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1986 Capsule: Hispanic Influence in the New World

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In order to understand the conquistador ethic it is important to start with an understanding of the social and political climate of Spain at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. It is a period unique in history, in which came together the elements of renaissance optimism, technological advance and religious zeal, combined with the marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon to Isabella of Castile which united a divided Spanish climate into a strong and adventurous nation state.

American history begins with the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella. As the last knights errant hung up their spurs, and the last crusade passed into history Columbus, in the same spirit of crusade and adventure set sail for the Temples of Cipango. Certainly Palos must be as important to the history of the New World as Plymouth Rock.

It is interesting to note that the average American looking for a history of the New World will readily find elaborate reconstructions of English colonization, but little to document the Spanish World that predated and rendered possible the English colonial period.

When Ferdinand and Isabella were married, for the first time in centuries most of the Iberian peninsula fell into one political structure. To be sure, Navarre and Portugal (both Christian) and Granada (Islamic) maintained political independence. It was the very nature of Islamic Granada that helped to bring about the right political climate to cement the power of the Catholic Monarchs.

The tradition of battling the Moor to restore Christendom to Spain was seven hundred years old when Ferdinand and Isabella married. The Catholic monarchy demanded of Granada the age old tribute payments which a divided Spain had foregone for many years.

Granada, ruled by Abul Hassan replied (if somewhat foolishly) that his mints "no longer coined gold but steel." A statement which provided the excuse for the termination by force of Moslem power in Iberia. The struggle was a lengthy one, beginning with Hassan's attack on Zahara in 1481, but terminating most importantly at a seminal time in European history, 1492 to the demands of Spanish artillery.

It seems likely (at least to this writer) that the classic history of the period *L'Espagne sous Ferdinand et Isabelle: Le Gouvernement, Les institutions et les Moeurs* by the French scholar Jean Hippolyth Mariéjol oversimplified the religious zeal of the inquisition. Mariéjol, to his credit, attempted to explain rather than justify the inquisition. His model tells a story in which the Spaniards regarded the Jews and Moslems as alien

elements in an otherwise cohesive kingdom of political unity. Heresy was a serious crime he said, and the resultant *autos da fe*; expulsion of the Jews and forced conversions were political devices to be employed in further cementing the unity of Aragon and Castile during a period when unity creation was the ultimate political hat trick. Although kind to the monarchs, this analysis seems politically naive.

War against infidels had been the preoccupation of the Spanish political existence since the fall of the empire on the plains of Guadalete in 711. The long crusade of guerilla activity by Pelayo, and the ultimate fall of Granada in 1492 mark seven hundred years of political tension and frequent military conflict. In addition, the Jews gained economic prominence in fifteenth century Spain. The ingredients were all present for the inquisition. While Ferdinand and Isabella (particularly the astute Queen of Castile) understood and exploited the political benefit that emerged from such a nationalistic movement it is naive to explain away the inquisition as one more political intrigue. It is against this backdrop of religious Catholic nationalism that Columbus set out for the New World.

The Spaniard that bore the conquistador was a blend of the Castilian, proud and faithful, and of the Aragonese traits of iron will, custom and legalisms. Fifteenth century Spain was a land of Spartan philosophy. The Spaniard fasted more than church required and ate only to live (see for example Lazarillo de Tormes which reveals the misery throughout all classes on the peninsula) Peter Martyr de Anghera summed up Spanish tastes of the period by writing:

“For myself, I prefer a pot full of Garlic seasoned with olive oil and cabbages that issue from the pot exhaling savory vapors; and laborer’s bread that fills one’s whole mouth and not some hollow stuff made only to please the palate . . .”

These plebeian tastes created a court atmosphere which was, to say the least, a loyal and strong one. Nevertheless the *hidalgo* dressed only in broques (buckler, sword and shield), inured to hunger and cold, is the perfect forbear to the conquistador spirit.

