

## Major Problems in American History Chapter 1 Documents

### Document 4

This document is an Aztec person's account of the Spanish invasion of Tenochtitlán, retold by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. In this account, the Spanish first ruthlessly and without warning obliterate the native people of the Cholula settlement. This is followed by the story of Cortés at Tenochtitlán, which causes great fear among the city's citizens. The city was thrown into turmoil as the Spaniards took over: they executed the king, stole his gold, and killed the men without mercy. This was followed by a Aztec counterattack, which trapped the Spanish inside the king's palace; they fled one night two months later via an aqueduct. After their escape, smallpox infested Tenochtitlán, greatly weakening the city. The new ruler died, along with many of his people; Cortés won over the city with a siege. The city was ransacked, the new king executed, and hundreds of thousands of people were killed. The Spaniards finally left quietly, leaving the city in a deathly silence. Overall, this story was told with a general fright towards the Spanish.

### Document 8

In this document, initial Native American responses to English colonists are described by William Wood. Wood begins by explaining their extreme awe at the superior technology of the English for inventions such as boats, windmills, and plows. He later goes on to describe the lifestyle of the Native Americans, especially their women. Wood describes the longhouses of the Native Americans in great detail, noting their architectural significance and build. He then describes their methods of gathering and preparing food: the cultivation of corn, fishing, and storing food, much of which is done by women. Next, he describes the leisure activities, which include sewing and creating patterns, which is also done by women. The document ends with a description of the interaction between Native American women and English women: the latter being more privileged, English culture becomes highly revered to Native American women. This results in much respect and many gifts from Native American women to the English.

### The Indians' Old World (Salisbury)

Salisbury describes in great detail what he believes should be the proper way that American history is taught in relation to Native American culture and the European colonization. He asserts that although many modern textbooks view the Americas prior to European colonization as a mostly "virgin" land that was largely untouched, this view misses the importance of the great interactions of the complex Native American cultures that thrived in the Americas previously. He describes the great interactions that the Native Americans were involved in that expanded their cultural and social prowess; this continued through the European colonization as trade, which was still a sacred cultural interaction. The Native

Americans had a complex agricultural and social system, with many advanced cities of thousands of people and many houses. Salisbury emphasizes the importance of the 1500s as an era to study, because this is when the greatest amount of interaction between the European colonists and the Native Americans took place — instead of thinking of it simply as a time of European discovery, it was rather a time of great cultural exchange. This period involved the cultural exchange of food and livestock, as well as the biological exchange of pathogens; it was not a simple one-sided encounter, and the Native Americans were no simple bystander in this interaction. Salisbury uses multiple examples of prominent tribes, such as the Apache, the Navajo, the Iroquois, and the Hurons to demonstrate the struggles between the colonizers and the indigenous people. Only after the disease had decimated many of the Native Americans did the sense of superiority largely set in, and the colonies became more independent and disrespectful of the Native Americans.

## Synthesis

### **How would the story of Indian-European contact have differed if Indians had been better able to resist disease?**

The Native Americans would have a much stronger resistance to the Spanish colonization if disease had not been a problem for them. Over three-quarters of the Native American population had been wiped out during the colonization, while the Europeans' population in the Americas steadily grew. As Bernardino had reported in his retelling, it took only 75 days for the Spanish to win over the great city of Tenochtitlán by siege because of the great death and famine in the city; without such a dramatic rate of death by disease, it is very unlikely that they would have fallen so easily. Salisbury too had claimed that while there existed many harmonious trade interactions and close relationships between the colonists and the Native Americans, this was greatly offset by the feeling of superiority the Europeans felt when the Native Americans began dying in flocks. The Native Americans were sophisticated, advanced people; the greatest reason that the Europeans were able to wipe out many of the Native Americans was because of their natural “ecological advantage” from their immunity to so many deadly diseases. If not for the lack of immunity to disease, Native American culture would still probably be very prevalent in today's culture, because the colonists would not have been able to wipe it out so entirely; the culture of entire nations lost by annihilation through disease may be preserved to today. As a result, our American identity would likely be more diverse, with many more people connecting themselves to Native American heritage and practicing non-European rituals.

