

Strategy in conquest of mexico essay



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Informed primarily by Spanish accounts, the traditional historical view of Cortés' victory over the Aztec Empire is that of the inherently superior and better-armed Spanish defeating the numerically superior, but technologically and morally inferior Aztec forces. Inga Clendinnen, for one, explains the Spanish conquest in cultural terms. According to Clendinnen, the Aztecs were defeated because their traditional societal view on the nature of warfare and its modes of termination made them incapable of defeating the Spanish forces led by the innovative and cunning Cortés. ¹ However, the recent availability of Aztec and other native accounts of the conquest call these interpretations into question.

Concurrently, a new wave of contemporary Aztec scholars argue that the motivations for Aztec imperialism are complex and multifaceted, but political and economic concerns dominated, just like any other empire. ²³⁴

Therefore, it is best to examine the Aztec Empire just as one would the Roman Empire, or any other imperial system. Viewed through this lens, it will be argued that Cortés' successful employment of military strategy and techniques were the critical determinant in the battle for the Aztec Empire. Other historical interpretations overlooked the role of strategy in the Aztec response to Cortés, but it will be argued that Cortés, as well as the Aztecs, conducted war within an overarching strategic plan.

As leader of the Aztec Empire, Montezuma's primary objective in the region was to consolidate and further expand his power base by bringing rival factions under Aztec control and compel the payment of tribute. ⁵ The Aztecs used conquering wars, where Aztec warriors attacked and quickly overwhelmed the enemy and forced them into submission, but so called “

flower wars" to achieve this end as well. Clendinnen and others have misinterpreted the "flower wars" as merely serving ritualistic aims, while other scholars described it as a training ground for Aztec soldiers. Hassig argues these "flower wars" were in fact a type of imperial war with important strategic objectives. The Aztecs often engaged in "flower wars" with their strongest opponents, while reserving conquering wars for vulnerable targets. The Aztecs often directed their conquering wars against those weaker foes which happened to border the Aztecs' strongest "flower war" opponents.

Once the stronger enemy was completely surrounded and deprived of potential allies, as well as room to retreat, the "flower war" escalated to a full fledge war of conquest, with the Aztecs chipping away at the enemy's periphery until the noose completely tightened. Montezuma had been following this strategy in the extended "flower wars" with the Tlaxcallan Confederacy, which at the time of Cortés' arrival in 1519 was completely surrounded by the Aztec Empire. ⁶Although Montezuma's allies warned Cortés against crossing into Tlaxcallan territory, he deliberately did so on his way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan. Cortés' battles with the Tlaxcallans were his first preview of Mesoamerican warfare, and also served as a preview as to what might be in store for him when he finally confronted Montezuma. In his letter to the Spanish emperor, Cortés suggests that he was able to end fighting with the Tlaxcallans by persuading them to join him in an alliance against Montezuma. ⁷ The Tlaxcallans, already encircled by the Aztecs and facing all but certain subjugation, assented to Cortés' offer

because they recognized that the Spaniards possessed the ability to do what they could not: consistently break through enemy lines.

With this alliance, Cortés exploited the Tlaxcallans dire military situation at the hands of the Aztecs, and strategically, the alliance with the Tlaxcallan Confederacy proved to be a decisive factor on Cortés' behalf in the ensuing battle with the Aztecs. The alliance significantly increased the total numbers in Cortés' forces and established a strategic pattern of brokering alliances with Montezuma's enemies and allies. The Tlaxcallans proved not just to be warm bodies in Cortés' army, but a well trained and highly motivated fighting force. While Cortés was forging an alliance with his worst enemy, Montezuma was still in the process of sizing up the Spaniard. He sent messengers to Cortés to assess his power as well as to dissuade Cortés from coming to Tenochtitlan.

Most historians agree that Montezuma's hesitancy in acting against Cortés and his men contributed to the eventual defeat of the Aztecs. Had Montezuma acted decisive and early, his thousands of well trained and disciplined warriors could have soon neutralized Cortés' relatively tiny army. Scholars have dedicated much research into attempting to explain Montezuma's hesitancy. Arguably, Montezuma should have been aware of Cortés' true objectives, based on his zeal for gold, his insistence to come to Tenochtitlan, and his alliance with Montezuma's enemies.

