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Brown Brothers

MONTEZUMA: THE LAST GREAT SPEAKER OF THE AZTECS

- 1467 Born
- 1480 Succession of Montezuma's uncle Tizoc as Great Speaker
- 1480-84 Montezuma trained as priest and warrior
- 1485 Succession of another uncle, the war leader Axayacatl
- 1497 Appointed commander of the Aztec army
- 1502 Elected Great Speaker
- 1519 First meeting with Cortés
- 1520 Died

The Spaniards who flocked to the New World in the wake of Columbus's discoveries were after not only land but the gold that was persistently rumored to be had there in such abundance. Among the seekers was an impoverished *hidalgo*¹ named Hernán Cortés. He made himself useful to Don Diego Velásquez, the Deputy Admiral of the Islands and Governor of Cuba, and was entrusted with an expedition to the mainland of Mexico. With only a bare handful of men and horses and a few cannon and shotguns, this man, who would shortly become the greatest of the *conquistadores*, set out on an incredible journey of conquest. He won the support of native people near the coast, including an invaluable woman, Doña Marina, who became his interpreter and mistress. And he began to hear of the great and wealthy empire of the Aztecs, the Mexica. He allied himself with the Tlaxcalans, another native people, who were bitter enemies of the

¹A *hidalgo* was a Spanish nobleman of secondary rank, below that of a grandee.—
ED.

Aztecs, and with some Tlaxcalan support and his own small force Cortés pressed inland toward the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, the later site of Mexico City, entering the city on November 8, 1519. He was met by a large delegation of high officials sent out by the Emperor Moctezuma—or Montezuma, as he was more commonly called by the Spaniards—and at last by the emperor himself.

What sort of man was Montezuma, and what sort of state and culture did he represent? He was in his early fifties. He had been Great Speaker, the ruler of the Aztec Empire, for nearly twenty years, having been elected to succeed his uncle as Great Speaker in 1502. Long before that he had been a powerful figure in the ruling Mexican nobility. As he is characterized by one of his modern biographers, "In his own world Montezuma was considered a wise man and one with prophetic gifts which were of great value to his nation. One may say that he was regarded as the ideal of a noble ruler by his own people and that in their fear and reverence for the Great Speaker there was mingled not a little love."²

His state comprised the Aztec Empire, which had been put together over the past two centuries by the conquests of his aggressive, warlike people. The Aztecs had subjugated the many indigenous peoples of central Mexico in a closely controlled imperial state that claimed between a million and a million and a half people, ruled from the capital city of Tenochtitlan. Tenochtitlan itself had some 400,000 people and spread out from its central temple, with its towering twin pyramids and spacious temple compound, to cover more than five square miles. It included religious structures, government buildings, and residences of the nobility, all built of stone and coated in glistening white and painted stucco, and the more modest homes of craftsmen and artisans. It had an enormous market where all the products of Meso-America were available for purchase. It was supplied with fresh water by aqueducts from Chapultepec and surrounded by the waters of Lake Texcoco, entered by an elaborate system of elevated causeways that also acted as dikes and breakwaters.

But the Aztec state was also a religious community. The Aztecs worshipped many gods, but the all-powerful "Lord of the World" was the sun god Huitzilopochtli, the Blue Hummingbird. It was mainly this god whose worship accounted for the most arresting feature of Aztec religion—mass human sacrifice and cannibalism. The practice of human sacrifice had grown over recent years until by the time of Montezuma thousands of persons were sacrificed every year—their chests slashed open by priests in ceremonies that took place atop the temple pyramids, their blood and still-beating hearts consecrated to

the god, and their flesh cooked and eaten by the priests and the people. One of the main motives of Aztec wars was to capture prisoners to serve as sacrifices; they were called, ironically, "flower wars." Montezuma, as Great Speaker, was the chief priest of Huitzilopochtli, the servant of the god on behalf of his subjects.

But conquest tradition claimed that Montezuma was also devoted to the god Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, the special deity of an earlier warrior people, the Toltecs, to whom the Aztec nobility traced their own ancestry. This tradition also recounted how Quetzalcoatl had returned to find his people so contented with their way of life and so intermingled with the native inhabitants that they refused to follow him. So he returned to the East once more, whence he had come. But the Aztecs were convinced that he would come again to reclaim their loyalty or that he would send someone in his stead.

On that November day of 1519 the stage was set for the most important confrontation in the entire story of the Spanish conquest of the New World.

²C. A. Burland, *Montezuma, Lord of the Aztecs* (New York: Putnam, 1973), p. 144.

The Second Letter to Emperor Charles V

HERNAN CORTES

There are several contemporary Spanish accounts of the first meeting and subsequent relations between Cortés and Montezuma. The most interesting and authoritative is that of Cortés himself, in the form of one of several detailed dispatch letters that he sent to Spain, to the Emperor Charles V, in whose name he claimed his conquests. The Second Letter, describing his dealings with Montezuma, was written less than a year after the events, and was dated October 30, 1520.

