

Seven myths of the spanish conquest essay sample



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Myths of the Spanish Conquest is broken into seven chapters, each dedicated to a different myth or mis-conception regarding the Spanish conquest. In debunking these myths, Matthew Restall works with three themes regarding the conquest. First, that the European discovery of the Americas was one of the greatest events in human history. Second, that the conquest was the achievement of “ a few great men,” which he subsequently describes as “ a handful of adventurers.” These two themes lead to a third theme, or question. “ If history’s greatest event - the European discovery and conquest of the Americas - was achieved by a mere “ handful of adventurers,” how did they do it?”

One common answer to this question is, “ because they were exceptionally great men.” The “ theory of exceptional men” paints the most well known of the Spaniards - Columbus and Cortes - as “ larger than life characters,” who “ still enjoy extraordinary name recognition almost a half a millennium after their deaths. This theory credits the courage, audacity and brilliance of each man as reasons for success in both reaching the Americas and conquering the Mexica, respectively. As Restall points out, nothing was unique regarding Columbus and his accomplishments. He offered no original plan or vision. In actuality, the Portuguese were mostly responsible for the Atlantic expansion. This expansion began over two hundred years prior, over time establishing a zone that was bordered by the Azores in the north, the Canary Islands in the south and African coast to the east. Restall claims that Columbus failed to become part of this process in the 1480’s because “ he lacked the connections and persuasive ideas of other navigators.

Even after his first successful trip, the “discovery” of Caribbean islands in an area assigned to the Portuguese, his success was questioned. Restall goes on to point out that it became obvious that Columbus had not discovered the route to the East Indies, and had been lying to Queen Isabella about it. The Castilian crown had him arrested, and stripped him of the titles he had negotiated in his contract, Admiral and Viceroy of the Indies. Restall sums up by saying, “His discoveries were an accidental geographical byproduct of Portuguese expansion two centuries old, of Portuguese-Castilian competition for Atlantic control a century old, and of Portuguese-Castilian competition for a sea route to India older than Columbus himself. Furthermore, had Columbus not reached the Americas, any one of numerous other navigators would have done so within a decade.”

Restall believes that the image of Cortes being “bold and brilliant” was created with a “myth inside the myth” – that after landing on the gulf coast of Mexico, Cortes burned his ships. This is not accurate. The ships were scuttled. This illustrates “how every move of Cortes’ has been taken as indicative of his exceptionality”. He goes on to claim that this image of brilliance is fueled by later conquistadors imitating the actions of Cortes. He further argues that Cortes was not original in his actions, but that he followed a playbook that pre-dated the conquest. Two examples stood out to me. “Much has been made of Cortes’ use of a Nahua noblewoman as his interpreter...giving the impression that she was an example of Cortes’ superior strategic skills,” Restall writes.

He rebukes this, however, by claiming that the search for an interpreter dates back to the late 1490’s. Seven Caribbean natives were taken by <https://assignbuster.com/seven-myths-of-the-spanish-conquest-essay-sample/>

Columbus in 1493 to Spain to be “ instructed as interpreters.” In 1502, an American native was captured and trained specifically to be an interpreter. And in 1517, Hernandez de Cordoba took prisoners from the Yucatan coast and tried making interpreters of them. Another example of taking a page from the playbook was “ the public seizure of a native ruler.” The decision to seize Moctezuma after he welcomed the Spaniards into Tenochtitlan is widely considered Cortes’ boldest. However, Restall points out that “ Spaniards routinely took native rulers hostage.” This precedent was apparently set in 1494, when a Haitian lord was seized and publicly executed, “ and thereafter Spaniards routinely captured, ransomed, tortured and executed native rulers throughout the Caribbean islands and later the adjacent mainland.”

While I do not have room to discuss it in length, I must briefly explain Restall’s thoughts regarding the question, “ If the conquest of the Americas was achieved by a mere “ handful of adventurers,” how did they do it?” Restall attacks the myth that the conquest was accomplished by a rather small number of Spaniards in chapter three. He claims that much of the fighting and military operations were carried out by native allies of the conquistadors. Backtracking, this ties into the myth covered in chapter two – the myth of the King’s army.

The conquistadors were not soldiers, but feudal lords – who held a minute amount of experience in battle compared to the natives. In chapter seven, Restall refutes the “ myth of superiority” – the idea that the Spaniards were successful due to technological or cultural superiority – by claiming that technological advances such as weapons, armor and horses were not

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consequential because they were in short supply. He argues that several factors leading to success were disease among the natives, lack of unity, (many became allies of the conquistadors) and the fact that the Indians were fighting on their own ground with their families and fields to care for, which made them quicker to compromise.