Evidence from the Codex Florentino suggests that Montezuma's failure to take swift action against the Spaniards can be attributed to his belief that Cortés and his men were gods. However, if Montezuma and his advisors

ever believed Cortés and his men were gods, there is little evidence that this belief persisted very long. Montezuma could reason that they were not gods since they did not behave like gods, simply based on their voracious appetite for gold and their lack of susceptibility to spiritual overtures. ¹¹ Smith argues that the Aztec religious elites created a set of myths, including those associated with the omens predicting the downfall of the Aztec empire, as well as the idea that Montezuma believed that Cortés was the returning god Quetzalcoatl, post-conquest in their effort to explain Montezuma's embarrassing hesitation. ¹² So, what can account for Montezuma's hesitancy in dealing with Cortés? Hassig posits that Montezuma simply did not view Cortés and his forces as a strategic threat. Montezuma had little basis on which to think that Cortés might launch an attack or an invasion.

After all, Montezuma was the undisputed leader of the powerful Aztec empire and as such, widely feared and respected. As Hassig notes, "there was the widespread perception of Montezuma's power." ¹³ This perception served as an effective check on the ambitions of Montezuma's enemies and allies alike. It was simply inconceivable that anyone would think that they could launch an attack on Tenochtitlan.

Also, Cortés had always asserted his interest in friendship with Montezuma and the Aztecs in general. Moreover, Cortés was making his approach during harvest season, a time when even actively rival factions ceased military engagements in favor of more pressing economic concerns. As far as Montezuma was concerned, Cortés might have come to Tenochtitlan to form an alliance. ¹⁴ Although he certainly did not reveal these objectives to Montezuma, Cortés came into Tenochtitlan with the main goals of

subduing the Aztecs, and securing the gold and other treasures of the realm, but also converting the heathens to the Catholic faith of Spanish Emperor Charles V, as well.

At the time he entered Tenochtitlan however, Cortés had not formulated any grand strategy for how he would accomplish these objectives, although as he indicated in his letter to Charles V., he saw an opportunity to capitalize on the factionalism and rivalries within the Aztec Empire: "I was not a little pleased to see such discord between the two, since it seemed highly propitious to my plan." 15 In addition to cultivating alliances with Montezuma's allies and enemies, Cortés made a tactical move to take direct control of Montezuma's power. He wrote "having passed six days..

. in the great city of Tenochtitlan...I considered it essential that its ruler should be placed in my power and not entirely free." 16 To this end, Cortés effectively placed Montezuma under a sort of house arrest.

Montezuma did not resist Cortés. Indeed, he ordered his people to give the Spaniards gold and he remained on good terms with Cortés, whom he seemed to like. Hassig suggests the possibility of some noble objectives behind Montezuma's acquiescence - that maybe Montezuma "was biding his time, trying to find a way to bind the Spaniards to him politically and break their potentially dangerous alliance with Tlaxcallan." 17 Montezuma did not live long enough to reveal his true intentions and following his death, the battle for Tenochtitlan began in earnest. Moreover, Cortés' tactic of seizing Montezuma backfired to a certain extent.

Correctly or incorrectly, the Aztecs perceived Montezuma's acquiescence as weakness and as his power eroded, Cortés' capacity to wield power through him also diminished. 18 In addition, the seizure of Montezuma to a certain extent radicalized or at least energized the underlying opposition to the Spanish and helped to focus support behind potential alternative leaders. On the other hand, the seizure of Montezuma and his subsequent untimely death left a vacuum in the Aztec leadership. This situation worsened when Montezuma's immediate successor, Cuitlahauh, died of smallpox less than three days after his election.

As Thomas explains, "the crisis was great, for the Emperor was essential to the direction of Mexican society. The Emperor was not just 'he who commands', but also the 'heart of the city'." 19 The power vacuum left the Aztec empire vulnerable not only to rebellion from the tributaries, but more critically, to organized attacks from Cortés and his men. The military strategies and tactics of the Spanish and Aztecs became most apparent once the battle for Tenochtitlan commenced.