When we had passed this bridge Muteczuma himself came out to meet us with some two hundred nobles, all barefoot and dressed in some kind of uniform also very rich, in fact more so than the others. They came forward in two long lines keeping close to the walls of the street, which is very broad and fine and so straight that one can see from one end of it to the other, though it is some two-thirds of a league in length and lined on both sides with very beautiful, large houses, both private dwellings and temples. Muteczuma himself was borne along in the middle of the street with two lords one on his right hand and one on his left, being respectively the chief whom I described as coming out to meet me in a litter and the other, Muteczuma's brother, ruler of Iztapalapa, from which only that day we had set out. All three were dressed in similar fashion except that Muteczuma wore shoes whereas the others were barefoot. The two lords bore him along each by an arm, and as he drew near I dismounted and advanced alone to embrace, but the two lords prevented me from touching him, and they themselves made me the same obeisance as did their comrades, kissing the earth: which done, he commanded his brother who accompanied him to stay with me and take me by the arm, while he with the other lord went on a little way in front. After he had spoken to me all the other lords who were in the two long lines came up likewise in order one after the other, and then re-formed in line again. And while speaking to Muteczuma I took off a necklace of pearls and crystals which I was

wearing and threw it round his neck; whereupon having proceeded some little way up the street a servant of his came back to me with two necklaces wrapped up in a napkin, made from the shells of sea snails, which are much prized by them; and from each necklace hung eight prawns fashioned very beautifully in gold some six inches in length. The messenger who brought them put them round my neck and we then continued up the street in the manner described until we came to a large and very handsome house which Muteczuma had prepared for our lodging. There he took me by the hand and led me to a large room opposite the patio by which we had entered, and seating me on a dais very richly worked, for it was intended for royal use, he bade me await him there, and took his departure. After a short time, when all my company had found lodging, he returned with many various ornaments of gold, silver and featherwork, and some five or six thousand cotton clothes, richly dyed and embroidered in various ways, and having made me a present of them he seated himself on another low bench which was placed next to mine, and addressed me in this manner:

"Long time have we been informed by the writings of our ancestors that neither myself nor any of those who inhabit this land are natives of it, but rather strangers who have come to it from foreign parts. We likewise know that from those parts our nation was led by a certain lord (to whom all were subject), and who then went back to his native land, where he remained so long delaying his return that at his coming those whom he had left had married the women of the land and had many children by them and had built themselves cities in which they lived, so that they would in no wise return to their own land nor acknowledge him as lord; upon which he left them. And we have always believed that among his descendants one would surely come to subject this land and us as rightful vassals. Now seeing the regions from which you say you come, which is from where the sun rises, and the news you tell of this great king and ruler who sent you hither, we believe and hold it certain that he is our natural lord: especially in that you say he has long had knowledge of us.³ Wherefore be certain that we will obey you and hold you as lord in place of that great lord of whom you speak, in which service there shall be neither slackness nor deceit: and throughout all the land, that is to say all that I rule, you may command anything you desire, and it shall be obeyed and done, and all that we have is at your will and pleasure. And since you are in your own land and house, rejoice and take your leisure from the fatigues of your journey and the battles

³This "knowledge" on the part of the Spanish emperor was, of course, simply made up by Cortés.—ED.

you have fought; for I am well informed of all those that you have been forced to engage in on your way here from Potonchan, as also that the natives of Cempoal and Tlascala have told you many evil things of me; but believe no more than what you see with your own eyes, and especially not words from the lips of those who are my enemies, who were formerly my vassals and on your coming rebelled against me and said these things in order to find favour with you: I am aware, moreover, that they have told you that the walls of my houses were of gold as was the matting on my floors and other household articles, even that I was a god and claimed to be so, and other like matters. As for the houses, you see that they are of wood, stones and earth." Upon this he lifted his clothes showing me his body, and said: "and you see that I am of flesh and blood like yourself and everyone else, mortal and tangible."

Grasping with his hands his arms and other parts of his body, he continued: "You see plainly how they have lied. True I have a few articles of gold which have remained to me from my forefathers, and all that I have is yours at any time that you may desire it. I am now going to my palace where I live. Here you will be provided with all things necessary for you and your men, and let nothing be done amiss seeing that you are in your own house and land."

I replied to all that he said, satisfying him in those things which seemed expedient, especially in having him believe that your Majesty was he whom they had long expected, and with that he bade farewell. On his departure we were very well regaled with great store of chickens, bread, fruit, and other necessities, particularly household ones. And in this wise I continued six days very well provided with all that was necessary and visited by many of the principal men of the city. . . .

Having passed six days, then, in the great city of Tenochtitlan, invincible Prince, and having seen something of its marvels, though little in comparison with what there was to be seen and examined, I considered it essential both from my observation of the city and the rest of the land that its ruler should be in my power and no longer entirely free; to the end that he might in nowise change his will and intent to serve your Majesty, more especially as we Spaniards are somewhat intolerant and stiff-necked, and should he get across with us he would be powerful enough to do us great damage, even to blot out all memory of us in the land; and in the second place, could I once get him in my power all the other provinces subject to him would come more promptly to the knowledge and service of your Majesty, as indeed afterwards happened. I decided to capture him and place him in the lodging where I was, which was extremely strong. . . .

Cortés's stratagem was to accuse Montezuma of an attack on his men that had occurred earlier, along the way, at the hands of some of his subject chiefs. Montezuma immediately summoned those chiefs to account for themselves, but in the meantime, Cortés insisted that Montezuma accompany him to the quarters provided for him, under house arrest. Amazingly, Montezuma agreed! A few days later the guilty chiefs were taken and executed.

