

**1493: UNCOVERING THE NEW WORLD COLUMBUS
CREATED¹**

REVIEWED BY MAJOR A. JASON NEF*

*They were doing the work of the centuries. They were agents of humankind's unending quest to enlase its most far-flung members in a single skein, a journey whose endpoints the travelers have rarely been able to anticipate.*²

I. Introduction

In 1492, the world changed forever when Columbus stumbled across the Americas and inadvertently introduced globalization to the world.³ The changes that followed this historic event remain with us over five hundred years later. The significance of Charles Mann's *1493* is the perspective it gives of that history. The author offers a broad view of the scale and scope of the changes brought by the sudden "turbulent exchange of goods and services that today engulfs the entire habitable world."⁴ At its heart, *1493* is about globalization, a well-worn topic. Yet it stands out from other writings with its focus on the origins of globalization and its impact on early participants. *1493* also contains important lessons for leaders to consider. The book provides excellent examples of how leaders influence and shape the future through their action or inaction, for better or worse, and deserves a spot on the military reader's professional-development bookshelf.

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¹ CHARLES C. MANN, *1493: UNCOVERING THE NEW WORLD COLUMBUS CREATED* (2011).

² *Id.* at 521.

³ The discovery of America was an accident due, in part, to Columbus's miscalculation of the sea-route to China. Christopher Columbus is not the focus of this book. His forays into the Western Hemisphere are the catalyst for the story, but not the story itself. The author provides many important details of Columbus's life but does not offer a comprehensive biography. See generally *id.* at 1–23.

⁴ *Id.* at 7.

II. Objective, Engaging and Detailed

Very few topics are as polarizing as African slavery, Indian subjugation, or the European colonization of the American continents. These are so polarizing that reasonable people will fight over the very words used to discuss them. Appreciating this fact, Mann devotes an entire appendix, titled “Fighting Words,” to explain his reasons for choosing the terms that he used to describe or identify the principle nationalities and groups discussed in *1493*.⁵ Mann examines these, and related topics, objectively and without an apparent agenda. His objectivity enables him to unpack an era of human interaction and conflict that divides people even today. While Mann examines these topics dispassionately, he does so with an engaging style. In fact, his style is what keeps readers engaged during his telling of the odd (but interesting) global histories of tobacco, rubber trees, corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and earthworms.⁶ Yes, he makes earthworms interesting.⁷

The amount of research and detail Mann presents demonstrates his scholarly approach to the material. However, *1493* reads more like a narrative and less like a collection of facts. Mann does not trivialize facts for readability; *1493* is supported by enough hard data to satisfy the fussiest academic. But where facts and figures obscure Mann’s narrative style, they are assigned to footnotes and endnotes.

Some sections of *1493* contain a distracting level of detail. Mann goes into such detail on some of the more local aspects of the post-1492 world that readers can forget the global focus of *1493*. The value of those detailed sections, however, becomes apparent in the end. From its inception, globalization has had a deep and persistent impact on local people, places, and communities. Mann illustrates that important point through those highly detailed sections. By incorporating the fine details into the larger history of globalization, Mann presents globalization as something more than an economic theory or nebulous system of trade.

⁵ *Id.* at 511–16 (providing an excellent summary of the differences in contemporary and historical self-identity and concepts of race).

⁶ *Id.* at 51–98, 210–355 (focusing heavily on the important role agriculture played in globalization).

⁷ This skill was probably honed during Mann’s work as an author for popular science and technology publications *Science*, *Wired*, *Smithsonian*, and *Technology Review*. See *id.* at vii.