Once again, it is the political situation in Spain that is unique to Europe, for the conquistador to emerge from any other European climate would have been an impossibility. It is exclusively Spanish, created by history, religion and politics.

There can be no doubt that the New World would have been encountered by Europeans sometime around the beginning of the sixteenth century. The academicians and scientists knew the world was round. Combining that knowledge, with the Crusader spirit, created the desire to reach the land of spices. Inevitably, someone soon would bump into the New World. Someone did: Christoforo Colombo.

Popular wisdom (at least from the point of view of the Portuguese explorers who were overwhelmingly influenced by Grecian writings such as the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea*) sought Cathay by heading Eastward, around Africa. Italian map makers however, advanced the idea that China was close to Europe in a *westerly* direction. The writings of Marco Polo influenced the Italian thinkers who decided that the shortcut might be to the West, cutting straight across a short span of ocean.

In 1474, eighteen years before Columbus, Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli (a Florentine Astronomer) wrote to Fernao Martins:

I have formerly spoken with you about a shorter sea route to the places of spices by ocean navigation than which you are pursuing by way of Guniea. The most gracious king now desires some statement or rather exhibit for the

eye, so that even slightly educated persons can grasp and understand that route. Although I am well aware that this can be proved by the spherical shape of the Earth, nevertheless in order to make the point clearer and to facilitate the enterprise, I have decided to display that route by means of a sailing chart. I therefore send his majesty a chart made by my hands upon which are laid down your coasts, and the islands from which you must begin to shape your course *steadily westward* .2

This was the plan that Columbus ultimately was to execute. Although Roselly de Lorgues petitioned for the canonization of Columbus he was more practical than saintly. Ten years of labor found him in Spain in 1484. The ongoing crusade against the moors left the Castilian monarch with little interest as of yet in the adventure (and obsession) of traveling to the Indies.

Eventually, Isabella chose to risk the sum of 1,140,000 maravedis (375 maravedis to the ducat, which would pay a carpenter or skilled person for eight days, or purchase 187 pounds of bread according to Mariejol's valuation). To further the venture the Town of Palos was required to pay royal tribute by providing vessels and crews. In addition Columbus raised a half million Maravedis of private capital. Little sung in this story had been the activity of the Pinzon brothers. Not only were they able shipbuilders but accompanied Columbus on the voyage that set forth on August 3, 1492.

Rather than recount a lengthy recitation of the Columbus story, for the purposes of this thesis it is sufficient to note that the explorer arrived in Cuba on October 28, 1492, and sailed the trade wind routes to discover Hispaniola and Tortuga. Ultimately shipwrecked at Cape Hatien, he left a small garrison there and returned to Spain to report his find.

The emphasis of Columbus' report was not the peaceful and gentle nature of the people that he encountered, but rather emphasized the economic benefits and abundance of gold "which could be gathered from the sands of its brooks."

It is an interesting historical aside that the Catholic Monarchs did not demand much in the way of proof from Columbus. Certainly if gold was as abundant as his report suggests, it might have occurred to someone to ask why he didn't bring some home with him (at least a few bags full). Columbus' report enabled him to get a promotion to Admiral; receive the title of viceroy to the Indies and finance a second voyage.

While Columbus' report was self serving, he failed to calculate the personal disaster that would come of his enthusiasm. The report of riches sent a stream of soldiers and adventurers to Hispaniola, who found no gold whatsoever. Indeed the fleets sent back to Spain were economic failures that lost money rather than gained. Ultimately the economic fiasco was blamed upon the Columbus Brothers who were turned upon by the Alcalde Mayor Francisco Roldan and returned to Spain in irons by the newly appointed governor, Francisco de Bobadilla.

It has often been noted that Columbus did not appreciate the magnitude of his discovery. (Indeed he thought in 1499 that he was nineteen days sailing from the Ganges). What is little known, and consistent with the thesis advance in this article is his religious fervor.

