**Hernán Cortés Outline**

Hernán Cortés left Spain at the age of nineteen after a brief period studying law and a fortuitous escape from a jealous husband. He used his personal connections to acquire an *encomienda*. Later he impressed Governor Diego Velásquez and served as his clerk during the expedition to conquer and settle Cuba in 1511. Cortés' pass performance made him the perfect candidate for the Governor's third expedition to the main land. But Cortés' ambition and personal magnetism made Velásquez suspect his loyalty. Velásquez planned on removing him as the leader of the expedition. Cortés discovered this and cut short his preparations and set sail for the mainland on February 18, 1519.

With a few pieces of artillery, sixteen horsemen, and roughly 400 infantry soldiers recruited from the poor whites of Cuba, Cortés made for the Gulf coast. While there, Cortés renounced Velásquez authority by founding his own city, Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, whose newly elected town council (*cabildo*) selected him as its chief administrative officer. Cortés then ordered his small fleet destroyed to persuade those under his command to accept his authority. Cortés did not want to explore, trade, and search for Christian captives. Rather, his goal was nothing less than the conquest of Mexico. He wrote to King Charles V, and sought confirmation of the title of chief officer of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz that he had conferred upon himself. He also explained to the king the "ungodly ways" of the indigenous population and stated that his would be a "just war" against their tyrannical ruler. Cortés did not hurt his own cause when he described the wealth of the Aztecs and claimed that he wanted to conquer the territory in the name of Christianity and the Spanish Crown. Convinced that his actions would ultimately justify the steps he had already taken, Cortés set off overland for the Mexican capital.

Upon the advice of his two translators - Jeronimo Aguilar, a shipwreck survivor, and Malitzin, an indigenous woman who spoke both Maya and Nahuatla - Cortés began to seek out native allies who were already hostile to the Aztecs. Cortés marched his troops along a route designed to recruit as many volunteers and supporters to the Spanish cause as possible. Cortés soon won the support of the Cempoalans, and the Tlaxcalans. With the strong support of the several indigenous groups who acted as allies, interpreters and guides, the expedition took three months to complete the 300-kilometer journey, much of it over difficult terrain. Arriving on the outskirts of Tenochtitlán the city's populous believed Cortés to be the descendent of the white-skinned god Quetzalcoatlin of Aztec prophesy. This prophesy stated that Quetzalcoatlin had left Mexico in the tenth century but would return from the east to reclaim his authority over the Aztecs. The Aztec Emperor, Moctezuma, saw Cortés' arrival as the fulfilment of this prophecy and welcomed the party warmly, presenting the Spaniards with lavish gifts.



"Cortez and Montezuma at Mexican Temple"   
Scene from the frieze decorating the United States Capitol.   
Painted sometime between 1878 and 1880 by Constantino Brumidi.

After courteous initial meetings with Moctezuma, relations between the Spaniards and the Aztecs deteriorated rapidly. Perhaps fearing that his company would become the next human sacrifices at the Aztec temple, Cortés seized Moctezuma and made him a prisoner. This stunned the Aztecs into submission and the Aztecs began collecting treasure as ransom. In the meanwhile Cortés left the capital to engage a military expedition sent by Velásquez to capture the rebellious captain. After subduing the forces sent by Velásquez, Cortés returned to Tenochtitlán to find that his Spanish troops had massacred an unarmed crowd at a religious ceremony thus provoking a massive popular uprising.

Cortés turned to his erstwhile prisoner, Moctezuma, in hopes that the sight of their emperor would quell the enraged populace. Unfortunately, Moctezuma was struck in the head by a stone and died three days later. Cortés' only option was to retreat to Tlaxcalan territory, but during this retreat the company sustained heavy losses. After regrouping, and being reinforced largely by enemies of the Aztecs, the Spanish returned to besiege Tenochtitlán in 1521. The Spanish and their allies blockaded the city, denying the populace food and water. An outbreak of smallpox further weakened the city's defenders. Cortés finally pushed his way into the city and razed all of the Aztec buildings so that hardly a trace of the city remained.

Cortés' management of Spanish possessions in the Americas ensured that, by 1540, Mexico City (built on the ruins of Tenochtitlán) was the metropolis of Spanish America. Cortés' gambled that his success would absolve him of his rebellion against Velásquez in the eyes of the Spanish Crown. He was correct and received riches, a title of nobility, and fame. After the defeat of the Aztecs, Spanish power spread rapidly through the Aztec Empire. Cortés' action was one of the single largest additions of land and treasure to the Spanish Empire ever secured by an individual.