

Hernando Cortés was a restless, aggressive man who was eager for

adventure, hungry for wealth, and ambitious for power. These drives combined with wily intelligence, great energy, and a chance opportunity enabled him to conquer the Aztec Empire.

Early in life, Cortés showed signs of his desire for excitement and control. In 1504, he left his native Spain to seek opportunities in the New World. He spent the next 14 years on the island of Hispaniola helping Diego Velázquez conquer Cuba.

Velázquez heard stories of a rich land full of gold to the west. In 1519, he gave Cortés the assignment of investigating the area to see if the stories were true. As Cortés prepared his expedition, though, he displayed such arrogance and ambition that Velázquez revoked the order that put Cortés in charge. However, Cortés ignored Velázquez, loaded his ships, and sailed for Mexico.

Upon landing there, Cortés learned that the stories of a gold-rich empire were true. As a result, he moved to establish his authority over the mission as legitimate. He ordered his men to build a town, named a council to lead that town, and then had that council name him captain general and the representative of the king of Spain. With these steps, Cortés tried to secure at least some legal basis for his command.

Cortés also took three additional actions. He made contact with a Native American woman named Malinche. She became a valued adviser because of her ability to speak the Aztec language and to learn Spanish quickly. Next, Cortés sent a sampling of gold gifts that he had received from the Aztecs on a ship back to Spain. With these presents for the king, he hoped to win an official appointment. Finally, he boldly had his men burn the remaining boats. There would be no returning to Cuba.

With the preparations complete, Cortés now set out for the Aztec Empire. Taking advantage of the resentments that other Native American groups held against the Aztecs, he forged several key alliances. These were important, as his small force

of around 600 men was woefully outnumbered by the mighty Aztecs. The Aztec emperor Montezuma II sent several missions bearing gifts, hoping to persuade Cortés to turn back. However, the gifts of gold only convinced the Spaniards to continue.

Cortés, meanwhile, used dogs, horses, guns, and cannons—none of which had ever been seen before in the Americas—to surprise and scare the native peoples. As the Spanish neared the Aztec capital, Cortés learned of an ambush. He quickly struck first, though, and killed thousands of enemy troops. However, a Native American account disputes that version, saying that Cortés carried out a premeditated massacre.

After reaching the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, Cortés imprisoned Montezuma and tried to rule through him. Troubles with Velázquez returned, however, and Cortés traveled to the coast to meet a Spanish force that had landed to seize him. Upon meeting this new army, Cortés described the riches of the Aztec Empire and convinced the soldiers to join him. Reinforced, he returned to Tenochtitlán to find a crisis. His second in command had killed many Aztecs and ignited a revolt. The Spaniards were being assaulted by them. Cortés had to withdraw from the city under attack. Within two years, though, he completed the conquest of the Aztecs.

In the meantime, Cortés had won the recognition he had sought from the Spanish crown. He was named governor of New Spain and began to set up the roots of a Spanish colonial government. He would eventually lead more expeditions to Honduras and to Baja California, but none proved as successful or lucrative as his voyage to Mexico.

Questions

1. ***Making Inferences*** How worried was Cortés about his actual authority to act in Mexico?

2. ***Drawing Conclusions*** Do you agree or disagree with Cortés's decision to burn the ships? Explain.

3. ***Developing Historical Perspective*** Do you think that Cortés was admirable or a villain? Explain.