***America’s History* Author Video: Chapter One**

**[[BIG IDEA:** How did the political, economic, and religious systems of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans compare, and how did things change as a result of contacts among them?]]

Hi, I’m Eric Hinderaker, an historian from the University of Utah and author of the colonial chapters in *America’s History*.

For a long time, historians talked about the colonial origins of the United States as if Englishmen ventured off into the wilderness to create new societies on their own. We know better now. Which is why chapter one stresses the idea of colliding worlds— how the worlds of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans crashed together in a variety of ways after contact. But to understand how things changed, we need to first understand each world before contact: how were these societies organized? What were their political systems like? How did their economies work? And what kinds of gods did they believe in?

At the beginning of the chapter, the Americas take center stage. Scholars now appreciate that Native America was not a primitive, backward place. It was home to millions of people with a much wider range of social systems than in Europe – from complex, centralized empires to chiefdoms and confederacies to kin-based bands of hunter-gatherers. We often see this spectrum as a hierarchy, where the empires are most impressive and important. But every kind of Native American society had its own energies and innovations, and they’re all worth appreciating on their own terms.

European, African, and American societies were surprisingly similar to each other in 1492. They all had elites or ruling classes that both protected and benefited from their followers; they relied deeply on their beliefs about the spirit world; they intensively developed local resources while at the same time establishing long-distance trading connections.

Of course, there were important differences too, and contact brought them to the fore. Colonization set enormous changes in motion. Invading Europeans enslaved Native Americans and introduced diseases that would decimate Native populations. European contact with Africa produced a transatlantic slave trade that destroyed African lives. And Europeans suffered and died in unfamiliar environments, even as they were gradually transformed by the new worlds they encountered.