III. Lessons for Leaders

A. Everything Matters

Often, the unknown variable or unintended consequence has the deepest and longest-lasting impact. Mann illustrates this point well when he notes Spain's goal of reaching China by sea was benign; a western sea route would be cheaper and safer than using the Silk Road trade routes or sailing around the continent of Africa. The purpose in pursuing that goal was to improve access to a known market. Spain ultimately established direct trade with China.⁸ But in reaching for that narrow and simple goal, Spain brought profound and unexpected changes to the world:

Babies born on the day the admiral founded La Isabela—January 2, 1494—came into a world in which direct trade and communication between western Europe and East Asia were largely blocked by the Islamic nations between (and their partners in Venice and Genoa), sub-Saharan Africa had little contact with Europe and the Eastern and Western hemispheres were almost entirely ignorant of each other's very existence. By the time those babies had grandchildren, slaves from Africa mined silver in the Americas for sale to China; Spanish merchants waited impatiently for the latest shipments of Asian silk and porcelain from Mexico; and Dutch sailors traded cowry shells from the Maldive Islands, in the Indian Ocean, for human beings in Angola, on the coast of the Atlantic.⁹

This was mission creep on a grand scale.¹⁰ No one anticipated the degree of suffering and achievement, or the massive cultural, demographic, economic, and agricultural changes that followed. Were these changes inevitable? Extraordinarily few leaders of that era stopped to question the consequences of their actions.¹¹

⁸ *Id.* at 26–29.

⁹ *Id.* at 6.

¹⁰ “Mission creep” is a military slang term for the unplanned expansion of a mission's original goal or purpose. See generally Ben Zimmer, ‘Mission Creep’ Crawls Out of the ‘90s, WALL STREET J., June 27, 2014.

¹¹ See generally MANN, *supra* note 1, at 382–87. Of the many changes that followed the discovery of the Americas, Spain's new relationship with the Indian population provides one clear example of a sovereign leader stopping to seriously question what their national

1493 illustrates the costs when leaders fail to evaluate their operations in light of both unknown variables and unintended consequences. Sometimes the unknown variable appears good and useful but leads to harm in the end. Spain's infusion of currency in the form of American silver could have stabilized Spain's government and economy. Instead of using the new currency to evaluate their spending priorities, the Spanish crown simply spent more money and increased its debt load at the very point it could have reduced it.¹² No one believed the good times would end and when the silver dried up, Spain was in worse shape than before.¹³ Failing to evaluate seriously the consequences of a course of action can quickly lead to distractions and disappointment.¹⁴

B. Taking the Gloves Off

Historically, Mann demonstrates, unwarranted or indiscriminate use of force usually backfires. The European settlement of the Americas was particularly heavy-handed in controlling populations, especially when those populations were a source of labor. With little exception, the concept of winning hearts and minds simply did not exist.¹⁵ In almost every instance, forcibly subjugated groups revolted violently and caused great loss of life and property for their subjugators.¹⁶

The desire to "take the gloves off" was not unique to the sixteenth-century conquistador. Leaders have an incredibly difficult and frustrating job operating in occupied areas. The enemy hides among the civilian population and wreaks havoc on their ranks. The civilian population may not readily turn over the terrorist hiding among them. In that environment, it is easy to decide that "taking the gloves off" and

policy should be. Queen Isabel of Spain predicted that enslavement of Indians would incentivize their revolt and pushed laws to prohibit the practice. Her efforts failed, but her prediction proved correct. *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 36–37.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ The military reader can liken this lesson to the U.S. government's strategic miscalculations of the realities of a post-invasion occupation of Iraq, as a contemporary example.

¹⁵ *Id.* ch. 8. The only exceptions were the missionaries who came to the Americas to evangelize. They *did* want to win hearts and minds and spoke out against the inhumane treatment of native populations and African slaves. These missionaries were routinely ignored primarily because the people behind the inhumane treatment were making a great deal of money in the process. *Id.*

¹⁶ See generally *id.* at 421–88.

dealing forcefully with *everyone* is the best way to secure a population's compliance and cooperation. The historical lessons presented in *1493* reveal the futility of this approach. When groups are coerced into cooperation they tend to close ranks and actively resist, or become tacit supporters of those who do. Mann summarizes it this way:

[P]eople always seek ways to exert their will, even in the most terrible circumstances. Africans and Indians fought with each other, claimed to be each other, and allied together for common goals, sometimes all at the same time. Whatever their tactics, the goal was constant: freedom. More often than is commonly realized they won it.¹⁷

Leaders must always guard against the temptation to strong-arm entire communities or populations to root out the few who pose a genuine threat. Gaining the trust and confidence of an occupied population is not an easy or simple task, and it cannot be accomplished quickly. But the cost of abandoning discrimination and distinction in favor of a heavy-handed approach is much higher in the end.

