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The Taste of Democracy Volume 1

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The Taste of Democracy

From Exploration through Reconstruction

Volume 1

Doug Good

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Chapter One

Exploring the New World

Original Inhabitants

From where did the inhabitants of the two American continents originally come? Because their genetic traits are somewhat similar to Asian people, the standard guess is that they came from across the Bering Strait where, before the great ice age, un-submerged land had connected North America to the continental masses of Asia, Europe and Africa. The melting of the glaciers around twelve thousand years ago raised the sea level to flood over the once dry land bridge. But some evidence has been unearthed suggesting an earlier arrival by sea vessels. The Native American residents apparently sustained themselves by spear hunting large mammals until these disappeared from either over hunting or from a drastic climate change.

Native Tribes and Empires

About 7000 BCE (before the common era, that is before Christ, or BC) the natives, in what now is central Mexico, began growing food crops. They discovered that vegetables, particularly maize (corn), could provide a more dependable food supply than hunting game and gathering wild edibles. Agricultural work and a steady food supply enabled residents to settle into communities, develop rituals and ceremonies, and spend time producing objects of art and the trappings of civilization.

The best known ancient American societies that existed before and into the Common Era (CE, previously called AD) were the Mayans and Aztecs. These Central American natives were not mentally challenged social and religious primitives as Europeans came to characterize them. They populated large cities, built pyramids and temples, designed complex irrigation systems, and developed wide networks for trade of tools and trinkets. The Mayans studied astronomy and developed a writing style. However, constant wars and a diminished food supply caused the collapse of their city states by the year 900 CE. The Aztecs took advantage of this political vacuum by migrating in the 1000s CE into the area later called Mexico.

The aggressive Aztecs honored a war god they imaged as an eagle, and practiced war as a religious ritual that included human sacrifices on a large scale (shades of the Europeans who burned witches). Ironically their priests predicted their world would end in volcanic eruptions and human suffering, which set the stage for the arrival of Spanish European conquerors.

Before the Common Era (BCE) most of the native tribes north of Mexico did not expand their territorial control beyond local clans. As a result, at the time of the European explorations over two thousand tribal groupings were spread across the two continents of the western hemisphere with hundreds of variations of verbal languages and individual cultures.

By contrast, the story of early medieval Europe tells of societies that settled into feudal divisions of nobles dominating the general population of peasants. Lords fought each other for territorial power. In the same years in the Americas, tribes organized in kinship groups. The chieftains they chose were usually male, though matrilineal (female) connections determined tribal loyalties. The kinship organization of tribes led them to consider those outside the communal land boundaries to be unworthy opponents. American natives assumed that land and other property were held in common, not owned individually. Communal labor was designated by gender roles. In the agricultural times the men cleared the fields and tilled the ground or hunted and fished, while women did the cooking and cared for the children. Some exceptions existed, as in what is now New York State where women took the responsibility for tilling the soil, or where the Iroquois tribes organized an eastern defensive confederacy. The Pueblos of Arizona and New Mexico creatively designed multilevel cliff houses. The rich diversity of cultures, however, was choked off with the intrusion of Europeans into North America. The swarming numbers of new arrivals and the decimating effect of European diseases for which the natives had no immunity destined the sidelining of these peoples.

Valuable Natural Resources

The original motivation for European explorations was to find a shorter and quicker route by sea for transporting the goods that Europe sought from the East, namely spices, precious metals, silk, and other rarities. But since the western hemisphere land mass stood in the way, Spain and Portugal made the best of the problem by exploring new sailing routes. When Christopher Columbus “discovered” this “isolated” new world in 1492 for the queen of Spain, he learned there was no silk or spices, but witnessed lavish ornamental use of gold. In post-Columbus years Spanish explorers gave their attention to conquering the Central American Indians (Columbus’ mis-titling of the natives as Indians stuck) in order to confiscate the gold and silver resources, and, by the way, to convert the natives to the Christian (Catholic) religion for easier control of the population.

Spanish Conquistadors

Hernan Cortes is the most noted Spanish explorer among those who punched their way inland from around the edges of the Caribbean Sea. He conquered the Aztecs by 1521 with the help of his charm, and cleverness in *using* disgruntled native subjects as allies, and his possession of horses and stronger steel weapons. But ultimately the most effective weapon the European invaders had was their sharing of smallpox hepatitis, and other viruses. These diseases did not have epidemic effect on the Europeans because they had developed immunity. But the introduction of these diseases to the Americas eventually devastated the population of these two continents, reducing the numbers within decades by about 90%.

Francisco Pizarro, second to Cortes in conquests, took control over the weakened

native Inca Empire in eastern South America (now Peru). By the 1520s Spain dominated the largest empire since Roman times.