This fighting began when Cortés was away from the city and the Aztecs responded to the Spaniards' massacre of participants at a ceremony honoring the god Huitzilopochtli. Cortés' deputy Pedro de Alvarado carried out the massacre in response to the report that there would be human sacrifices at the festival. Leon-Portillo's work contains a vivid account from the Aztec perspective of this massacre: "They attacked all the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them, striking them with their swords..

. the blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools.”²⁰ Just as there was no strategic plan behind the Spaniards’ attack on the celebrants, the Aztecs’ response to the attacks occurred outside of the context of any organized plan or military strategy. The Aztec sources depict the uprising against the Spanish as an impromptu response to the slaughter.

While hastily assembled, the Aztecs’ response revealed signs of organization and clear purpose: When the news of this massacre was heard outside the Sacred Patio, a great cry went up: ‘ Mexicanos, come running! Bring your spears and shields! The strangers have murdered our warriors!’ This cry was answered with a roar of grief and anger: the people shouted and wailed and beat their palms against their mouths. The captains assembled at once, as if the hour had been determined in advance.²¹ The Aztecs attacked the Spaniards with all available weapons. They also made an effort to lay siege to the Spanish by widening and deepening the canals, blocking the roads with walls, as well as erecting bulwarks to prevent the Spanish from breaking out. Food deliveries stopped, and the Aztecs also attempted to cut off the Spaniards’ supply of drinking water. Thomas notes that the Spaniards’ superior weaponry was meaningless in the face of this type of assault from the Aztecs.

²² The Aztecs assaulted the Spanish in the absence of any clear leadership. Indeed, Montezuma, at the behest of his Spanish captors, had exhorted his subjects to cease their attack on the Spaniards. The Aztecs ignored Montezuma’s pleas, instead redoubling their efforts against the Spaniards. This was, as Thomas observes, “ a different kind of war from what they were accustomed.”²³ This was an improvisational street war that did not provide

the Aztec fighters with the time or opportunity to engage in the usual rituals of war like wearing battle dress or announcing the start of the fighting each day.

This also encouraged the Aztecs to explore new tactics and strategies. In addition to developing their street fighting capabilities, the Aztec fighters explored the frontiers of psychological warfare. Each night, the Aztecs conjured up frightful images for those Spaniards who were looking down at them from the buildings. Sometimes the Spanish would see a head walking around attached only to a foot, or see human heads jumping, or decapitated corpses rolling around on the ground groaning. ²⁴Cortés' return to Tenochtitlan with reinforcements did not tame the Aztecs' assault on their unwelcome Spanish guests. In July of 1520 - seven months after Cortés and his men first arrived in Tenochtitlan - Cortés ordered his men to retreat from the city.

The Spanish sustained many casualties and deaths upon their exit from the Aztec capital. For the Spanish, the retreat came to be known as the "Night of Sorrows." Smith reports that prior to leaving the city, Cortés and his men had packed up heavy loads of gold - a factor which slowed their escape and increased the likelihood that they would drown if they fell or the Aztecs forced them into the water. ²⁵The losses on the Night of Sorrows only served to reify Cortés' resolve to re-take Tenochtitlan. He wrote his emperor that "it was my firm resolution to return and avenge ourselves on the inhabitants of the capital." While Cortés plotted revenge, the Aztecs were convinced that they had so routed the foreigners that they would never again return to Tenochtitlan.

When months passed and no attack seemed forthcoming, the Aztecs grew even more steadfast in their beliefs and by the time of spring 1521, the Aztecs enjoyed the delusion that no enemy – including the Spanish – would dare to launch an attack at or near harvest time. This false belief that they were no longer vulnerable to an assault by Cortés is probably the Aztecs' biggest strategic failure. ²⁶Meanwhile, Cortés was busy assembling a comprehensive war strategy. Having found from experience that a direct frontal assault on Tenochtitlan was inadvisable, Cortés began to attack Aztec tributaries near their allies in Tlaxcallan. Hassig notes that “ by adopting this strategy, the Spaniards were guaranteed a refuge: they had allies at their backs, and they could mount assaults on locations too quickly for Tenochtitlan to respond.