### **In what ways did Europeans of different nationalities treat Indians?**

Depending on their needs, different European colonial powers treated the Native Americans differently. The Spanish, for example, focused their colonization on the basis of “gold, glory, God” — not the preservation of the native people. As a result, they treated the

Native Americans very inhumanely: for gold, they raided and ransacked, as was evident in Bernardino's account of Tenochtitlán. At the beginning of his retelling, he reveals that sometimes they did it so ruthlessly and suddenly, upon unsuspecting soldiers and civilians alike. Similarly, for glory, they took control over these great empires. For God, they attempted to convert Native Americans to Christianity — however, as Salisbury had mentioned, this was a futile effort that often resulted in hatred between the Spanish and the Native American tribes, such as with the Pueblo Revolt (which also involved the Navajo and Apache tribes) that ended with great Native American casualties. In terms of this Spanish interaction, it generally was simply a power play, a manifestation of politics and power: the Spanish tried to impose their beliefs and control on the people; when they didn't listen, they were penalized.

The French and the Dutch were involved with the Native Americans more focused around an economic goal. As a result, because they were trading partners, they supported their Native American partners: the Dutch the Iroquois, and the French the Hurons. Ultimately, this led to war between the opposing French and Iroquois, however. This was a system of economic exchange that resulted in better treatment of the Native Americans.

The English had varied interactions with the Native Americans. As Salisbury had mentioned, sometimes Native Americans had partnered with the English to help remove other Native Americans (as was the case with the Iroquois promising the English that they would help remove other tribes that would be interfering with colonization). This began as a system of economic exchange stemming from the Dutch trade, but turned into a hostility as people began to migrate west. Ultimately, migration and settlement (the western migration) and politics and power (less-dependent colonists looking to rid of the Native Americans) led to negative treatment of the Native Americans by the English.

### **What differences did Europeans focus upon between themselves and Indians?**

The Europeans liked to think of themselves as superior to the Native Americans. William Wood captures this sentiment in his writing: he states that the men are in awe at the technology of the Europeans, at inventions such as the ship, the windmill, even the plow. This difference in technology gave Europeans an advantage over the Native Americans. Technology of war was also a point of contrast: the Europeans often won in combat, further inflating their confidence over the Native Americans.

Similarly, the Europeans also liked to think of themselves as culturally superior to the Native Americans. Salisbury points out numerous conflicts between the Spanish and the Native Americans because of cultural imposition; that is, they believed that their religion (Christianity) was greater than the Native American religion. Wood also wrote about how the Native American women and the Europeans alike believed that European culture was more civilized and advanced because of the greater respect for women. Overall, it is these cultural and societal differences — technology, religion, beliefs — that the Spaniards set themselves apart with.

### **What role did violence play in creating the new world?**

Violence greatly accelerated the colonization by asserting the superiority of European strength. The differences between the Old World and New World demographics were too different, so that conflict was inevitable; in the end, violence precipitated it. Bernardino recalls that the two-thirds of the Spanish escaping Tenochtitlán after being trapped were killed on their escape because they were so covered in gold, and he also tells about the useless murdering of hundreds of thousands of Native Americans from the cities — this shows the intense greed of the conquerors, their burning passion to vanquish the Native Americans and steal all their wealth. Instead of diplomacy, which would result in too little to themselves, colonists often settled on violence, in which they had the advantage of weaponry and tactic. Like the disease, violence could be used as a power play over the Native Americans because the Europeans were much more sure to win, and it provided a quick alternative to logical negotiation.

This violence also created a nature of fear and rebellion that is so inherent in nature today. Our entire culture and society is based off the idea; it is part of our American identity. There is the sense of indignance that is shown by the Aztec memory and embedded in Native American culture; a fear to be overthrown, to be annihilated. This probably contributed to the strong sense of rebellion and patriotism during the Revolutionary War, and may be why violence is still so prevalent today. The United States is based on violent conflict.

### **Was this period defined by conquest of one group over another or by contact among many groups?**

It is the latter: contact among many groups. Even before the arrival of the Europeans, this was evident by the complex systems of exchange between many different tribes; this allowed for the complex housing and agricultural systems that Salisbury describes. During the conquest, the period was defined by the many interactions of the Columbian Exchange; as the name implies, it was an *exchange*, a two-sided interaction in which the Native Americans were not simply the ones waiting to be conquered. Instead, trade existed, benefitting both sides. Economics played a huge role in facilitating the mutual influences the Native Americans had on the Europeans, and vice versa. Neither is it correct to say that the time period was defined by the conquest of only a single group over another; there existed many different colonial nations vying for power (i.e., the Dutch, the Swedish, the French, the English, and the Spanish) and many more indigenous nations. And while there was a conquest of the Native Americans in the end, many Native American groups, such as the powerful Iroquois, persisted sovereignly while maintaining relations with the Europeans. It is more accurate to say the time period was defined by culture shocks — and later, cultural assimilation — than simply by conquest: it was the exchange of people, of differing values that defined this period of colonization.