

# A HISTORY <sup>OF THE</sup> AMERICAN PEOPLE

SECOND EDITION



Volume I: To 1877

STEPHAN THERNSTROM

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THE  
AMERICAN PEOPLE**  
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**STEPHAN THERNSTROM**  
*Harvard University*



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To Melanie and Sam

# Preface

After taking an examination in American colonial history as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University in 1884, Woodrow Wilson wrote in disgust that he went into it “crammed with one or two hundred dates and one or two thousand minute particulars of the quarrels of nobody knows who with an obscure governor for nobody knows what. Just think of all that energy wasted! The only comfort is that this mass of information won’t long burden me. I shall forget it with great ease.” History presented as an endless string of names and dates, battles and treaties, can be excruciatingly boring, and it is natural to wonder about the point of studying it.

In writing this book, I have been mindful of Wilson’s complaint. Inevitably this book includes a good many names, dates, and descriptions of key historical actors and events—but only those details I consider truly important to the beginning student. An American history without George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Woodrow Wilson would be like a *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. Chester A. Arthur, though, can safely be left out of the main story, although he occupied the White House from 1881 to 1885. So too can chief executives whose administrations were uneventful, obscure bills, treaties, battles, and scandals that authors of textbooks customarily feel obliged to cover because all the other texts include them.

Too many details overwhelm the reader. A textbook can also be boring not just from an excess of facts but from a lack of a strong connective tissue of *ideas* to give those facts meaning. History is not “one damned thing after another”—X happened, then Y happened, then Z happened. History examines the relationship between X, Y, and Z, and explores how one led to the next. A description of five acts passed by Congress in 1863 will not interest anyone unless he or she is prodded to think about why the measures passed when they did and what their consequences were. The historian must be analytical, asking not only what happened but how and why it happened in that sequence and what difference it made. The descriptive passages in this volume serve a purpose too. They provide the necessary raw material to make the “how” and “why” questions comprehensible. Asking why things turned out as they did and not some other way is always central to this book’s purpose.

Like most historians today, I believe that history is more than past politics. Therefore, the central focus of this book is not on political life, although major political developments are indeed treated. I think the central question to ask about American history is: Who are the American people and how did they

come to be that way in the nearly four centuries that have elapsed since the first British settlement at Jamestown in 1607? Scholarly inquiry in such new fields as urban, ethnic, family, and women's history has shed much new light on that overarching issue in recent years. Studies of life at the "grassroots" now tell us far more about the millions of anonymous Americans in the past than we knew before. I have drawn upon this recent literature, as well as upon still valuable older studies, to fashion a fresh overview of the contours of American history, emphasizing the enormous changes in our economy and social structure that have made America what it is today. Preparing the second edition has given me an opportunity to update my interpretations in light of recent scholarship and to devote more space to matters that I dealt with too briefly in the first edition. America's role in an increasingly interdependent world is given a good deal more attention as are the events and issues of the most recent half century of our history. I have included an entirely new chapter on economic and social trends since the Great Depression and have given a new assessment of politics in the Reagan years.

I hope that readers will take from this book something more meaningful than what Woodrow Wilson claimed from his study of colonial history. If I have succeeded in my aim, readers will gain a greater measure of self-understanding and a stronger sense of connection with their ancestors, a new feeling for what Abraham Lincoln called "the mystic chords of memory" that tie successive generations of Americans together. Another of our greatest presidents, Franklin D. Roosevelt, spoke of why our history matters:

*A nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment for the creation of the future.*

I would like to acknowledge the following historians: Barton J. Bernstein, Stanford University; John Morton Blum, Yale University; A. M. Burns, University of Florida; Maurice A. Crouse, Memphis State University; Jack Diggins, University of California at Irvine; Michael Frisch, State University of New York at Buffalo; Sheldon Hackney, University of Pennsylvania; Donald W. Hensel, California Polytechnic State University; Stanley N. Katz, formerly at Princeton University, now with the American Council of Learned Societies; Samuel McSeveney, Vanderbilt University; Dr. Myron A. Marty, formerly at Florissant Valley Community College, now with the National Endowment for the Humanities; John M. Murrin, Princeton University; Nell Irvin Painter, Princeton University; James T. Patterson, Brown University; Raymond Robinson, Northeastern University; Laurence Veysey, University of California at Santa Cruz; and Daniel J. Walkowitz, New York University. Richard John, Harvard University, unearthed valuable material and made sage suggestions that assisted me in revising the manuscript.

Stephan Thernstrom

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# CHAPTER ONE



## The European Invasion

**H**alf an hour before sunrise on August 3, 1492, the *Pinta*, the *Nina*, and the *Santa Maria* slipped their moorings in the harbor at Palos, Spain, and headed out into the Atlantic. Christopher Columbus, their commander, had begun his daring quest to reach the Orient by a new route—sailing westward around the globe. On October 12, with the fearful crew on the verge of mutiny, he spied land. It was not Asia, but the Bahamas. Columbus had not discovered a new route to the Orient; he had discovered a “new world.”

