

CRISIS SIMULATION

SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE



Letter to the People:

Honorable Delegates,

Welcome to the sixth annual Freeman Model United Nations Conference! Our names are Cormac Taylor and Shruthi Subramanian, and we're incredibly excited to lead you through this committee. Cormac is a sophomore and is at the Center for Leadership, Government, and Global Economics. He has participated in Model UN for 4 years. Outside of school, Cormac enjoys running cross country, playing basketball, and participating in musical theatre. Shruthi is a junior and is also in the Center for Leadership, Government, and Global Economics. She's enjoyed Model UN for 3 years and loves running cross country and track, playing pickleball, and cooking in her free time. We cannot wait to hear all the interesting and well-researched ideas that will be presented, and we hope that you'll enjoy the diverse discussions that await you.

As you dive into these issues, we remind you to stick to your delegated position on any points and refrain from using personal positions. While we strongly encourage delegates to write position papers, they are not required. However, to be considered for an award, papers are necessary. Delegates who demonstrate exceptional performance in committee through organized debate, unorganized debate, problem-solving, and backroom performance will be recognized for an award.

We look forward to being your chairs for this committee and wish you the best for your preparations! If you have any questions, please contact us at freemunviatec@gmail.com for additional information.

Your Chairs,

Cormac Taylor and Shruthi Subramanian



Douglas S. Freeman High School Model United Nations Conference

Historical Crisis

Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire

Topic I: *Arrival of the Spanish*

Topic II: *Internal Issues*

Introduction

It is May 1519, and Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés has recently set foot into the Aztec Empire with about 500 men. While they lack in numbers, the Spanish have brought goods never before seen by the Aztecs, such as horses, steel swords, and firearms. They have clear intentions of finding wealth, claiming land, and spreading Christianity.

Meanwhile, the Aztec Empire, led by Emperor Moctezuma II, has been the main power in Mesoamerica for hundreds of years. The empire, run through its capital, Tenochtitlan, keeps rule through a hegemonic system with tributary city-states. This means that all conquered powers remain partly autonomous but still must pay tribute to the empire. Many of these city-states, such as the Tlaxcalans or Totonacs, harbor resentment towards the Aztec Empire. With the arrival of the Spanish, both of these groups could see this as an opportunity to challenge the rule of the empire.

In addition, with the arrival of the Spanish also comes the arrival of new diseases. One such disease, smallpox, has been ravaging the population of the Aztecs.

With entire noble families and towns being wiped out and no cure, there is a lot of unrest surrounding the disease. Amidst all of these crises unfolding, leadership internally in the empire has been slowly crumbling. The entirety of the power in the empire, ranging from conquered city-states to the capital, traces back to the emperor, Moctezuma II. Hungry for power, many nobles have been pushing for decentralization of power of some sort, with others calling for a complete reshaping of the government. Religious nobles are also losing influence with the Spanish missionaries spreading Christianity, and other Aztecs believing the arrival of the Spanish fulfills ancient prophecies about the Aztec god, Quetzalcoatl.

Delegates in this committee will be tasked to figure out how to respond to the arrival of the Spanish, while also ensuring the empire can battle through its own internal issues and stay afloat.

Topic I: **Arrival of the Spanish**

Background and Current Status

The Aztec Empire has been the dominant power in Mesoamerica for almost 200 years. It is located in modern-day Central Mexico, and runs through a hegemonic system of rule using tributary city-states that traces back to the Emperor, Moctezuma II. This means that all conquered regions remain semi-autonomous under the Empire but still must pay tribute to the capital, Tenochtitlan. This system allows the Empire to grow rapidly, but also causes some of the city-states to harbor resentment towards the Empire. Two groups that have been openly hostile towards the Empire are the Totonacs and the Tlaxcalans.

The Totonacs are a group that lives along the Gulf Coast or in modern-day Veracruz. The Totonacs were conquered by the Aztecs in 1480, and ever since, they have had to pay tribute to the empire and provide human sacrifices for Aztec rituals. Meanwhile, the Tlaxcalans have not been conquered by the Aztecs, but have been warring with the Empire since 1454 in ritual conflicts known as flower wars. Both of these groups are looking for any opportunity to take down the Empire and ensure their continued survival.

Arrival of the Spanish

In the spring of 1519, Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and 500 of his men landed off the eastern coast of the Aztec Empire. Despite being small in numbers, the fleet possessed steel weapons, firearms, and horses, which were completely new to the Aztecs. The conquistadors are looking to claim land for the Spanish Empire, while also gaining both glory and wealth.

The pursuit of wealth has been a huge motivating factor for the Spanish conquest. This desire stems from Christopher Columbus's first voyage in 1492, when stories were spread across Spain about the New World and the riches it contained. Columbus had returned with various golden items, which fueled the hopes of other conquistadors to amass their own wealth. Since Cortés and his men were not paid an actual salary, they were hoping they would find enough gold to make the voyage financially worthwhile.

