The Black Legend, Native Americans, and Spaniards: Crash Course US History #1

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=6E9WU9TGrec
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/6E9WU9TGrec

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course US History. No, Stan, that's not going to work, actually. I mean, we're talking about the sixteenth century today when *this* was neither 'united' nor 'states'. By the way, this globe reflects the fact that I believe that Alaskan statehood is illegitimate! In fact, we're going to call this whole show "US History", but inevitably, it's going to involve other parts of the world and also, not to brag, a small part of the moon. Sorry, we can be a little bit self-aggrandizing sometimes here in America.

So to begin US History, we're not going to talk about the United States or this guy, we're going to talk about the people who lived here before any Europeans showed up.

North America was home to a great variety of people, so it's difficult to generalize, but here's what we *can* say:

One, when the Europeans arrived, there were no classical style civilizations, with monumental architecture and empires like the Aztec or the Incas.

And two, Native North Americans had no metalwork, no gunpowder, no wheels, no written languages and no domesticated animals. However, they did have farming, complex social and political structures and widespread trade networks.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! So, they were pretty backward, huh? Well, I mean, or at least, primitive.

"Primitive" is a funny word, me from the past, because it implies a romanticization - the simple people, who never used more than they needed, and had no use for guns - and it also implies an infantilization. It's like you believe that just because you have a beeper and they didn't, they were somehow less evolved humans.

But you can't say the human story is one that goes from primitive to civilized. That's not just Euro-centric, that's contemporary-centric. The idea that we're moving forward as a species implies a linear progression that just does not reflect the reality of life on this planet. I get that you like to imagine yourself as the result of millennia of advancement and the very pinnacle of human-ness, but from where I'm sitting, that worldview is a lot more backwards than living without the wheel.

So, no one knows exactly how many people lived in North America before the Europeans got here. Some estimates are as high as 75 million, but in the present US borders, the guesses are between 2 and 10 million. And like other Native Americans, their populations were decimated by diseases such as smallpox and influenza. Actually, it was much worse than decimation. As many of you have pointed out, 'decimation' means 'one in ten'. This was much worse than that, it was closer, maybe, to eight in ten, which would be an 'octicimation'.

So there had been civilizations in North America, but they peaked before the Europeans arrived. The Zuni and Hopi civilizations, roundabout here, peaked about 1200 CE. They had large, multiple-family dwellings in canyons, which they probably left because of drought. CrashCourse World History fans will remember that environmental degradation often causes the decline of civilizations- I'm looking at *you*, Indus Valley, and also *you*, entire future Earth. But complex civilizations weren't the rule in North America, and now we're about to begin generalizing - a bad habit historians have, partly because there's a limited historical record, but also because Eurocentric historians have a bad habit of primitivizing and simplifying others.

So I want to underscore that there was huge diversity in the pre-Columbus American experience, and that talking about someone who lived *here*, in 1000 BCE, and talking about someone who lived *here* 2000 years later, is just inherently problematic.

That said, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

Most Native groups in most places organized as tribes, and their lives were dominated by the natural resources available where they lived. So, West Coast Indians primarily lived by fishing, gathering and hunting sea mammals. Great Plains Indians were often buffalo hunters. These tribal bands often united into loose confederacies or leagues, the best known of which was probably the Iroquois Confederacy, also called The Great League of Peace. This was kind of like an upstate New York version of NATO, but without nuclear weapons or the incessant international meddling or Latvians. OK, it was nothing like NATO, actually.

Religion usually involved a vibrant spiritual world, with ceremonies geared towards the tribe's lifestyle. Hunting tribes focused on animals, agricultural tribes on good harvests, and most Indian groups believed in a single creator god, who stood above all the other deities, but they weren't monotheistic in the way that Christians who came to the New World were. American Indians also saw property very differently from Europeans. To First Peoples, land was a common resource that village leaders could assign families to use, but not to own, and most land was seen as common to everyone. As Black Hawk, a leader of the Sauk tribe said, "The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence; and so long as they occupy and cultivate it, they have a right to the soil."

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So many of us tend to romanticize American Indians as being immune from greed and class, but in fact, there were class distinctions in Indian tribes. Rulers tended to come from the same families, for instance. That said, wealth was much more evenly distributed than it was in Europe.

And while most tribal leaders were men, many tribes were matrilineal, meaning that children became members of their mother's family. Also, women were often important religious leaders. Women also often owned dwellings and tools, although not land, because, again, that idea did not exist. Also, in many tribes, women engaging in pre-marital skoodilypooping wasn't taboo. In general, they were just much less obsessed with female chastity than Europeans were. I mean, I will remind you the first English settlement in America was called "Virginia".

The idea that Native Americans were "noble savages" - somehow purer than Europeans and untouched by their vices - is not a new one. Like, some of the earliest Europeans saw the Indians as paragons of physical beauty and innocent of Europeans' worst characteristics. But for most Europeans, there was little "noble" about what they saw as pure Indian savagery. I mean, Indians didn't have writing, they suffered from the terrible character flaw of being able to have sex without feeling ashamed, and most importantly, they weren't Christians.