Most of us learned the tale in childhood. The factual details are correct, but the new world myth is a European invention that obscures a crucial truth. Columbus did not really find a new world, only a world new to Europeans. The Western Hemisphere was not virgin soil 500 years ago. Many millions of people lived there—the native peoples Columbus called “Indians” out of the delusion that he had reached Asia. Columbus established contact between two worlds already old, thereby opening the way for an invasion that transplanted Western European civilization on new territory. To exploit the rich resources of the Western Hemisphere, aggressive European newcomers conquered the original inhabitants and lived off their labor. Late in the fifteenth century, Europe gained mastery over the oceans of the world and created a new Europe-centered global economy. The invasion of America, a key step in the process, was possible because inventive and ambitious Europeans had no scruples about using their newly developed sources of power to impose their will upon others.

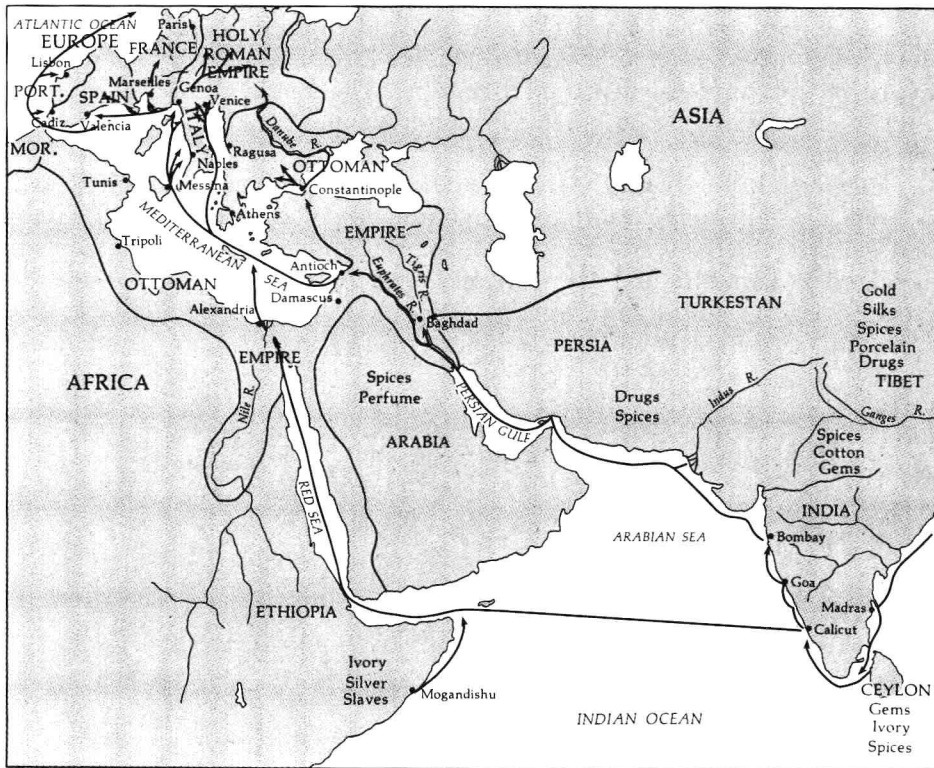
## EUROPE LOOKS OUTWARD

A visitor from another planet touring the world in 1400 to determine which of its societies was most developed would have had little reason to single out Western Europe. The civilization of western Christendom in the late Middle Ages was rich and vibrant in certain respects. A visit to the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, or a look at an intricate illuminated manuscript, would have impressed him, but the Chinese, Persian, and Byzantine empires had made comparable cultural achievements. Nor did Europe enjoy a clear advantage in any other realm—levels of agricultural and commercial development, scientific and technological know-how, the capacity of the government to preserve order, or the like. A hundred years later, Europe had become distinctly more advanced than other parts of the world in some basic respects, but its superior dynamism was not evident in 1400.

Western Christendom had undergone three centuries of expansion. Between 1000 and 1300, the population more than doubled and the economy flourished. Living standards improved, trade increased, and agriculture became more efficient because of technological advances. Iron ploughs replaced wooden implements, enabling farmers to penetrate the soils of previously unarable land. The introduction of the three-field system of crop rotation increased output per acre. Better harnesses and nailed horseshoes allowed the substi-

tution of more efficient horses for oxen. An “urban revolution” was also occurring. Cities that had been stagnant since the fall of Rome in the fifth century began to grow in size and wealth and many new towns were established.