Columbus believed that he, like Isiah was an important prophet of the Lord. He wrote that the world would end in one hundred and fifty years. It was therefore necessary to move quickly to amass resources to deliver for the Second Coming of Christ. His appeal to Ferdinand for his fourth and final voyage was exactly as it is represented. It was to be a crusade for God against the infidel—for the sole purpose of amassing treasure, not for the wealth of earthly princes but for the holy Sepulcher, the logical prelude to the Sounding of the Final

Trump.

Not surprisingly, it was a difficult proposition selling a politician as astute as Ferdinand of Aragon on an idea based not only in a new, but in “another” world. As if planned by providence testing his servant job, this last voyage was economically fruitless and measured by revolt, hardship and deprivation. Columbus’ return to Spain in 1504 was greeted with the disastrous political news that Isabella, whose imagination he had fired was dead, and that Ferdinand (who had always thought of him as a dangerous eccentric) now publicly viewed him as a burden on the public funds of the Monarchy. He spent the last two years of his life trying to get paid by the Crown for his services, but was forever put off. He died May 21, 1506 in the City of Valldoid.

The greatest contribution to history that Columbus made was his firing of the public imagination. The crusader spirit followed Columbus almost immediately in the likes of Alonso de Ojeda, Juan de la Cosa (the pilot for Vespucci) and countless conquistadors. Floodgates opened to soldiers and fortune hunters endowed with the missionary zeal of the crusader, and the adventuring spirit of the Hidalgo, which I have previously explained.

Sebastian de Ocampo circumnavigated Cuba. Vincente Yanez discovered the Yucatan and opened the door to Cortez. Juan Ponce de León discovered Florida.

Balboa, dispatched from the survivors of a colony at Darien, crossed Panama to see the Pacific with European eyes. Pinzon in 1500 sailed south without ever leaving the sight of land on his Starboard.

By the time Ferdinand had died in 1516 an area from modern Florida, in the North, The Rio de La Plata, South of 40° South latitude, and the Pacific Ocean were opened to Spanish influence.

Although the destruction of the Aztec and Inca civilizations at the hands of Cortes and Pizarro (with small military units) has received much of the popular press, it seems to be the officials and visionaries upon whose shoulders fell the task of administration that the New World began to take political shape.

Certainly the second phase of Spanish input after the initial discovery of the New World was the political contribution rendered necessary by the dictates of colonial and political administration.

The political problems of this period ironically find themselves based in the payments to Columbus. Columbus’s deal with the Crown granted him, on paper enormous political advantage. The Santa Fe Accords made Columbus the hereditary governor general of the entire New World. It gave him and his family the right to appoint candidates for any post of profit in the New World (subject of course to the advice and consent of the Monarch, but even that was limited).

More particularly the family had the right to appoint magistrates over trade and barter disputes, with ten percent of all cargoes belonging to Columbus’ family and one month of the net proceeds of any venture being theirs.

It is important to recall that Ferdinand thought the whole idea was a waste of time, and therefore did not think that such broad sweeping concessions would be at all costly. Ferdinand’s calculation was that he would pay out for the opening of a sea route to China, and would deal with the soldiers who took and held the lands written of by Marco Polo when the necessity arose. This is consistent with both the representations of Columbus and the expectations of those who followed in his footsteps.

As the magnitude of the discovery became apparent to the Crown the spectre of a Genovese sailor attaining the Governorship of Spanish America, and becoming a vassal of Spain, with empires perhaps equal to or

greater than the Monarch's became a reality. The political interests of Spain required (in the best tradition of two thousand years of palace intrigue, indeed the kind of political maneuvering that is still with us), albeit did not justify, the selling out of the deal with Columbus.

In 1509 Diego Columbus (married to the niece of the Duke of Alba) was appointed as Governor of the Indies. The appointment was rendered possible by the influence of his familial uncle, but was effectively riposte by the Monarch who limited Diego's tenure to two years, and kept him out of the New World by constantly calling him to Spain for consultation. As a result Diego spent almost all of the ensuing two years on the deck of a ship traveling one way or the other across the Ocean.

