Part Three
Into Clear View
It is customary to date the beginning of modern world history from the discovery of the New World in 1492. But it is easy to quarrel with this familiar example of periodization. The history of world exploration began much earlier than the lifetime of Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), even though the earliest expeditions across the seas did not result in permanent settlement.

Moreover, the birthing of the modern world is associated with other events of comparable magnitude. Few would dispute the importance of the invention of printing in the 1440s by Johann Gutenberg (c. 1398-1468). Equally seminal were the challenges to traditional thinking and feeling associated with the Italian Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries, which created the intellectual and emotional divide between the medieval and modern worlds of Western civilization. Identifying modernism with the freedom to express dissent from theological orthodoxy and scientific dogma, we might prefer to date the beginning of the modern world from the appearance of the first successful dissenters, such as Martin Luther (1483-1546) or Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543). However we choose to focus on great events or figures of history, we might agree that the modern rate of acceleration in human affairs can be attributed above all to our ancestors of the 16th century.

In the middle of the 15th century no one had any sense that humanity was about to inherit an expanding universe. Yet we know now that at that time human development was but one step away from its most dramatic leap. Especially in the West, the human spirit would soon be emboldened, generating energies that had not been seen before. For better and for worse, the age of Western adventure and ascendancy was about to unfold.

It is even more difficult to determine the end of that age. In some sense, the story of Western ascendancy continues as a dominant motif of world history. Since history is an accumulation of thoughts and actions, the early modern era that began with great adventures might be said to have ended with the career of Hugo Grotius (1585-1645), the great synthesist of early modern ideas. After Grotius, international law can no longer be described in primitive terms. Thereafter, the “Grotian tradition” takes hold, at least until a new concept of modernism emerges in the geopolitics of the early 19th century.