Mutezuma proclaimed an assembly of all the chiefs of the neighbouring towns and districts; and on their coming together he sent for me to mount to the platform where he already was and proceeded to address them in this manner: "Brothers and friends, you know well that for many years you, your fathers and your grandfathers have been subjects and vassals to me and to my forefathers, and have ever been well treated and held in due esteem both by them and me, as likewise you yourselves have done what it behoves good and loyal vassals to do for their lords; moreover I believe you will recollect hearing from your ancestors that we are not natives of this land, but that they came to it from another land far off, being led hither by a powerful lord whose vassals they all were; after many years he returned to find our forefathers already settled in the land married to native wives and with many children by them in such wise that they never wished to go back with him nor acknowledge him as lord of the land, and upon this he returned saying that he would come again himself or send another with such power as to force them to re-enter his service. And you know well that we have always looked to this and from what the captain has told us of the king and lord who sent him hither, and the direction from which he came I hold it certain as ye also must hold it, that he is the lord whom we have looked to, especially in that he declares he already had knowledge of us in his own land. Therefore while our ancestors did not that which was due to their lord, let us not so offend now, but rather give praise to the gods that in our times that which was long expected is come to pass. And I earnestly beg of you, since all that I have said is notorious to everyone of you, that as you have up till now obeyed and held me as your sovereign lord, so from henceforth you will obey and hold this great king as your natural lord, for such he is, and in particular this captain in his place: and all those tributes and services which up to this time you have paid to me, do you now pay to him, for I also hold myself bound to do him service in all that he shall require me: and over and above doing that which is right and necessary you will be doing me great pleasure."

All this he spoke to them weeping, with such sighs and tears as no

man ever wept more, and likewise all those chieftains who heard him wept so that for a long space of time they could make no reply. And I can assure your Majesty that there was not one among the Spaniards who on hearing this speech was not filled with compassion. After some time when their tears were somewhat dried they replied that they held him as their lord and had promised to do whatever he should bid them, and hence that for that reason and the one he had given them they were content to do what he said, and from that time offered themselves as vassals to your royal Majesty, promising severally and collectively to carry out whatever should be required of them in your Majesty's royal name as loyal and obedient vassals, and duly to render him all such tributes and services as were formerly rendered to Muteczuma, with all other things whatsoever that may be commanded them in your Majesty's name. All this took place in the presence of the public notary and was duly drawn up by him in legal form and witnessed in the presence of many Spaniards. . . .

From this point, however, the situation began to deteriorate. The Spaniards had discovered vast treasures of gold in the city. There was an incident in which they attacked the Aztecs during a religious festival and killed a large number of priests and nobles. The Aztec nobility, now led by Montezuma's brother, turned against the Spaniards and besieged them in their quarters.

Muteczuma, who was still a prisoner together with his son and many other nobles who had been taken on our first entering the city, requested to be taken out on to the flat roof of the fortress, where he would speak to the leader of the people and make them stop fighting. I ordered him to be brought forth and as he mounted a breastwork that extended beyond the fortress, wishing to speak to the people who were fighting there, a stone from one of their slings struck him on the head so severely that he died three days later: when this happened I ordered two of the other Indian prisoners to take out his dead body on their shields to the people, and I know not what became of it; save only this that the fighting did not cease but rather increased in intensity every day.

Cortés and his men at this point were forced to withdraw from the city with many casualties, but he recovered and, against impossible odds, defeated the Aztec army sent after him. After enlisting more Tlaxcalan allies, he returned and besieged the city of Tenochtitlan,

which finally surrendered on August 13, 1521. There was never again to be serious native resistance to Spanish rule.

The Aztec Account

TEXTS FROM THE *CODEX FLORENTINO*

The incredible events of the Spanish conquest, including the incredible behavior of Montezuma, are described in the surviving Aztec documents as well as in Spanish sources, and in suspiciously similar terms. The most comprehensive Aztec account is that contained in the so-called *Codex Florentino*. It was written in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, by native students in the school founded by the Franciscan missionary Bernardino de Sahagún. He had worked out a way of writing Nahuatl in Latin characters with Spanish sound values and taught the method to his native pupils. They used it to record much of their Aztec culture and to describe historical events, such as the conquest. For their account they depended on the recollections of aged natives who had witnessed the events, on traditional songs and orations transmitted orally, and on contemporary Spanish sources. The first version of the account was done in about 1555 but does not survive. Brother Bernardino made a résumé of it in Spanish and later, about 1585, reconstructed the original text in Nahuatl.

Our excerpt begins after the first reports of the Spaniards' arrival have reached Montezuma. He has sent messengers to them and anxiously awaits their return.

While the messengers were away, Motecuhzoma could neither sleep nor eat, and no one could speak with him. He thought that everything he did was in vain, and he sighed almost every moment. He was lost in despair, in the deepest gloom and sorrow. Nothing could comfort him, nothing could calm him, nothing could give him any pleasure.

He said: "What will happen to us? Who will outlive it? Ah, in other times I was contented, but now I have death in my heart! My heart burns and suffers, as if it were drowned in spices . . . ! But will our lord come here?"

Then he gave orders to the watchmen, to the men who guarded the palace: "Tell me, even if I am sleeping: 'The messengers have come back from the sea.'" But when they went to tell him, he immediately

said: "They are not to report to me here. I will receive them in the House of the Serpent. Tell them to go there." And he gave this order: "Two captives are to be painted with chalk."

The messengers went to the House of the Serpent, and Motecuhzoma arrived. The two captives were then sacrificed before his eyes: their breasts were torn open, and the messengers were sprinkled with their blood. This was done because the messengers had completed a difficult mission: they had seen the gods, their eyes had looked on their faces. They had even conversed with the gods!

When the sacrifice was finished, the messengers reported to the king. They told him how they had made the journey, and what they had seen, and what food the strangers ate. Motecuhzoma was astonished and terrified by their report, and the description of the strangers' food astonished him above all else.