The Columbus family eventually brought suit against the Crown, but the economic pressure on them was too great and in 1536 Don Louis Columbus, the third Admiral of the Indies settled his claims against Spain for a compromise of title and property. In exchange for this title (and the rights attendant to it) he became the Duke of Veragua, with an annual income of 10,000 Ducats.

The center of the Spanish Empire in the New World was the Antilles. In 1511 Don Diego Velasquez, under whose command were Hernando Cortes and Bartolomé de Las Casas established Spanish Administration on Cuba.

The first wave of Spanish influence on the New World was from soldiers; the second from administrators and the third from artisans and craftsmen. The development of agriculture was introduced to the New World when Nicholas de Ovambo decided to try to grow sugar cane on Espa-ola. The monarchy, from the outset committed what appears to be an economic error, grounded in the same religious and historical strengths that made discovery and conquest possible. Rather than establishing relationships between Spain and the colonies the Crown sought to control America from abroad, running industry and agriculture as state run monopolies.

Captains were required to detail their manifests to the smallest detail, for both directions of the voyage. Indeed as long as Isabella lived only Castilians were permitted to engage in trade with America. Aragonese, Catalans and Valencians were out unless granted a special license from the crown. There was much less interest in promoting national trade that enriching the crown itself through the accumulation of precious metal.

Herein lies the political reasoning behind the actions of the likes of Cortes and Pizarro. As has been previously analyzed a unique set of political and economic circumstances came together in Spain at the end of the Fifteenth Century. It reached its logical conclusions in the hands of soldiers, administrators and artisans who exploited it.

American Indians had no technology of mining. The "Gold of Montezuma" was all alluvial gold taken from surface deposits. As a matter of fact so was much of the gold taken by explorers who first came to exploit the area. Alluvial deposits are quickly devoured by a gold economy and it was not long before mining technology was introduced. ³ Once again the State intervened. Using the resources available at the time, a center smelter was established. All of the gold ore was brought there and extracted, the government charging 50% of the cast weight for its service. This was later reduced by succeeding governors from one half to one third and ultimately to one fifth. Like Space cargoes of today, while the value of Gold was undeniable, the cost of obtaining it was restrictive in the extreme. Thus also was born slavery. The inhabitants of Espa-ola, Cuba and the other Antilles were quickly decimated by this process. Ultimately they were extinguished. One of the ironies of history is that the race that witnessed the landing of Spaniards in the New World has not left a single descendant to tell of it.

What can we say of Latin America today? As history is “a look back into our own future,” we must remember Bartolome de Las Casas own account of the Spanish colonialism. In his book *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* , he graphically describes the horrid acts that occurred once the Spaniards took over. The Spaniards broke up marriages, separating husbands and wives, robbed couples of their children and set Indian against Indian, all in the name of conquest and civilization. The hierarchy of the Indians were completely disregarded and in its place, the New World’s hierarchy was to reign.

On one occasion when the Indians came out to welcome the conquerors, they were all placed in a big house of straw and at a command were slaughtered. ⁴We can sight many more distasteful and cruel acts by which the “civilization” of the New World was molded. I choose to stop here.

With time, Spanish influence promoting language, religion, culture and politics spread over and above the original conquest. It included most of the Caribbean, the Indies, South America and a great part of the Southwestern United States; all of Mexico, Central America and Florida to Spanish dominance. Remnants of Hispanic sovereignty can still be seen today. Architectural flair, cuisine, names of cities (San Antonio) and mountains (Sierra Nevada) and rivers (Orinoco) and other terminology has been absorbed in our own Anglo culture evident to this day. This happened on its own with degrees of heightened awareness, in the last century, on socialpolitical roots and via demographic changes.