Symptomatic of the expansive vitality of Western Europe in this era were the Crusades (1095–1270), great holy wars launched to recapture the holy places of Palestine from the Muslims. Although the Crusaders were eventually beaten back, they returned to Europe with new tastes that had historical consequences. In the Middle East, Europeans first encountered the silks, jewels, and spices of Asia. The most significant of these luxuries—spice—soon was regarded as a necessity in wealthy households. Meat cooked in smoky fireplaces, often in an advanced state of decay, was almost inedible without an ample dose of pepper to disguise the taste. Spices, furthermore, were thought to have aphrodisiac effects. To satisfy the growing European appetite for Asian goods, Middle Eastern merchants organized overland trading routes to the East, using their monopoly to extract enormous profits from their customers. To a great extent, the discovery of the new world was sparked by the high price of spices. It stimulated European adventurers to search for sea routes to China and India and to open direct trade with them (see Map 1-1).



MAP 1-1 Trade Routes between Europe and Asia, c. 1500

## Contraction

The first outthrust of Western Europe was not sustained. The failure of the last Crusade in 1270 marked the beginnings of a period of decline. Territorial expansion ceased, and soon the frontiers of Christendom began to contract under pressure from Turks on the east and Moors on the west. Three centuries of rapid growth had expanded the population beyond the land's capacity to sustain it. In a rural society like that of medieval Europe, the population can continue to grow only if more land can be brought under cultivation or if existing land can be worked more efficiently. By 1300 neither was happening. All the arable land was already under the plough, and there were no new breakthroughs in agricultural technology to increase yields per acre. A "Malthusian crisis" began. As food prices rose to a level the poorest could not afford, their diets deteriorated; the death rate edged upward.

Then came a crisis of another kind—the Black Death. In 1347, trading caravans from Mongolia reached Europe, bringing in their wake packs of rats infested with fleas carrying the microparasite that causes bubonic plague (now recognized as *Pasteurella pestis*). The plague cut through Europe like a great scythe, killing a third of the population, 25 million people, in a mere 6 years. Because diseases pass easily from person to person in dense urban quarters, cities, the focal points of social, economic, and cultural development, were the hardest hit. Many cities lost at least half of their inhabitants; 60 percent of the people of Venice died within 18 months. The plague did not disappear after its first horrifying outburst. Smaller epidemics recurred for the rest of the century.

The onset of the Black Death initiated a period of general economic and social decline in much of Europe, though not in Italy as we shall see. Production fell and villages were abandoned. A profound pessimism and fatalism appeared in literature and art. "Oh miserable and very sad life," sighed a French poet. "We suffer from warfare, death, and famine; cold and heat, day and night, sap our strength; fleas, scabmites, and so much other vermin make



The Black Death and subsequent epidemics forced an exodus from the cities of early modern Europe.



## THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK DEATH

Many men and women abandoned their own city, their houses and their homes, their relatives and belongings as if the wrath of God could not pursue them, but would only oppress them within city walls. They were apparently convinced that no one should remain in the city, and that its last hour had struck. The calamity had instilled such terror in the hearts of men and women that fathers and mothers shunned their children. It had come to pass that men who died were shown no more concern than dead goats today.

—Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

war on us. In short, have mercy, Lord, upon our wicked persons, whose life is very short." It was a time of widespread violence and internal disorder, manifested in the savage Hundred Years' War between France and England (1337–1453) and in bloody peasant uprisings like the Jacquerie in France (1357) and Wat Tyler's Revolt in England (1381). Europe was retreating steadily before the advancing Ottoman Turks. The Turks blocked the trading routes to the Far East and menaced the European heartland itself. In 1453, Constantinople (Istanbul) fell to the Ottomans, whose armies then penetrated deeply into Greece and the Balkans. Europeans were terrified at the encroachment of these "most inhuman barbarians, the most savage enemies of the Christian faith, the fiercest of wild beasts."

## Technological and Political Foundations of European Supremacy

Europe's fears of domination by Islamic invaders proved unfounded. In the latter half of the fifteenth century, Europe made a great leap forward. Its armies developed the strength to push the Turks back, and its navies won supremacy over the oceans, opening a new European-dominated epoch in world history. Portugal and Spain, the first of the strong centralized nation-states of the early modern period, made a remarkable end run around the Turkish blockade by discovering sea routes to the Far East. In the process, they stumbled on the unknown lands they came to call "the New World."

The dynamism that propelled Europe appeared first in Italy. Since about 1300, Italy had been experiencing intellectual, scientific, and cultural flowering known as the Renaissance. The city-states of Venice, Florence, Bologna, and Pisa were flourishing because of the success of their merchants and bankers in capturing the Mediterranean trade. The riches they gathered provided the economic base for a cultural efflorescence expressed in the rediscovery of the heritage of the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome, the celebration of