He was also terrified to learn how the cannon roared, how its noise resounded, how it caused one to faint and grow deaf. The messengers told him: "A thing like a ball of stone comes out of its entrails: it comes out shooting sparks and raining fire. The smoke that comes out with it has a pestilent odor, like that of rotten mud. This odor penetrates even to the brain and causes the greatest discomfort. If the cannon is aimed against a mountain, the mountain splits and cracks open. If it is aimed against a tree, it shatters the tree into splinters. This is a most unnatural sight, as if the tree had exploded from within."

The messengers also said: "Their trappings and arms are all made of iron. They dress in iron and wear iron casques on their heads. Their swords are iron; their bows are iron; their shields are iron; their spears are iron. Their deer carry them on their backs wherever they wish to go. These deer, our lord, are as tall as the roof of a house.

"The strangers' bodies are completely covered, so that only their faces can be seen. Their skin is white, as if it were made of lime. They have yellow hair, though some of them have black. Their beards are long and yellow, and their moustaches are also yellow. Their hair is curly, with very fine strands. . . ."

When Motecuhzoma heard this report, he was filled with terror. It was as if his heart had fainted, as if it had shriveled. It was as if he were conquered by despair. . . . Motecuhzoma listened to their report and then bowed his head without speaking a word. For a long time he remained thus, with his head bent down. And when he spoke at last, it was only to say: "What help is there now, my friends? Is there a mountain for us to climb? Should we run away? We are Mexicanos: would this bring any glory to the Mexican nation?"

"Pity the old men, and the old women, and the innocent little children. How can they save themselves? But there is no help. What can we do? Is there nothing left us?"

"We will be judged and punished. And however it may be, and whenever it may be, we can do nothing but wait." . . .

The Spaniards arrived in Xoloco, near the entrance to Tenochtitlan. That was the end of the march, for they had reached their goal.

Motecuhzoma now arrayed himself in his finery, preparing to go out to meet them. The other great princes also adorned their persons, as did the nobles and their chieftains and knights. They all went out together to meet the strangers. . . .

Thus Motecuhzoma went out to meet them, there in Huitzillan. He presented many gifts to the Captain and his commanders, those who had come to make war. He showered gifts upon them and hung flowers around their necks; he gave them necklaces of flowers and bands of flowers to adorn their breasts; he set garlands of flowers upon their heads. Then he hung the gold necklaces around their necks and gave them presents of every sort as gifts of welcome.

When Motecuhzoma had given necklaces to each one, Cortes asked him: "Are you Motecuhzoma? Are you the king? Is it true that you are the king Motecuhzoma?"

And the king said: "Yes, I am Motecuhzoma." Then he stood up to welcome Cortes; he came forward, bowed his head low and addressed him in these words: "Our lord, you are weary. The journey has tired you, but now you have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city, Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy.

"The kings who have gone before, your representatives, guarded it and preserved it for your coming. The kings Itzcoatl, Motecuhzoma the Elder, Axayacatl, Tizoc and Ahuitzol ruled for you in the City of Mexico. The people were protected by their swords and sheltered by their shields.

"Do the kings know the destiny of those they left behind, their posterity? If only they are watching! If only they can see what I see!

"No, it is not a dream. I am not walking in my sleep. I am not seeing you in my dreams. . . . I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face! I was in agony for five days, for ten days, with my eyes fixed on the Region of the Mystery. And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again.

"This was foretold by the kings who governed your city, and now it has taken place. You have come back to us; you have come down from the sky. Rest now, and take possession of your royal houses. Welcome to your land, my lords!"

When Motecuhzoma had finished, La Malinche⁴ translated his address into Spanish so that the Captain could understand it. Cortes

⁴Another name for Cortés's translator, Doña Marina.—ED.

replied in his strange and savage tongue, speaking first to La Malinche: "Tell Motecuhzoma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear. We have wanted to see him for a long time, and now we have seen his face and heard his words. Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented."

Then he said to Motecuhzoma: "We have come to your house in Mexico as friends. There is nothing to fear."

La Malinche translated this speech and the Spaniards grasped Motecuhzoma's hands and patted his back to show their affection for him. . . .

When the Spaniards entered the Royal House, they placed Motecuhzoma under guard and kept him under their vigilance. . . .

Then the Spaniards fired one of their cannons, and this caused great confusion in the city. The people scattered in every direction; they fled without rhyme or reason; they ran off as if they were being pursued. It was as if they had eaten the mushrooms that confuse the mind, or had seen some dreadful apparition. They were all overcome by terror, as if their hearts had fainted. And when night fell, the panic spread through the city and their fears would not let them sleep. . . .

When the Spaniards were installed in the palace, they asked Motecuhzoma about the city's resources and reserves and about the warriors' ensigns and shields. They questioned him closely and then demanded gold.

Motecuhzoma guided them to it. They surrounded him and crowded close with their weapons. He walked in the center, while they formed a circle around him.

When they arrived at the treasure house called Teucalco, the riches of gold and feathers were brought out to them: ornaments made of quetzal feathers, richly worked shields, disks of gold, the necklaces of the idols, gold nose plugs, gold greaves and bracelets and crowns.

The Spaniards immediately stripped the feathers from the gold shields and ensigns. They gathered all the gold into a great mound and set fire to everything else, regardless of its value. Then they melted down the gold into ingots. As for the precious green stones, they took only the best of them; the rest were snatched up by the Tlaxcaltecas. The Spaniards searched through the whole treasure house, questioning and quarreling, and seized every object they thought was beautiful. . . .

The Aztec sources, like the Spanish, then tell of the massacre of the Aztec priests and nobles by the Spaniards—but in greater detail.

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. They all carried their spears and shields.