If we study the Modernist writers or works of famous writers such as Jose Enrique Rodo, Pedro Henriquez Urena, and Roberto Fernandez Retamar (to name a few) we can taste in their works the conscience of literary politics and the sociopolitical climate to which it is proof. A new era for this New World. Retamar clearly evokes pride in the Third World populous and Rodo in *Ariel* sets a tone of declaration, a manifesto in idealism. He criticizes the U.S.A. and exhalts nationalistic fervor.

The research can go on endlessly trying to correlate Hispanic roots and influence in the Americas from the first Spanish Fleet to today but we will conclude here.

In an excerpt, from a translated manuscript of Pablo Neruda’s poem “Canto General” I found the essence of the gift bestowed upon us by discoverer, conquistador and literary genius alike.

From: “A LAMP ON EARTH” (Canto General)

Conquistador: So with the cruel

titan of stone,

the deathdealing falcon,

not only blood but wheat arrived.

The light came despite the daggers.

Notes

1. Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol, *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella* . (Rutgers University Press, 1961) p. xvi Editors Preface.
2. Rafael Altamira, *A History of Spain*. (D. Van Nostrand Co, Inc., New York, 1949) p. 63.
3. *Obra Crítica Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica* (1960) p. 2.
4. Bartolomé de Las Casas, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* . p. 113.

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2. Fodor's Travel Guide (South America) N.Y. 1983

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2. *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic* , William H. Prescott, (10th ed, 1851).
3. *The Structure of Spanish History* , E.L. King, Princeton, New Jersey, 1954.
4. Christophe Colombe, *Etudes d'histoire critique*, HARRISSE, (The translated letter is from John Fiske's translation in *The Discovery of America* , the excerpt and emphasis are Mariejol's).
5. *The Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella* , Jean Hippolyte Mariéjol, Keen Translation, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey. ed of 1961.
6. *De la Conquista a la Independencia* , Mariano Picon Salas.
7. *La Cultura en La America Hispanica* , Pedro Henríquez Ureña.
8. *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* , Bernal Diaz del Castillo.
9. *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America* , Cabeza De Vaca, (University of New Mexico Press, 1961, 2nd Printing 1984).
10. *A History of Spain* , Rafael Altamira, D. Van Nostrand, New York, 1949.

11. *Conciencia intelectual de America* , Carlos Rippoll (New York, 1966).

LESSON PLAN #1

Overall Goal To introduce roleplay in this unit.

Objectives The students will be able to “feel” the effects via dramatization, that change aka civilization made on the people it found in the New World and visa versa. Impromptu will be used for dialogue; this lends itself to creativity and usually a positive class participation. This type of exercise also makes historical issues more tangible and meaningful. It’s also a lot of fun!

Cast of Characters (change around and let everyone try):

Conquistador

A few soldiers

Monk (priest)

Interpreter

Chief of an Indian tribe (Montezuma)

Materials Needed Props and costumes are simple

Props Swords, A Spanish Flag, Large Cross, Sheet of paper “parchment” to simulate a formal decree

Costumes Brightly colored feathers (headress), Brown robe, helmet and rosary beads.

Suggestions to initiate dialogue (teacher needs to prompt).

Scene A: Montezuma, wise and powerful in his own rite, hopes to scare off the foreigners from his land. He sees them as demons.

Scene B: Conquistador Hernado Cortes in an eloquent speech (of which the Indians don’t understand) claims the land and everything on it for the Holy Church and for the good of Spain.

Scene C: A zealous Roman Catholic Priest or monk was specifically sent over with the army in search of souls. He forces the Indians to embrace our Lord a conversion en masse whether the Indians wanted it or not.

There is much flexibility to this lesson. It is based on the enthusiasm and creativity of the teacher and the willingness of the students to participate. It is a good icebreaker and brings social studies to life at least in the classroom.

LESSON PLAN #2

Overall goal To acquaint students with Primitive or Latin American Art and history via slides.