The nature of Spanish colonization was basically exploitative. Unlike Rome which had allowed local government to maintain some control, supervised by appointed governors, the Spanish subjected American natives to rigid rule. The Spanish monarch screened and limited emigration to America, forbade local manufacturing, and expected conformity to the Catholic Church. Spanish immigrants were encouraged to take native wives, and Africans were brought in to join the natives in enslaved labor. In order to supplant local rule, Spain rewarded their conquistadors by granting them lordship over land and natives (the *encomienda* system). Catholic friars came to run the missions. They employed native slave labor, and sought to transform their pagan ways.

A Fair Trade?

We might consider it fair that the natives returned the trade favor by sharing syphilis, the venereal disease, with the Europeans to spread on around the world. They also taught them how to smoke the noxious tobacco weed. In more positive terms, the Europeans introduced horses for the first time to the Americas. The natives became skilled riders, focusing their hunting exploits on the buffalo to supplement their agricultural diet. Tribes with horses also had an edge in inter-tribal warfare. The English, thank you very much, learned that the sugar cane of the West Indies whetted their sweet teeth. The plentiful fish near Newfoundland attracted English sea captains to expand fishing grounds, and the trapping of North American beaver for fur pelts transformed European hat fashions.

England Ramps Up

In the 1580s England began to show interest in the potential for trade in the New World. Sir Humphrey Gilbert made an abortive attempt in 1584 to tap the potential for trade in the Newfoundland region, but his venture was marred by desertion among his motley crew, ship wrecks, and Gilbert's death at sea. In 1587 Sir Walter Raleigh sent a Contingent of colonists to establish a settlement at Roanoke, an island in what is now North Carolina. But this endeavor failed to last due to drought and lack of fresh supplies, which were shipped too late to help. The delayed return of help found the site empty with no clue of what happened to the abandoned settlers.

A simpler approach for England to benefit from the new region was to prey on Spanish ships returning with captured treasure. This competition led in 1588 to a naval sea battle between the two countries. England, with more trimly maneuverable sailing ships, defeated the oar propelled Spanish armada. This new military dominance opened the door for England to more actively engage in planting colonies; though twenty years passed before the first permanent settlement took root at Jamestown, Virginia.

In summary, Spain and England adopted different approaches to spreading their empires. Spain followed the strategy of conquest, forced religious conversion, and intermarriage with the natives. The English, whose style of settlement depended on

Assessment

How did the sectionalism that ended in Civil War get out of hand? Many factors contributed, but slavery was the identifying cloak of the South. The southern climate invited planting of crops that needed gang labor for handling. But the off-season left laborers inefficiently employed. The paternalism of the plantation method answered how to level out the up-and-down use of a large labor force. But consistency of service to one owner/manager was essential. Forced servitude was the most practical way to obtain this loyalty.

During the colonial period as the southern colonies clustered their laws into codes, slavery became an “institution” of enforcement that wrapped its tentacles around the economic, social, and cultural personality of the South. The colonial rebellion against imperial England brought the thirteen colonies together in a revolutionary war effort, and the confederating leaders infused the founding documents with a common passion for self-government.

The founders understood the pragmatic necessity to table discussion of the contradiction of slavery in a democracy. But as the nation expanded westward, territories that were acquired (or taken) came in lumps without developed sections that matched the original national family arrangement. As the abolitionist movement ramped up its moral criticism and northern states lined up to make slavery illegal, it became increasingly obvious that the unique personality of the South was a distinction becoming a difference. And as the occupation of the western territories brought on the question of how the new states would be governed, the “place” of a slave society in a nation of sections became a competition for political control. This opened the door for revisiting the unresolved question first unclothed in the 1780s about whether the U.S. should be a confederacy or a federal union. It finally took a civil war to decide.

Chapter Sixteen

Reconstruction (1865-1876)

The Civil War settled several contentious national issues. Federalism won out over confederacy. Secession likely would not ever be tried again. The hypocrisy of slavery at home in a democracy was cast off. The immorality of slavery was purged. Territories requesting statehood no longer would arouse congressional fights that required compromises. The sun was shining on the republic in a new way. The restored unity of spirit released a deeper pride and renewed energy as the country proceeded to fill in its continental boundaries. And the emotion of new hope took root in the African Americans as they stepped forth to claim their freedom birthright. Some details of transformation, though, had to be worked out first.

Judgment or Mercy?