Then the battle began. The Aztecs attacked with javelins and arrows, even with the light spears that are used for hunting birds. They hurled their javelins with all their strength, and the cloud of missiles spread out over the Spaniards like a yellow cloak.

The Spaniards immediately took refuge in the palace. They began to shoot at the Mexicans with their iron arrows and to fire their cannons and arquebuses. And they shackled Motecuhzoma in chains. . . .

On the third day, Motecuhzoma climbed onto the rooftop and tried to admonish his people, but they cursed him and shouted that he was a coward and a traitor to his country. They even threatened him with their weapons. It is said that an Indian killed him with a stone from his sling, but the palace servants declared that the Spaniards put him to death by stabbing him in the abdomen with their swords.

On the seventh day, the Spaniards abandoned the city along with the Tlaxcaltecas, the Huexotzincas and their other allies. They fled down the causeway that leads out to Tlacopan. But before they left, they murdered King Cacama of Tezcoco, his three sisters and two of his brothers.

A New Explanation

J. H. ELLIOTT AND ANTHONY PAGDEN

In the whole account of the conquest of Mexico, nothing is more puzzling than the behavior of Montezuma. He was in the prime of life, in secure and undisputed control of an aggressive, warlike empire that could field hundreds of thousands of soldiers on his order alone. He had a considerable reputation for military leadership himself. Yet he was virtually paralyzed by the course of events.

The explanation that is presented both in the Spanish and the Aztec sources—as we have seen—is that Montezuma profoundly believed that Cortés was the agent of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl and

that Cortés acted on behalf of the god, incarnate in the person of his sovereign, Charles V.

But was this the case? In the critical notes to the latest and best edition of the Cortés letters, the editor, Anthony Pagden, and the author of the introduction, J. H. Elliott, offer an alternative explanation. Elliott argues that Cortés's letters were not only reports on the events of the conquest but carefully crafted political apologies as well. He notes, quite correctly, that Cortés was operating without any real official authorization. He had been sent by Don Diego Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba, to investigate the loss of a small exploration fleet and to rescue any Spaniards being held captive in Yucatan. He was also authorized to explore and trade—but he had no permission to colonize. Yet he had founded the town-settlement of Vera Cruz, in large part so that he could be authorized by the town government (which was himself) to undertake an expedition to the interior. He had set out on that expedition on the basis of this contrived and specious authority.

Cortés had therefore defied his own immediate superior, Velázquez, and had potentially antagonized Velázquez's powerful friends at Court. He knew well enough the grave risks he was running. But to Cortés and his friends . . . the risks paled before the attractions of the anticipated prize. Nothing could more quickly obliterate the stigma of treachery and rebellion than a brilliant military success and the acquisition of fabulous riches. If new peoples were won for the Faith, and rich new lands won for the Crown, there was reason to hope that the original defiance of Velázquez would be regarded as no more than a peccadillo, and that Velázquez's friends and protectors would be silenced by a *fait accompli*. . . .

Success in arms, and resort to the highest authority of all, that of the king himself—these were the aims of Cortés and his fellow conspirators as they prepared in April, 1519, to compound their defiance of Velázquez by a landing which would mark the real beginning of their attempt to conquer an empire. They were concerned, like all conquistadors, with fame, riches and honor. But behind the willful defiance of the governor of Cuba there existed, at least in Cortés's mind, a philosophy of conquest and colonization which made his action something more than an attempt at self-aggrandizement at the expense of Velázquez. He entertained, like so many Castilians of his generation, an exalted view of the royal service, and of Castile's divinely appointed mission. Both the divine and the royal favor would shine on those who cast down idols, extirpated pagan superstitions, and won new lands and peoples for God and Castile. . . .

But what seemed plausible enough in Mexico was bound to seem highly implausible in Cuba and at the Spanish Court. Clearly it was essential to win support in Spain for an action which Fonseca⁵ and his friends would certainly represent to the king as an act of open rebellion. . . .

Everything now depended on the successful presentation of his case at Court, where the Fonseca group would certainly do all in its power to destroy him. If possible, Charles and his advisers must be reached and won over before they had time to learn from Velázquez himself of Cortés's act of rebellion. . . .

The first letter from Mexico, then, was essentially a political document, speaking for Cortés in the name of his army, and designed to appeal directly to the Crown over the heads of Velázquez and his friends in the Council of the Indies. Cortés was now involved in a desperate race against time. Montejo and Puertocarrero⁶ left for Spain on July 26, 1519, with their bundle of letters and the gold; and unless, or until, they could persuade Charles to sanction retrospectively the behavior of Cortés and his men, Cortés was technically a traitor, liable to arrest and persecution at the hands of an irate governor of Cuba, fully empowered to act in the royal name. The danger was acute, and the blow could fall at any time, perhaps even from within Mexico itself. For there was still a strong group of Velázquez partisans in the expedition, and these men would do all they could to sabotage Cortés's plans. But Cortés, who had his spies posted, was well aware of the dangers. The friends of the governor of Cuba appear to have been plotting to send him warning of the mission of Montejo and Puertocarrero, so that he could intercept their ship. The plot was discovered, the conspirators arrested, and two of them, Juan Escudero and Diego Cermeño, put to death. . . . As long as Cortés could command the loyalties of his army—and this would ultimately depend on his ability to capture and distribute the fabulous riches of Motecuçoma's empire—he was now reasonably safe from subversion within the ranks. . . .