Objectives The student will study a series of slides dealing with Mayan, Aztec and Inca art. In this

lesson, culture and cultural/religious symbolism will also be presented. Students will view the slides and then look up pertinent historical background.

Materials to be used Set of 15 slides. Included in these slides are ancient ruins such as the Mayan temples at Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula, El Caracol at Chichen Itza also in the Yucatán and various forms and structures which are part of their culture.

One set of these slides will be at the YaleNew Haven Teachers Institute Office. These slides are available for all teachers who wish to use them in class. The set of slides are in color and can be used in a standard carousel slide projector.

LESSON PLAN #3

VOCABULARY SKILLS

Overall Goal To acquaint the student with vocabulary that will be found in a teaching unit on this subject.

Objectives The student will learn how to spell the words correctly and to match the words with the given definitions. The student will do this until obtaining at least 90% accuracy. This is not simply an exercise in spelling but to have the students be comfortable with terminology used by the teacher or found in texts which discuss the Unit's subject matter.

Sample List of Words

Impresario

Conquistador

voyage

conquest

convert

conversion

origin

discovery

independence

royalty

colony

colonization

civilize

Mayan

mistizo

Caribbean

(see other List of Terms Spanish to English Appendix A)

The above list is just a sampling of words that can be listed on the board and their meanings (definitions) placed beside them. To have the children think in an orderly fashion, suggest that they alphabetize the words first before copying them down. Also a ditto can be provided as a study guide and then a series of spot quizzes utilizing the MatchUp format can be given.

This type of exercise although very academic, can be a good source of training for students who seldom look up words nor do they force themselves to learn the meanings of words taken out of context.

APPENDIX A

List of Terms: (can be substituted for Lesson #3)

1. diezmo. (1) Ecclesiastical tithe. (2) Customs duty.
2. dinero. A Spanish coin used especially in the realm of Aragon; 1 dinero = 1.5 maravedis.
3. ducado. A Spanish gold coin of the value of \$2.32 in U.S. pre 1934 gold dollars.
4. escopetero. A harquebusier; musketeer.
5. excribano. Notary or scrivener.
6. estado llano. The order of commoners: Third Estate.
7. estamento. Estate: order.
8. fieldad. The office or charge of a fiel almotacen.
9. fuero. A constitution or code of laws or privileges, often applying to a particular locality or group; specifically, the charter of a medieval Spanish municipality.
10. galgo. Greyhound.
11. grande. A Spanish nobleman of the most elevated rank: grandee.
12. hidalgo or hijodalgo. A member of the nobility of the second class: gentleman.
13. infanta. A legitimate daughter of a Spanish king.
14. infante. A legitimate son of a Spanish king.
15. infanzón. A member of the nobility of the second class: hidalgo.
16. jinete. Light cavalryman.
17. jurado. Any of several officials of the Spanish medieval municipality.
18. letrado. Lawyer: legist.
19. maestresala. Mayordomo or steward.
20. maraved'. A Spanish copper coin of the value of \$.007 in U.S. pre1934 dollars.

LESSON PLAN #4

MAP SKILLS

Overall goal *To acquaint the student to maps and the globe and their use and function in a Social Studies unit.*

Objective *The student will trace the voyage of Columbus from Spain to the New World.*

Materials Needed *Overhead projector, maps and globe.*

Procedure *On the overhead projector place a map of the Caribbean and Latin America as it is today. Have students copy this. Also, you can do the map of Spain, the Atlantic Ocean and the Route that Columbus took. After students copy this map, they can trace the Voyage in red pencils. To lend creativity to this project ask the students to put themselves in Columbus' shoes. If they had to do all over again, how would they map out the First Voyage to a new land? Another good question, if you were a scientific whiz and wanted to discover a new "world" how would you plan this discovery let's say in the year 2200? Having students read about the voyage that Christopher Columbus made makes for interesting background material.*

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