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Beyond the numbers

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Beyond the Numbers

One of the most important conquests in history is the conquest of Mexico or otherwise known as the conquest of New Spain. This is one of the most important conquest for several different reasons. The main reason this conquest is so well known in history is because the “underdogs”, the Spaniards, defeated the “powerhouse”, the Aztecs. This is not a very common occurrence in history. The Spaniards, led by Hernan Cortes, were looked at as the underdogs because they were considered to have a relatively small army. There are many factors that were in the Spaniard’s favor that led to the defeat of the Aztecs including: the confusion of the Aztecs, the advanced weapons of the Spanish , disease that struck the Aztecs, internal conflict in Mexico, the intimidation and fear imposed on the Aztecs, and the allies the Spanish gained. All of these factors contributed to the defeat of the Aztecs, but the most important factor was the allies that the Spanish gained when arriving in Mexico.

A few years before the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, the Aztecs already began to receive signs of the coming of the invaders. The people of Mexico experienced eight different omens and were very confused at the meaning of these omens. Although these were a prediction of the coming of the Spaniards, the Aztecs did not comprehend what they meant. The first sighting of the Spanish in the Gulf Coast was by a common man who described the Spanish as strange and having “very light skin, much lighter than ours” (“The Broken Spears” 13). Upon news of the sighting of a strange and unique people, Motecuhzoma was very startled and began to believe that it was Quetzalcoatl returning with other divinities as he had promised. With the thought that the strangers approaching were Quetzalcoatl and other divinities, Motecuhzoma sent five of his messengers to greet the strangers with gifts. The fact that the Aztecs believed the Spanish were Quetzalcoatl and other divinities caused the Aztecs to be caught off guard and confused when they finally came to the realization that it was not Quetzalcoatl, it was the Spanish. This was an advantage to the Spanish because they were fully prepared, and instead of preparing for battle, the Aztecs were confused by Omens and busy preparing for the arrival of what they believed to be Quetzalcoatl.

The Aztecs were at many disadvantages due to the fact that they believed the Spanish were Quetzalcoatl. The Aztecs were extremely unprepared, giving the Spanish a better chance at the battle. The Spanish came prepared for battle. They had very many advanced weapons including swords, spears, iron arrows, bows, cannons and arquebuses. This helped the Spanish to easily take down the unprepared Aztecs. They also were better prepared because they had steel helmets, coats of mail, breastplates and shields of metal, wood and hide. The Spanish also were prepared for many different situations. They were equipped with portable wooden bridges to cross canals. The many materials the Spanish brought along tremendously aided them in their conquest of New Spain. Another factor that also helped the Spanish with their victory over the Aztecs was the disease that struck in Tenochtitlan while the Spaniards were in Tlaxcala. From the account of the Aztecs, “…lasted for seventy days, striking everywhere in the city and killing a vast number of our people. Sores erupted on our faces, our breasts, our bellies; we were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot” (“The Broken Spears 92-93). This shows the severity of the disease and how quickly it spread. During this plague the Aztecs either died of the disease or died of hunger. The disease even traveled to the king and killed him as well. The advantage presented to the Spanish through this disease was that the population of the Aztecs tremendously diminished. After the plague, the Aztecs that actually survived, were extremely weak and it took them a while to get back on their feet. This then gave the Spanish an advantage when they returned and began their first battle outside of Tlatelolco.

While the Aztecs were attempting to fight the Spanish, they were also dealing with internal conflicts as well. When Motecuhzoma first heard about the eight Omens, he summoned magicians from the city to come and inform him of what they meant. He placed the magicians in prison because they had not seen the Omens, so they could not advise him. Motecuhzoma sent his head steward back to the prison to consult with the magicians again, and they were gone. When he got word of this, Motecuhzoma told his head steward to “Call the chiefs together, and tell them to go to the villages where the magicians live. Tell them to kill their wives and all their children, and to destroy their houses” (“The Broken Spears” 15). While the Spanish were on their way, the Aztecs were killing their own citizens and diminishing their population size which provided an advantage to the Spanish. Also, eventually Motecuhzoma’s people begin to lose trust in him and became disloyal. After the Spaniards attack the Aztecs during the big fiesta, the Aztecs became enraged with Motecuhzoma. They do not feel the need to listen to the leader anymore, and they prefer not to take any more orders from his as well. This is an advantage to the Spaniards because while there is dissention and turmoil amongst the Aztecs, the Spaniards are sitting back plotting their attack. In any battle, a strong leader is needed along with the loyalty of his people. This was not the case with Motecuhzoma, which gave the Spanish the opportunity to build a stronger, more cohesive army.

While the Aztecs had internal conflicts, they also suffered from the fear and intimidation imposed on them by the Spanish. When the Spaniards were on their way to Mexico, Motecuhzoma sent out some messengers to greet the strangers with gifts. When the messengers returned from their visit to the strangers, they reported to Motecuhzoma about all the weapons they had and how powerful they potentially could be. This imposed fear and terror into the soul of Motecuhzoma before the Spanish even arrived. The Aztecs were very intimidated by the Spanish before they even arrived. In “The Broken Spears”, in reference to the Aztecs, it is stated that, “They could not harm them in any way whatever” (“The Broken Spears” 34). This showed that from the beginning the Aztecs had lost all hope and confidence in winning the battle for their territory. Motecuhzoma, the weak and frightened leader he is, even thinks about fleeing when he hears the Spanish wish to meet him. The fear and intimidation placed on the Aztecs gave the Spanish an advantage because the fear made the Aztecs not step up and want to fight. This made it easy for the Spanish to manipulate the Aztecs and get out of them what they desired. But the most important factor that contributed the most to the victory of the Spanish was the allies the Spanish gained in Mexico. When the Spanish first entered Mexico, a man from Cempoala showed them the shortest and best routes to get to their destination. This was to the advantage of the Spanish because they did not have to waste their time figuring out the new land they landed on, but instead they were shown where to go. Next, the people of Tlaxcala invited the Spanish to enter their city and joined them as allies. After the Tlaxcaltecas create an alliance with the Spaniards, they turn against their own people and lead the Spanish towards their enemies in Cholula. This was an invitation from the Tlaxcaltecas to the Spanish to attack the people of Cholula with no cause but the fact that they were enemies of the Tlaxcaltecas. After the massacre at Cholula occurred, this caused the people of all the other cities to become extremely frightened. Soon after this massacre, the Spaniards were on their way to the City of Mexico. In “The Broken Spears” it is said that, “Cortes saw to it that his new friends and confederates did not leave his side, using his wits as always, as an astute leader, to take advantage of a favorable situation” (“The Broken Spears” 43). When Cortes gained allies, he used this to his full advantage. This was very important because this now added people to his army that knew the land, the people and the language as well. With the allies, the Spanish gained more confidence in the battles they were partaking in.

All in all, the Spanish were able to conquer Mexico from the Aztecs, despite their disadvantage in size, due to several different factors including the confusion of the Aztecs, the advanced weapons of the Spanish , disease that struck the Aztecs, internal conflict in Mexico, the intimidation and fear imposed on the Aztecs, and the allies the Spanish gained. These all were significantly helpful, but the most beneficial factor was the allies the Spanish gained in Mexico. Adding not only additional people to the Spanish army, but their knowledge and communication skills, helped the Spanish in the conquest of New Spain. Although the Spanish began with far less men in their army than the Aztecs, this was not of importance because in the end, the Spanish were victorious and showed that it was far beyond the numbers that mattered.

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