Velázquez began to organize an army to be sent to Mexico against Cortés. . . . At a time when a smallpox epidemic was raging in Cuba, Velázquez felt unable to lead his army in person, and handed over the command to one of his more reliable but less intelligent friends, Pánfilo de Narváez. The army, twice the size of that of Cortés, set sail from Cuba on March 5, 1520. . . . During the autumn and winter of 1519, therefore, at the time when Cortés was securing the submission

⁵Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, Bishop of Burgos, was Velázquez's relative and patron at the Spanish court and the royal councillor principally responsible for the affairs of the Indies during the previous reign.—Ed.

⁶Cortés's agents.—Ed.

of Motecuçoma and had established himself precariously in Tenochtitlan, he was faced with the prospect of a military confrontation with his immediate superior, the governor of Cuba. . . .

The outcome was likely to be determined on the battlefield, in an internecine struggle of Spaniard against Spaniard, which could well jeopardize and even destroy Cortés's uncertain hold over the Aztec empire. But in the Spanish monarchy of the sixteenth century a military solution could never be final. Legality was paramount, and the key to legality lay with the king.

Everything therefore turned on the success of Montejo and Puertocarrero in Spain. They duly reached Seville at the beginning of November, 1519, only to find their country on the verge of revolt. Charles had been elected Holy Roman Emperor on June 28. Once elected, his immediate aim was to extract the largest possible subsidies from the Cortes⁷ of the various Spanish kingdoms, and then to leave for Germany. When the procuradores⁸ arrived in Seville, the emperor was still in Barcelona, heavily preoccupied with plans for his departure; and the Castilian cities were beginning to voice their dissatisfaction at the prospect of heavy new fiscal demands and an absentee king.

At this particular moment the chances of winning the emperor's support for a still-unknown adventurer on the other side of the world hardly looked very promising. . . . From Barcelona they [Montejo and Puertocarrero] moved across Spain in the tracks of the emperor, finally catching up with him at Tordesillas, near Valladolid, early in March. Here, seven months after leaving Vera Cruz, they could at last petition the emperor in person to confirm Cortés in his position as captain general and *justicia mayor*. . . .

Meanwhile, in Mexico, Cortés had seized the initiative, divided his forces, and moved to intercept Narváez's army. This was his situation at the time of the massacre of the Aztec lords at the religious festival. He defeated Narváez, conscripted the bulk of Narváez's men to his own cause, and returned to Tenochtitlan.

Narváez's defeat left the governor of Cuba a ruined and broken man. Cortés had defeated Velázquez—geographically his nearest enemy—but he was still without news from the Spanish Court. Moreover, his

⁷The *Cortes* were the legislative bodies of the Spanish kingdoms.—Ed.

⁸The *procuradores* were the "agents" whom Cortés had sent from Mexico to the Spanish court.—Ed.

march to the coast to defeat Narváez had fatally weakened the Spanish position in Tenochtitlan. When Cortés got back to the capital on June 25 it was already too late. The behavior of Alvarado and his men in Tenochtitlan during Cortés's absence had precipitated an Indian uprising, and neither Cortés's troops, nor the diminished authority of Motecuçoma, proved sufficient to quell the revolt. Motecuçoma, rejected by his own subjects, died his strange death on June 30. During the course of the same night, the *noche triste*, the Spaniards made their famous retreat from Tenochtitlan. Cortés might have defeated the governor of Cuba, but he had also lost the empire he had promised to Charles.

It was during the autumn months of 1520, while Cortés was preparing for the siege and reconquest of Tenochtitlan, that he wrote the Second Letter. This letter, like its predecessor from Vera Cruz, is both more and less than a straightforward narrative of events, for it, too, has an essentially political purpose. Cortés, when writing it, was influenced by three major considerations. In the first place, he still did not know what decision, if any, had been reached in Spain on his plea for retrospective authorization of his unconventional proceedings. In the second place, he had by now heard the news of Charles's election to the imperial throne. Finally, he had won a new empire for Charles and had proceeded to lose it. His letter, therefore, had to be so angled as to suggest that, at the most, he had suffered no more than a temporary setback . . . and that he would soon be in a position to render the most signal new services to a king who had now become the mightiest monarch in the world.

With these considerations in mind, Cortés carefully contrived his letter to convey a predominantly "imperial" theme. Its opening paragraph contained a graceful allusion to Charles's new empire in Germany, which was skillfully coupled with a reference to a second empire across the Atlantic, to which he could claim an equal title. This reference set the tone for the document as a whole. The fact that Cortés was no longer at this moment the effective master of the Mexican empire was no doubt inconvenient, but could be played down as far as possible. For the thesis of the letter was that Charles was already the *legal* emperor of this great new empire, and that Cortés would soon recover for him what was rightfully his.

The entire story of the march to Tenochtitlan and the imprisonment of Motecuçoma was related in such a way as to support this general thesis. Motecuçoma, by his speeches and his actions, was portrayed as a man who voluntarily recognized the sovereignty of Charles V, and voluntarily surrendered his empire into his hands. Whether Motecuçoma did indeed speak anything like the words which Cortés attributes to him will probably never be known for

certain. Some passages in his two speeches contain so many Christian overtones as to be unbelievable coming from a pagan Aztec. Others, and in particular the identification of the Spaniards with the former rulers of Mexico wrongly banished from their land, may be an ingenious fabrication by Cortés, or may conceivably reflect certain beliefs and legends, which Motecuçoma himself may or may not have accepted. Whatever its origins, the story of the expected return of lords from the east was essential to Cortés's grand design, for it enabled him to allege and explain a "voluntary" submission of Motecuçoma, and the "legal" transfer of his empire—an empire far removed from the jurisdiction of the Audiencia of Santo Domingo and from the Caribbean world of Diego Colón⁹ and Velázquez—to its rightful ruler, Charles V.