“ ²⁷ By following this strategy, Cortés was able to add new allies in the newly conquered tributaries for his upcoming assault on the Aztecs. Cortés also realized that he and his men had become a victim of Tenochtitlan's particular geography. To correct this situation, Cortés undertook the construction, with the aid of his Indian allies, of a fleet of boats. The twelve brigantines were “ flat-bottomed, with both sails and paddles, able to maneuver through the shallow lake without risk of being grounded and each could carry about 25-30 men.

“ ²⁸ Gardiner reports that these brigantines provided Cortés with the mobility he lacked during the first battle, since Tenochtitlan's waterside location cut down the mobility of his infantry, cavalry, and artillery. ²⁹ The boats were undoubtedly a key element in Cortés' overall strategic plan to re-conquer Tenochtitlan, in addition to the assault on the surrounding

tributaries. However, the linchpin of Cortés' strategic plan, was a siege. Cortés planned to starve Tenochtitlan by cutting off supplies to the city as well as occupying its causeways. Gardiner, writing admiringly of Cortés' strategic brilliance, likens him to Napoleon, "in being both the strategist in the pre-campaign map room and the tactician leading a combat force into the fray.

.. The close naval support commonly afforded ground troops throughout the engagement smacked of later centuries, as did the razing of the city."

30 Notwithstanding Cortés' talents as a strategist and tactician, the Spanish siege of Tenochtitlan was by no means a walkover. The Aztecs continued to mount stiff resistance throughout the long siege.

Moreover, even in the absence of strong leadership, the Aztecs continued to fight with tireless ferocity. 31 The situation they faced demanded that they move beyond the usual strategic approach to warfare in Mesoamerica.

Hassig states that "the basic strategy in a conventional encounter was to maintain a solid front" and that the "major goal of each side was to break the enemy's front, disrupting his line and throwing whole units into disarray."

32 In fighting Cortés, the Aztecs had to rely primarily on defensive tactics.

They set traps for the enemy (setting up pits containing sharpened stakes, using feints against the enemy, etc.), selectively destroyed the dike system, and attempted to move the Spaniards away from positions of advantage. In fighting the Spanish, the Aztecs proved to be not only resilient, but also innovative and adaptive. When confronted with new and mysterious Spanish

weaponry, the Aztecs studied them and learned how to avoid the brunt of their impact.

A passage in the Florentine Codex describes this capacity for adapting to new circumstances: “ The Mexica began to draw back and protect themselves from the artillery, zigzagging with the canoes, and also when they saw that they were about to fire one of the cannon, they crouched down in the canoes.”³³ The Aztecs also revealed their adaptability and innovation in their use of psychological warfare against the Spaniards and in their use of night attacks – previously almost unheard of in Aztec warfare.³⁴ Ultimately, Aztec defensive tactics proved to be no match for the successful execution of Cortés’ strategic plan. Lacking strong and clear leadership of their own and weakened by the ravages of the smallpox epidemic, the Aztecs were probably better able to cope with a direct assault by the Spaniards than they were with Cortés’ program of planned starvation.

³⁵ Cortés’ siege strategy attacked not just the warriors but the entire Aztec population, thus crippling the empire. Cortés’ strategy of cultivating Indian allies to fight against the Aztecs was also critical in ensuring his victory. As Smith observes, the oft asked question, “ How did five hundred Spaniards manage to defeat the Aztec empire whose armies had tens of thousands of warriors?”³⁶ is based on false assumptions. He notes that the “ Aztec empire was defeated by five hundred Spaniards, aided by tens of thousands of native allies and a disease epidemic of proportions never before seen in the New World.”³⁷ The causes of Cortés’ defeat of the Aztec Empire have been a much debated topic among historians, but it is necessary to begin this investigation holding the assumption that the conflict

consists of two relatively matched, rational opponents, both conducting warfare with an overarching strategic plan.

In so doing, one will come to the conclusion that Cortés' successful employment of military and techniques, as well as strategic mistakes by the Aztecs, were the critical determinant in the outcome which saw the Aztec Empire, and all its riches fall into the hands of Cortés.