C. The Importance of Discipline

A lack of discipline carries a high price. Readers of *1493* learn, through Mann's recitation of historical events, the damage undisciplined troops and oblivious, disengaged leaders can cause. One example illustrates the point well. On November 23, 1493, Columbus returned from Spain to Hispaniola and the settlement of La Navidad to find "only ruin."¹⁸ La Navidad and the adjacent native Taino settlement were completely destroyed.¹⁹ The cause? Rape and murder. An unknown number of Columbus's sailors angered the Taino by "raping some women and murdering some men."²⁰ This sparked a war that was soon exploited by another Taino group that "swooped down and overwhelmed

¹⁷ *Id.* at 424.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 8–9 (La Navidad was on the island of Hispaniola; Columbus established a settlement there after his flagship, the *Santa Maria*, ran aground.).

¹⁹ *Id.* Columbus left behind thirty-eight men at the settlement and returned to Spain to report the discovery and gather supplies. He was gone for eleven months. After discovering the ruins of La Navidad, Columbus searched nine days for survivors. None were found. *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

both sides.”²¹ Columbus left undisciplined and untrustworthy men in positions where they could do the most damage—and they did. Columbus did not intend this outcome; he simply did not know the disposition of his own troops.

Contemporary battlegrounds present similar challenges for leaders. In Iraq and Afghanistan, commanders were routinely charged with holding a piece of ground, protecting the population, and rooting out the enemy, all at the same time. This often required spreading their troops over a large area, leaving smaller units and their leaders in positions of great responsibility with minimal supervision. When the right leaders and troops held that responsibility, they accomplished monumental tasks with honor. When the leaders disengaged and the undisciplined held that responsibility, disaster followed.²²

IV. Final Thoughts

1493 is a careful look at how the today’s world was shaped by the unknown and unanticipated forces of globalization. By weaving seemingly loose threads of history into a broad narrative, Mann reacquaints the reader with the story of the first four centuries of globalization, its successes and failures, and a clearer view of the costs and benefits of human interaction on a global scale.

²¹ *Id.*

²² On March 12, 2006, Private First Class Steven Green and three fellow soldiers, raped and murdered a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl, Abeer Qassim Hamzah Rashid al-Janabi, and murdered her parents and six-year-old sister. Jim Frederick chronicles the events leading up to, and following, the crime in his book *Black Hearts*. The book is a case study of the difficult job leaders and troops face in combat, and how lethal a combination disengaged leadership and undisciplined troops can be.

The story of Steven Green proves that . . . even one private with a rifle can affect the course of a war . . . Only one out-of-control platoon needs just one Steven Green and a handful of coconspirators to significantly damage the gains that a nearly thousand-strong battalion worked hard to achieve . . . Despite [the battalion commander’s] insistence that he and his chain of command practiced what he incessantly calls ‘engaged leadership,’ facts demonstrate that he and his senior leaders were woefully out of touch with the realities on the ground.

Globalization is, ultimately, about people if it is about anything at all. If the forces of globalization have shaped the world, those forces are not abstractions but the collective conduct and interaction of groups and individuals. The experiences of the early participants of globalization remain relevant and provide an opportunity for leaders to reflect on how they want to lead in modern times. *1493* is an excellent reminder of the challenges of leading in a complex world where seemingly minor or isolated actions can have lasting consequences, for good or bad.