



Genocide, Slavery, and Immigration

by Richard W. Rahn

My New Year's wish for the coming year is for more of my fellow Americans and others to learn some basic history and try to get a grip on reality. Someone who writes for The New York Times under the name of Michelle Alexander wrote a column published last week, "Who Deserves Citizenship?"

One of her choice sentences: "But for slavery, genocide, and colonization, we would not be the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world — in fact, our nation would not even exist." Hmm. Both North and South America were colonized by European countries that practiced slavery, and the United States was not the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery.

What many now call genocide of the Native American people was rarely a deliberate policy of the colonizers. The American Indians had no immunity against many diseases that the Europeans inadvertently brought with them — most notably smallpox. But many other diseases — such as measles, not normally fatal to Europeans — proved to be so to the Native Americans. The death toll was horrendous — but again, largely as a result of ignorance. The understanding of germs was still several hundred years away.

No one knows how many people lived in the Americas when Columbus arrived. Most estimates have it in single or low double-

digit millions. What is more widely agreed is that there were only about 600,000 left in North America by 1650, meaning that perhaps as many as 90 percent of the pre-Columbus population had perished. By the time the English colonists began to settle in Virginia and New England, most of the mass death had already occurred. The Europeans were no strangers to mass death events. The plague in the 1300s in Europe killed an estimated third of the population.

Slavery, as a legal institution in some parts of the world, has only been abolished in the last 50 years. From the time that mankind moved from being hunter gatherers to tending crops, slavery had been a near universal institution. At the time of the American Revolution, most of the world practiced slavery or serfdom in one form or another. The ancient Greeks had slaves, often drawn from neighboring tribes they had conquered. The Romans enslaved many who lived on the edges of the Roman Empire, including some of the German tribes.

Slavery was dying out as the United States and other countries moved from primarily agriculture to industry. By the time of the Civil War, slavery was only economically important in the cotton fields of the American South. Slavery had been slowly made illegal (over a century) in the Northern states, as it became less and less viable as an economic institution. William Wilberforce was able to stir the consciences of the English in his crusade to abolish slavery, only after the country had experienced the Industrial Revolution. Slavery persisted the longest in countries like Brazil and others with large plantation agriculture, where it was still of some economic benefit.

Ms. Alexander fails to explain to us why the United States became the wealthiest country, when the "genocide" she blames occurred for the most part before the English colonization, and that slavery was common all through the Americas until the mid-1800s, not long before or after the United States abolished it. Could it be that the Spanish colonizers brought with them institutions that were not conducive to individual initiative and liberty — while the English colonizers brought the concepts of private

property, the rule of law, and individual responsibilities and liberties, and the institutions that supported them?

The open borders movement is not just a child of the American left but also has many adherents among libertarians. Simply put, their argument is that immigrants have historically brought new ideas and energy to the American economy, making everyone better off. That was largely true before the advent of the welfare state, which Milton Friedman and others realized necessitated some reasonable restrictions of immigration. If all immigrants spoke English and had a better than average education level, large numbers could be admitted with few problems. The reality is that some immigrants are value subtractors rather than value adders, thus reducing the social and economic standards for those who are already citizens.

In the past, most new immigrants wanted to get away from the institutions and practices of their old country that made life miserable, and readily adopted what is known as the American Way. Now, there are some immigrant groups that seek to bring their old institutions to America, like Sharia law, which would undermine the existing successful institutions and structure. There are others who come to America seeking free stuff, rather than seeking to create the wealth necessary to provide the support that they and others really need.

America has served as a great example of what can be accomplished with the right institutions and policies. Because America cannot accommodate all of those who wish to become U.S. citizens, the best thing it can do is continue to admit those who will benefit the country, becoming an even brighter city on the hill for rest of mankind to emulate.

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