To help the Confederates understand the completeness of their defeat, Union troops remained in the South for another decade. The federal government struggled to find a balance point between leniency and recrimination toward the Southerners. Lincoln preached forgiveness and no malice toward the South as the best way to heal emotional wounds and move on quickly. Thinking ahead in 1863, he proposed sweeping pardons and readmission of southern states if they could gather ten percent of the voting populace to reorganize and swear allegiance to the United States. The radical members of the Republican Party countered with a severely restrictive bill that Lincoln adroitly pocket vetoed. Lincoln and the Radicals agreed though on the 13th Amendment ending slavery, which passed in Congress early in 1865.

Practical Wrinkles to Smooth Out

Policy makers were not naïve enough to think the southern *gentlemen society* would lift their hands to welcome freed slaves as compatriots in their midst. Congress set up the Freedman's Bureau to help freed slaves negotiate job contracts with former masters, and in general to help protect them from exploitation. They also supplied food and medicine to the displaced ex-slaves and built schools to accommodate their thirst for education.

Missionaries, teachers, and businessmen hoping to stimulate the southern economy traveled south to join with the newly freed citizens in establishing black colleges and helping them find their way in the still white dominated society. It did not take long for the African Americans to set up independent, well attended black churches as a place to experience racial and social solidarity.

The former southern white elite resented the outside interference, and accused reformers from the North of trying to siphon money from their local projects and carry it back home in their luggage--hence the *Carpetbagger* term of disparagement; and Southerners who cooperated with them they called *Scalawags*.

Passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments (in 1868 and 1870) gave the African Americans legal guarantee of all citizen rights, protection of "due process of law," and the unhampered right to vote. These guarantees opened the door for freedmen to run for political office during the Reconstruction period. Congress required the southern states to accept the new amendment as a condition of re-admittance. During the reconstruction period, and before many of the disfranchised Confederates had gained pardon, the Republican Party, with help from newly enfranchised African Americans, controlled the southern state governments from the mid to late 1870s. African Americans participated in the writing of new state constitutions. They also won numerous elective offices as Republicans, though without dominating; only two black senators were elected and a scattering of House representatives. By the late 1870s the southern "redeemers" (as the former white elite leaders called themselves) were taking back their political entitlements.

Eventually resentment over losing political power, and accusations about political corruption in the Republican controlled state legislatures, fueled terrorist activity against the freedmen by the Ku Klux Klan, organized in 1866. Beatings, rape, arson and

murder became standard fare in the South. By this method of crusade the Klan proved instrumental in restoring white control of southern politics.

Johnson and the Radicals Clash

Copying his predecessor's leniency toward Southerners, President Johnson quickly offered pardons to all Southerners--except highly ranked Confederates---in exchange for an oath of loyalty to the United States. Johnson had risen to high position as a self-made man with little formal education. The image of proud planters on their knees applying for a pardon from a hill country Tennessean comes to mind. Johnson's pardoning motivation did not ring with Lincolnesque compassion, but it had the effect of helping return the white elite to renewed political influence.

This rapid paced rehabilitation of important ex-Confederates not only made Johnson look like a friend of the defeated South; it was a first step in ending federally directed reconstruction. At this early point in the reconstruction years, the 14th and 15th Amendments guaranteeing voting and citizen rights for African Americans had not yet been passed. The state legislatures took opportunity to pass Black Codes to keep freedmen under strict legal and social "control."

Johnson's contribution to restoring southern white leadership to power coordinates with his personal racism. His white supremacist attitude is well documented in his first annual address as President, where he said whenever the black race has been allowed to govern themselves they have always reverted to barbarism.

Johnson was setting himself up for a clash with the radical Republicans who wanted the traitorous ex-Confederates to suffer long under federal guidance, backed by army occupation (until 1877 in a few states). Johnson, however, was facilitating home rule. Another reason the Radical Republicans wanted an extended reconstruction period---other than to receive penance---was to assure time for northern guidance in the programs of democratic reform--- public education, land redistribution, and full rights for the African American population.

In 1866 Johnson vetoed two Republican sponsored civil rights bills that would extend the Freedman Bureau's term and bring the discriminatory Black Codes under federal judicial scrutiny.

The mid-term national election of 1866 increased Republican control of Congress (enough to override presidential vetoes) resulting in the 14th and 15th Amendments, and legislation to make it harder for the southern states to return to the union. Along with the constitutional guarantees to African Americans, military presence in the South served to watch dog southern compliance with the new rules. Congress also forbade the president from dismissing the army commander and any Cabinet members without Senate consent--this to protect Grant (army commander) and Edwin Stanton (Secretary of War) respectively, who wore Radical Republican stripes.

Johnson promptly challenged both Radical Republican moves, giving his own orders to military district commanders in the South and firing Stanton. Congress responded by impeaching (indicting) the President. Following impeachment procedure, the Senate tried but narrowly (by one vote) acquitted Johnson.

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