

GRAVY: Pilgrims' landing had lasting impact

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heritage, even the fact they had unique load-bearing mammals, like horses. These factors combined gave the conquistadors a massive advantage over the sophisticated civilizations of the Aztec and Inca empires.

“But weapons alone can’t account for the breathtaking speed with which the indigenous population of the New World were completely wiped out.

“Within just a few generations, the continents of the Americas were virtually emptied of their native inhabitants — some academics estimate that approximately 20 million people may have died in the years following the European invasion — up to 95 percent of the population of the Americas.

No medieval force, no matter how blood-thirsty, could have achieved such enormous levels of genocide. Instead, Europeans were aided by a deadly secret weapon they weren’t even aware they were carrying: Smallpox.”

Smallpox probably wasn’t the culprit in the case of the Wampanoag (bubonic plague seems most likely), but the point remains valid: The land was cleared for the Pilgrims and other European settlers in large part by germs. The Pilgrims, as was their wont, attributed this to God. The Wampanoag, no less metaphysical in their orientation, may have done the same.

Of course it is important to recognize that

there is no agency here. Although there were later plots to infect Indian populations with smallpox deliberately, the massive destruction wrought by germs was biological happenstance. As the Black Plague reshaped Europe, killing a third of its population, so germs reshaped North America. I take issue with the use of the term genocide to describe the devastation wrought by disease upon the native populations. Genocide is a fraught term, implying a deliberate program of destruction against a targeted group. That isn’t what happened here. But deliberate or not, lack of resistance to European diseases doomed the native peoples, greatly reducing their populations and weakening their base of resistance before the intruders even arrived in force.

“We Shall Remain — After the Mayflower” documents the gradual — and probably inevitable — breakdown of the Puritan/Wampanoag alliance, which ended in King Philip’s War in the 1670s — the bloodiest conflict in American history. Per capita casualties were not equaled even in the American Civil War.

This was no storybook First Thanksgiving story to warm the heart, but watching it is a family tradition. It isn’t all about football and turkey. The tale is a poignant one for a festive holiday, but one that bears remembering.

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