship. Columbus (christened Cristoforo Colombo) had been promised a ten-percent share of profits, governorship of new-found lands, and an impressive title—Admiral of the Ocean Sea.

On October 12 at 2:00 A.M., just as his crews were threatening to mutiny and force a return to Spain, a lookout named Rodrigo

aboard the *Pinta* sighted moonlight shimmering on some cliffs or sand. Having promised a large reward to the first man to spot land, Columbus claimed that he had seen the light the night before, and kept the reward for himself. Columbus named the landfall—*Guanahani* to the natives—San Salvador. While it was long held that Columbus's San Salvador was Watling Island in the Bahamas, recent computer-assisted theories point to Samana Cay. Later on that first voyage, Columbus reached Cuba and a large island he called Hispaniola (presently Haiti and the Dominican Republic).

Although he found some naked natives whom he christened *indios* in the mistaken belief that he had reached the so-called Indies or Indonesian Islands, the only gold he found was in the earrings worn by the Indians. As for spices, he did find a local plant called *tobacos*, which was rolled into cigars and smoked by the local Arawaks. It was not long before all Europe was savoring pipefuls of the evil weed. (Tobacco was brought to Spain for the first time in 1555. Three years later, the Portuguese introduced Europe to the habit of taking snuff. The economic importance of tobacco to the early history of America cannot be understated, especially with respect to the later English colonies, where it literally kept the settlers alive. Powerful tobacco lobbies that influence government decisions practically arrived with the first European settlers.)

Still believing that he had reached some island outposts of China, Columbus left some volunteers on Hispaniola in a fort called Natividad, built of timbers from the wrecked *Santa María*, and returned to Spain. While Columbus never reached the mainland of the present United States of America on any of his three subsequent voyages, his arrival in the Caribbean signaled the dawn of an astonishing and unequaled era of discovery, conquest, and colonization in the Americas. Although his bravery, persistence, and seamanship have rightfully earned Columbus a place in history, what the schoolbooks gloss over is that Columbus's arrival also marked the beginning of one of the cruelest episodes in human history.

Driven by an obsessive quest for gold, Columbus quickly enslaved the local population. Under Columbus and other Span-

ish adventurers, as well as later European colonizers, an era of genocide was opened that ravaged the native American population through warfare, forced labor, draconian punishments, and European diseases to which the Indians had no natural immunities.

If he wasn't interested in the Bahamas, what was Columbus looking for in the first place?

The arrival of the three ships at their Caribbean landfall marks what is probably the biggest and luckiest blooper in the history of the world. Rather than a new world, Columbus was actually searching for a direct sea route to China and the Indies. Ever since Marco Polo had journeyed back from the Orient loaded with spices, gold, and fantastic tales of the strange and mysterious East, Europeans had lusted after the riches of Polo's Cathay (China). This appetite grew ravenous when the returning Crusaders opened up overland trade routes between Europe and the Orient. However, when Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, it meant an end to the spice route that served as the economic lifeline for Mediterranean Europe.

Emerging from the Middle Ages, Europe was quickly shifting from an agrarian, barter economy to a new age of capitalism in which gold was the coin of the realm. The medieval Yuppies (Young European Princes) acquired a taste for the finer things such as gold and precious jewels, as well as the new taste sensations called spices, and these were literally worth their weight in gold. After a few centuries of home-cooked venison, there was an enormous clamor for the new Oriental take-out spices: cinnamon from Ceylon, pepper from India and Indonesia, nutmeg from Celebes, and cloves from the Moluccas. The new merchant princes had also acquired a taste for Japanese silks and Indian cottons, dyes, and precious stones.

Led by Prince Henry the Navigator, founder of a great scholarly seaport on coastal Portugal, Portuguese sea captains like Bartholomeu Dias (who reached the Cape of Good Hope in 1488) and Vasco da Gama (who sailed all the way to India in 1495) had taken the lead in exploiting Africa and navigating a sea route to

the Indies. Like others of his day, Columbus believed that a direct westward passage to the Orient was not only possible, but would be faster and easier. In spite of what Columbus's public-relations people later said, the flat-earth idea was pretty much finished by the time Chris sailed. In fact, an accepted theory of a round earth had been held as far back as the days of the ancient Greeks. In the year Columbus sailed, a Nuremberg geographer constructed the first globe. The physical proof of the Earth's roundness came when eighteen survivors of Magellan's crew of 266 completed a circumnavigation in 1522.

Columbus believed a course due west along latitude twenty-eight degrees North would take him to Marco Polo's fabled Cipangu (Japan). Knowing that no one was crazy enough to sponsor a voyage of more than 3,000 miles, Columbus based his guess of the distance on ancient Greek theories, some highly speculative maps drawn after Marco Polo's return, and some figure-fudging of his own. He arrived at the convenient estimate of 2,400 miles.

In fact, the distance Columbus was planning to cover was 10,600 miles by air!

So if Columbus didn't really discover America, who did?

The debate over who reached America before Columbus goes back almost as far as Columbus's voyage. Enough books have been written on the subject of earlier "discoverers" to fill a small library. There is plenty of evidence to bolster the claims made on behalf of a number of voyagers who may have reached the Americas, either by accident or design, well before Columbus reached the Bahamas.

Among these, the one best supported by archaeological evidence is the theory that holds that the Norse captain Leif Eriksson not only reached North America but established a colony, called Vinland, in present-day Newfoundland around 1000 A.D., five hundred years before Columbus. Most of what is guessed about the Norse colony in North America is derived from two Icelandic epics called *The Vinland Sagas*.

While "Leif the Lucky" gets the credit in history and the