Motecuçoma's death at the hands of his own subjects left Charles the undisputed master of the field. It was unfortunate that the Mexicans were now in open rebellion—a situation which could only be ascribed to the nefarious activities of the governor of Cuba, acting through his agent Pánfilo de Narváez. But although Narváez's invasion had nearly brought disaster, the tide had now been turned, because God was on the emperor's side. With divine help, and through the agency of that most loyal of lieutenants, Hernán Cortés, the land would soon be recovered; and what better name could be bestowed upon it than that of New Spain?

Anthony Pagden, the editor of the text, turns more specifically to the inexplicable behavior of Montezuma. He begins with the speech that Montezuma made as soon as Cortés and his men had been settled in their quarters in Tenochtitlan.

Both this speech and the one that follows . . . would seem to be apocryphal. Motecuçoma could never have held the views with which Cortés accredits him. Eulalia Guzmán (*Relaciones de Hernán Cortés*, I: 279 ff.) has pointed out the Biblical tone of both these passages and how their phraseology reflects the language of the *Siete Partidas*.¹⁰ Cortés is casting Motecuçoma into the role of a sixteenth-century Spaniard welcoming his "natural lord," who in this case has been accredited with a vaguely Messianic past. Indeed the whole setting has a mythopoeic ring: Motecuçoma is made to raise his garments

⁹The son of Christopher Columbus, who had inherited the title of Admiral from his father.—Ed.

¹⁰This is a thirteenth-century compilation of Castilian law.—Ed.

and to declare, "See that I am flesh and blood like you and all other men, and I am mortal and substantial," words reminiscent of those of Jesus to his disciples, "A spirit hath not flesh and bones as ye see me have" and of Paul and Barnabas to Lystra, "We also are men of like passions with you." (J. H. Elliott, "The Mental World of Hernán Cortés," pp. 51–53). There is evidence, however, that Motecuçoma did believe himself to be the living incarnation of Huitzilopochtli (see Durán, chaps. LIII–LIV; and Sahagún, bk. IV, chap. 10), and certainly such an identification would not have been alien to Mexica religious thought. Despite the absurdity of attributing such words and gestures to an Amerindian, it seems likely that Cortés's account of the events is based on partially understood information about the native mythologies. A number of modern commentators seem to believe the thesis of Motecuçoma's speeches, namely, that the Mexica lived in fear of a vengeful Messiah, who would one day return from the east, and mistook Cortés for his captain. Later this Messiah, who in the words attributed to Motecuçoma is only a legendary tribal chieftain, becomes Quetzalcoatl, the "Plumed Serpent" lord of Tula, whose story as told by Sahagún bears some resemblance to the Cortés-Motecuçoma version of Mexica prehistory. There is, however, no preconquest tradition which places Quetzalcoatl in this role and it seems possible therefore that it was elaborated by Sahagún . . . from informants who themselves had partially lost contact with their traditional tribal histories.

The identification of Cortés with Quetzalcoatl is also the work of Sahagún (see bk. XII, chap. 4, pp. 11 ff.). Don Antonio de Mendoza, first viceroy of New Spain, however, said that Cortés was mistaken for Huitzilopochtli (Elliott, *op cit.*, p. 53), traditionally associated with the south, and about whom no Messianic legend is known to exist. It is possible that Mendoza was told this by Cortés himself, and "Uchilobos" was the only Mexica deity Cortés could name.

Cortés may have picked up a local legend and embellished it in an attempt to prove that Motecuçoma was himself an usurper and therefore had no right to the lands he ruled (cf. the Third Letter, n. 3). . . .

Where Cortés first heard the story is uncertain. Cervantes de Salazar (bk. 111, chap. 49) and Bernal Díaz (chap. 79) both say that it was in Tlaxcala but both are very vague (see also Muñoz Camargo, pp. 184–185). Professor Guzmán says that a similar legend was common in the Antilles. But perhaps the first contact was made in Yucatán, where a foliated cross appears on a number of Mayan buildings and seems to have been associated with Quetzalcoatl, called Kukulcan in Maya. . . . If it is unlikely that Motecuçoma took the Spaniards to be the vicars-on-earth of the "Plumed Serpent," it is even more unlikely that it would have in any way affected his attitude toward Cortés.

Besides the improbability of any leader acting on a prophecy, Quetzalcoatl's cult was largely confined to the lowland regions beyond Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl and appears to have held little sway in central Mexico itself (*Códice Borgia*, I: 67). Its cult center was Cholula, which, when it came under Mexica rule, was granted no special respect and even forced to venerate Huitzilopochtli. Nor, it might be added, did Cholula accord to Cortés the welcome he might be expected to receive as Quetzalcoatl's lieutenant. Motecuçoma was himself a priest of Huitzilopochtli; and, secure in the power of the tutelary deity of his race, it does not seem likely that he would have resigned his powers to the supposed avatars of an apotheosized Toltec chieftain.

The attitude of the Mexica toward the Spaniards can best be explained by the traditional immunity from harm enjoyed by all ambassadors—and Cortés claimed to be an ambassador albeit without an embassy. It is also possible that once Motecuçoma had realized Cortés's intentions, he deliberately drew him inland, not understanding that the sea could be a supply route for the Spaniards. . . . Motecuçoma may well have underestimated the Spanish powers of diplomacy and the state of unrest within his own empire. It was unfortunate for him . . . that the Spaniards were in a position to play one Indian against another. . . .

Pagden next turns to the puzzle of Montezuma's death.

