

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Was America a Mistake?

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*The son of a distinguished historian, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (1917–2007) would himself rise to become a well-known American historian, social critic, and public intellectual. He specialized in American history, with a focus on 20th-century liberalism. He was the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *The Age of Jackson* (1946) and one for *A Thousand Days* (1966), a history and memoir of the Kennedy administration in which Schlesinger served as Special Assistant to President John F. Kennedy. The present selection was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in September 1992, on the eve of the quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the New World. In a balanced way, it addresses ongoing arguments about whether this is an event that should be celebrated.*

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Why, according to Schlesinger, is Christopher Columbus, “the great hero of the nineteenth century . . . well on the way to becoming the great villain of the twenty-first”? What arguments do revisionist critics use to support the moral or cultural superiority of the Native Americans? How does Schlesinger assess these arguments? How does Schlesinger—and how would you—answer his own question: “What would the destiny of the Americas have been without any European infusion?” Does he regard the coming and triumph of the Europeans as inevitable? What, on balance, is his answer to the title question, “Was America a Mistake?” Do you agree? What additional arguments or different assessments would you offer?

October 12, 1992, marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the most crucial of all encounters between Europe and the Americas. In the contemporary global mood, however, the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus's landing in the New World—new, anyway, to the European intruders; old and familiar to its inhabitants—seems an occasion less for celebration than for meditation. Indeed, in some quarters the call is for penitence and remorse.

Read the entire essay online at:
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