The Spanish were the first Europeans to explore this part of the world. Juan Ponce de León arrived in what is now Florida in 1513, looking for gold and the fabled Fountain of Youth. In 1521, he encountered a Calusa brave's poison-tipped arrow and died, before discovering that the Fountain of Youth is, of course, delicious Diet Dr. Pepper. Mmm. Aah, I can taste all 23 flavors.

There were many more Spanish explorers in the first half of the 16th century, including one Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, who wandered through the American Southwest, looking for gold, which I mention entirely because I think that guy's last name means "Cow Head".

Of course, none of these people found any gold, but they did make

later European colonization easier by bringing over the microbes that wiped out most Native populations.

So the Spanish wanted to colonize Florida to set up military bases to thwart the pirates who preyed on silver-laden Spanish galleons coming out of Mexico. But Spanish missionaries also came over, hoping to convert local Native populations. This, of course, worked out magnificently, just kidding it went terribly, and many of the missions were destroyed by an uprising of Guale Indians in 1597. And I will remind you, mispronouncing things is my thing.

In general, colonizing Florida sucked because it was hot and mosquito-y. Spain was much more successful at colonizing the American Southwest. In 1610, Spain established its first permanent settlement in the Southwest, at Santa Fe, New Mexico, and you couldn't really say that it flourished, since Santa Fe's population never got much above 3000, but it had a great small town feel.

And New Mexico is really important, because it's the site of the first large-scale uprising by Native Americans against Europeans. I mean, the native people, who the Spanish called Pueblos, had seen their fortunes decline significantly since the arrival of Europeans. How much decline? Well, between 1600 and 1680, their population went from about 60,000 to about 17,000. Also, the Franciscan friars who came to convert the indigenous people became increasingly militant about stamping out all native religion. The Spanish Inquisition just wasn't very keen on the kind of cultural blending that made early conversion efforts successful.

So while the Spanish saw all the Pueblos as one people, they also knew there were tribal differences that made it difficult for the Indians to unite and rise up against the Spanish. But nothing unites like a common enemy, and in 1680, a religious leader named Pope organized an uprising to drive the Spaniards out. Pope organized about 2000 warriors who killed 400 Spanish colonists and forced the rest to leave Santa Fe. So the Spanish colony in New Mexico was effectively destroyed. The Pueblos tore down all the Christian churches and replaced them with "kivas", their places of worship.

But, like most awesome uprisings, it didn't last. But after the revolt, the Spanish were much more tolerant of indigenous religion and they also abandoned the forced labor practice called "encomienda".

Oh, it's time for the new Crash Course feature, the Mystery Document? How mysterious.

The rules here are simple. I read and attempt to identify the mystery document. If I am right, I do *not* get shocked by this shock pen, and if I am wrong, I do. Okay, what do we have here?

The Indians... were totally deprived of their freedom and were put in the harshest, fiercest, most horrible servitude and captivity which no one who has not seen it can understand. Even beasts enjoy more freedom when they are allowed to graze in the fields. But our Spaniards gave no such opportunity to Indians and truly considered them perpetual slaves... I sometimes came upon dead bodies on my way, and upon others who were grasping and moaning in their death agony repeating, "Hungry, hungry." And this was the freedom, the good treatment and the Christianity the Indians received.

Well, that's nice.

Okay, so the mystery document is always a primary source and since the writer refers to "our Spaniards", I'm going to guess that he or she - probably he - is European. And a Spaniard sympathetic to the Indians, which narrows the list of suspects considerably. So it probably wasn't de Sepúlveda, for instance, who argued that the Indians might not even be human.

Okay, Stan, I'm actually pretty confident here. I believe it is from 'A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies' by Bartolomé de las Casas.

No?! DANG IT! Stan just told me I have the author right, but the book wrong. It's *A History of the Indies*. Ugh, I hate shocks, both literal and metaphorical. GAH!

So we've focused a lot on the brutality of the Spanish toward the Indians, but at least one Spaniard, de las Casas, recognized that his countrymen were terrible. This realization is a good thing, obviously, but it leads us to one of the big problems when it comes to this time and place.

The Black Legend is the tale that the Spanish unleashed unspeakable cruelty on the Indians. Now that tale is true. But that idea was used by later settlers, especially the English, to justify their own settlements. Like, part of the reason they needed to expand their empire was to save the Indians from the awful Spanish. But were the English so much better? Yeah, probably not.

As we mentioned at the beginning of today's episode, American Indians didn't have writing, so we don't have records of their perspective. Now, some Europeans, like de las Casas, were critical of the Spaniards, but most considered the Indians heathens, and implied - or even outright said - that they deserved whatever horrible things befell them.

So at the beginning of our series, I want to point out something that we need to remember throughout. One of the great things about American history is that we have a lot of written sources - this is the advantage of the US coming on to the scene so late in the game, historically speaking. But every story we hear comes from a certain point of view, and we always need to remember who is speaking, why they are speaking, and especially, which voices go unheard and why.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble. If you have questions about today's video, you should ask them in comments. Everybody who works on Crash Course, as well as a team of historians, will be there to answer them. Thanks for watching. Please make sure you're subscribed to Crash Course, and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.