There are two versions of Motecuçoma's death. The first, that given by Cortés, is corroborated by most of the Spanish writers. Bernal Díaz (chap. 126) and Vázquez de Tapia, both witnesses, say that there were a large number of Spanish soldiers on the roof guarding the *Uei Tlatoani*;¹¹ if this was so, it is possible that the Mexica were aiming at them rather than at Motecuçoma. Gómara (p. 365) suggests that the Mexica did not see him, and Juan Cano told Oviedo (bk. XXXIII, chap. 54) that "Montezuma died from a stone which those outside threw at him, which they would not have done had not a buckler been placed in front of him, for once they had seen him they would not have thrown." Bernal Díaz says that Motecuçoma died because he refused to eat or to have his wound attended, a story repeated by Herrera (dec. 11, bk. X, chap. 10). If the Mexica did attack him on the roof, this might be true. Bernal Díaz then goes on to say that Cortés

¹¹The Great Speaker.—Ed.

and the other soldiers wept at Motecuçoma's death as though they had lost a father, which seems somewhat unlikely.

The second theory is that Motecuçoma was stabbed to death shortly before the Spaniards fled the city. This idea is advanced by most of the native writers, though some of them agree that Motecuçoma had been discredited and would therefore be open to attack if he appeared in public. The *Anales Tolteca-Chichimeca* (quoted by Orozco y Berra, IV: 425) even say that it was Cuauhtemoc who threw the stone. Durán (chap. LXXVI) also mentioned the wound but says that when Motecuçoma was found it was almost healed, and that he had been stabbed five times in the chest. Ixtlilxóchitl (I:341), who is largely pro-Spanish, repeats the Spanish version of the killing but adds, "his vassals say that the Spaniards killed him by stabbing him in the bowels." The *Codex Ramírez* (p. 144) also says that he was killed by a sword thrust in the bowels. Torquemada (bk. IV, chap. 70), following Sahagún, says that Motecuçoma and Itzquauhtzin, lord of Tlatelolco, were found garroted. There is little evidence to support this: garroting was for formal executions, not assassination.

Review and Study Questions

1. What were Cortés's hidden motives in his letter to Charles V detailing his conquest of Montezuma's empire?
2. How much credence do you place in the story that Montezuma and the Aztecs believed Cortés to be the agent of the god Quetzalcoatl? Explain.
3. How do you account for the submissive tone of the Aztec account of the conquest?
4. Regardless of the motives and actions of Montezuma himself, how do you account for the surprising ease with which Cortés accomplished the conquest of Mexico?

Suggestions for Further Reading

In addition to *Hernando Cortés: Five Letters*, tr. and ed. J. Bayard Morris (New York: Norton, 1960), excerpted for this chapter, there are two other editions: *Conquest: Dispatches of Cortés from the New World*, intro. and commentary Irwin R. Blacker, ed. Harry M. Rosen (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1962), and *Hernán Cortés: Letters from Mexico*, tr. and ed. A. R. Pagden, intro. J. H. Elliott (New York: Grossman,

1971), also excerpted for this chapter. There are two more contemporary Spanish accounts of the conquest. One is Francisco López de Gómara, *Cortés: The Life of the Conqueror by His Secretary*, tr. and ed. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964). Although Gómara never actually visited the New World, he had access to Cortés's own papers and recollections. The other account is by one of the soldiers on the expedition, written many years later from his recollections: *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles: The True Story of the Conquest of Mexico*, tr. and ed. Albert Idell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957) and another edition, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, 1517-1521*, ed. and tr. A. P. Maudslay, intro. Irving A. Leonard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956). In addition to *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. and intro. Miguel Leon-Portilla (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962), excerpted for this chapter, another contemporary Indian work is Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *1547-1577, A History of Ancient Mexico*, tr. Fanny R. Bandelier (Glorieta, N. M.: The Rio Grande Press, 1976). This is actually not a history but an account of the Aztec religion; it is, furthermore, largely a series of selections from the much more comprehensive edition of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe, N. M., and Salt Lake City, Utah: The School of American Research and The University of Utah, 1955-1982), a massive work in thirteen parts. The account of Cortés and Montezuma occurs in Part XIII, No. 14.

Of the modern accounts of the dramatic confrontation between Aztec and Spaniard, Cortés and Montezuma, the best is R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503-1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967). A much less substantial and analytical popular work is Maurice Collis, *Cortés and Montezuma* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954). An earlier work that tried to make some of the same analyses that Padden did is Charles S. Braden, *Religious Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1930).

The standard modern biography of Cortés is Salvador de Madariaga, *Hernán Cortés, Conqueror of Mexico* (New York: Macmillan, 1941). There is also a 1955 edition of this work, published by Henry Regnery Co., Chicago. A brief, popular, but competent biography is William Weber Johnson, *Cortés* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975). The only substantial modern biography of Montezuma is C. A. Burland, *Montezuma, Lord of the Aztecs* (New York: Putnam, 1973); this is a brilliantly written if somewhat fictionalized account, but solidly based on the standard sources. The masterwork on the entire history of the period is William H. Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*, 3 vols.

(Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1843, and five later editions). There is a one-volume abridgement of this work, dealing only with the career of Cortés: *A History of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. Harry Block (New York: Heritage Press, 1949).

Of the many works on the Aztecs themselves, probably the best general history is Nigel Davies, *The Aztecs: A History* (London: Macmillan, 1973). Rudolf A. M. van Zantwijk, *The Aztec Arrangement: The Social History of Pre-Spanish Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985) is a detailed but somewhat difficult book on Aztec social organization by a great European anthropologist. Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) is an attempt to reconstruct the social life and customs of the Aztecs on the eve of the Spanish conquest.