The desire to earn glory was also a huge motivating factor for the conquest. Claiming new lands for Spain was a great way to earn fame and glory. Back in the country, the social hierarchy was rigid, and it was sometimes difficult for people to become known, but in the New World, there were endless possibilities to earn fame. This motivated Cortés to not only sail to the Empire, but to arrive with plans to conquer the entire continent. Successful conquistadors were seen as heroes of Christendom and servants of the crown, which motivated them to embark on daring conquests.

The final motivating factor for the Spanish conquest was spreading Christianity, specifically Catholicism. The conquistadors believed it was their divine duty to convert the indigenous people to Christianity and save their souls. Many priests and friars accompanied the conquistadors on their conquests. The Spanish were particularly appalled by the practice of human sacrifice, which they saw

as barbaric and a reason to conquer the Aztecs.

Aztec Response

Delegates in this committee will be tasked to cooperate and find a way to respond to the Spanish arrival. With some groups in Tenochtitlan urging direct violence by using their advantage in numbers, and some urging a diplomatic approach, including coming to a possible trade compromise with the Spanish, it will be crucial for delegates to agree on an effective way to respond to the arrival of the Spanish.

Figure 1: Territorial Organization of the Aztec Empire, 1519



Questions to Consider:

1. Should the Aztecs attempt to stop the Totonac and Tlaxcalans from allying with the Spaniards, or is it not a concern?
2. Should the Aztecs stall time and attempt to learn as much about the Spanish as they can, or is inaction a dangerous gamble?
3. How can the Aztecs respond to unfamiliar technology used by the Spanish? Should they be feared or studied?

4. Should trade or diplomatic relations with the Spanish be attempted by the Aztecs, or should the Spanish be treated as a threat?

Topic II: Internal Issues

The Smallpox Breakout

As the Spanish land on the Aztec coast, they not only bring weapons and horses, but a threat possibly more dangerous than themselves. Smallpox is a deadly disease brought from Europe. Since the disease is completely new in the Americas, it is a lot more dangerous to the indigenous peoples than to the Spaniards because they have no antibodies or immunity. With soldiers, nobles, and priests being wiped out and the disease quickly spreading through the empire, the Aztecs must find a solution quickly, before smallpox takes even more victims.

Smallpox is not only a humanitarian issue, but it is also a catastrophe for the economic and political state of the Aztec Empire. Everywhere around the empire is being depopulated, labor and food supplies are being reduced, and the military is dying out as well. Delegates are tasked to respond to this crisis with little to no medical knowledge of this foreign disease.

Aztec Leadership

In the Aztec Empire, the emperor, Moctezuma II, holds absolute power. In the midst of all the crises, such as the Spanish

arrival and smallpox outbreak, there is a lot of pressure on Moctezuma to handle these problems. In addition, many nobles in the empire are pushing for a decentralization of power or a complete restructuring of the government. Many believe the current system leads to an ineffective way to run the empire, especially in crisis.

Different factions have broken out among the Aztec nobles. Some believe that a more decentralized government with possibly more than one leader or just shared authority from Moctezuma could be a better system to deal with crises. However, others don't have a problem with the system but just believe Moctezuma as a leader should be replaced. Delegates in this committee must figure out whether to change the governmental system or keep the current system. In addition, if delegates choose to change the system, they will have to find an effective governing system in the midst of many problems facing the empire.

Figure 2: Hernán Cortés meeting Montezuma II



Religious Crisis

Religion has always been an incredibly important component in Aztec society. In Aztec religion, the gods demand sacrifice, and the Aztecs make sure to deliver it through war and human sacrifice in rituals. However, with the arrival of the Spanish also comes the arrival of Christianity. Spanish missionaries denounce Aztec religion as barbaric and are trying to convert much of the Aztec population, offering their own god and belief system.

Simultaneously, many Aztecs believed that the arrival of the Spanish could fulfill an ancient prophecy foretelling the return of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl. These beliefs are creating division and confusion, which is leading to the Aztecs challenging the authority of traditional religious leaders. Ordinary people are questioning whether the gods are challenging them, and many are abandoning religion altogether. Delegates are tasked to decide whether the religious elite should reform their religion or double down on their beliefs.

Questions to Consider

1. Should the empire attempt quarantine, isolate cities, or seek help from the unaffected Spanish?
2. How could the government be structured to best meet the needs of the Aztecs in a time of crisis?
3. Is Moctezuma's leadership helping or hindering the Aztecs in the midst of all that is going on?

4. Can traditional Aztec religion hold together the fearful population of the Aztecs, or is reform necessary?
5. Should foreign religions be accepted or resisted?

Conclusion

With all of these separate issues reaching a climax and facing the Aztecs, delegates in this committee will be tasked to cooperate and find solutions to deal with not only foreign threats, but internal ones too. Delegates will need to choose how to interact with unfamiliar states and the new technologies present on the subcontinent. Additionally, natives must figure out a solution to stop the spread of disease, while also reckoning with the arrival of Christianity. Finally, delegates will have to consider their own allegiances when choosing who to forge alliances with in the committee. Ultimately, the future and survival of Central America is in the hands of a diverse group of Aztecs, Europeans, and other natives who must quickly devise solutions and strategies, lest they risk their own extinction.

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