

A Conquistador's Account of Major Screw-Ups

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Throughout Spain's conquest of Latin America, much of their success seemed to be cut out for them as the indigenous people they were conquering were severely underprepared for the arrival of technologically advanced conquistadors. Despite this there were instances where the Spaniards seemed as though they may not prevail and come out on top when navigating the New World. Under both the expeditions of Grijalva and Cortés many hardships came about, whether it be losing a battle and many men, or low numbers accompanied with a shortage of food. Through the disadvantages of not knowing the layout of the land and not knowing the native languages the conquest was short from a done deal.

Grijalva's expedition was filled with many unexpected disasters and events leading to many casualties and low morale. When it came down to it his men were simply unprepared and not familiar with the area; but, shortly before his expedition began things already seemed bleak. "The expedition sails on to Champoton where fifty-six Spaniards had been killed in battle under Córdoba the year before."¹ Only a year before Grijalva's group arrived at Yucatan a large portion of a previous expedition, likely around one fourth, was massacred.

Once arriving to Yucatan, it did not take long for things to hit the fan for Grijalva himself. "Another battle takes place, resulting in seven more Spanish dead, plus sixty wounded, including Grijalva."² Out of 240 men that left with Grijalva a fair portion of them were already wounded, causing things to look bleak from the start. Although there were more successful expeditions going on elsewhere in the New World at the time, the Yucatan area was proving difficult to overcome.

¹ Bernal Díaz and David Carrasco, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*. (University of New Mexico Press, January 2009), 32.

² Ibid, 32.

Not long into the expedition Grijalva's men are low in motivation, as they were not finding a lot of land and many Indians did not wish to meet in person or even trade. "The Spaniards enter a deserted town and fail, even with the help of Julianillo and Melchorejo, two baptized Indians captured the year before, to communicate with local leaders who refuse Spanish efforts to meet face-to-face."³ Without the ability to meet with the local leaders the explorers could not make any progress in the area they were in, as they could not obtain any information on the surrounding area or make any deals.

Despite these disadvantages, the group did find a way to cheer themselves up, even if it was only temporary. "...the Spaniards sail on and stop at the Rio Tabasco, which they rename Rio Grijalva."⁴ They take a river in their own name, claiming it for Spain; this may have brought them some joy for the time, and glory back home for 'conquering' one of the rivers of the Americas.

Some news received from a tribal group may have also brought them hope, as it was a promising announcement. "The next day the caciques invite the Spaniards to trade and exchange gifts and give a tantalizing piece of information: "that further on, in the direction of the sunset, there was plenty of gold, and they said, 'Colua, Colua, Méjico, Méjico.'"⁵ With this news the Spaniards sail on and come upon a group of native warriors on a shore, possessing turtle shell shields that appear to be gilded with gold. They come ashore and speak and trade with their people for 6 days, then decide to leave.

³ Ibid, 32.

⁴ Ibid, 32.

⁵ Ibid, 32.

Despite the good things that happened, and the serotonin that was fired off, their happiness did not last for very long. “Fatigued, depressed by the death of thirteen soldiers in various battles, and harassed by mosquitoes, they return on a forty-five-day journey to Cuba.”⁶ After everything that happened they just could not carry on with their expedition and finally decided to return home, or a more familiar place. To make matter worse, when they traded a group of Indians for a large amount of gold, it turned out to be copper.

Grijalva was not the only conquistador to have an uncertain expedition, as there was also Cortés. From the start people did not want Cortés to set sail for the Americas, whether it be from jealousy or anger. “Those who took the leading part in persuading Diego Velásquez to revoke the authority he had given to Cortés were some members of the Velásquez family and an old man name Juan Millan...”⁷ There was already an attempt for his downfall from the beginning, which would have stopped a major part of the conquest.

After arriving to the Americas, a battle ensued that resulted in the Spaniards gaining a new town, Santa Maria de la Victoria. Not long after this, the Spaniards came upon an intimidating group of Indians. “Ordás replied that it was not good advice, for there were three hundred Indians to every one of us, and that we could not hold out against such a multitude- so there we stood enduring their attack.”⁸ The Indians had the advantage as they outnumbered the Spaniards in full, so it seemed as though the Spaniards may lose. Despite their numbers, the Indians eventually retreated to avoid the Spanish’s swords.

⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷ Ibid, 38.

⁸ Ibid, 50.

After all of this, Cortés and his men were getting along just fine, until he destroyed his ships to keep traitors from leaving and reporting to Velásquez. They claimed an area and named it Villa Rica and stayed in the area with the natives of the area. Alas, in doing so they eventually dealt with food shortage. “And we returned to Villa Rica without having had anything to eat since we first started.”⁹ It seemed as though being stranded and not having food would set about starvation and possibly dispute and/or madness, but the men kept high hopes despite the severity of the situation.

Later, when Cortés found out about the city of Mexico, he wished to peacefully speak with their Lord and higher positioned members. However, the people of Mexico mocked them and showed resistance when it came to talking to the Spaniards. The people had told the explorers that there was a shortage of food, so they could not give them any and that it may be best to go home. “The Cacique was so embarrassed that he could hardly speak, he said that they would look for the food, but their Lord Montezuma had sent to tell them not to give us any, and was not willing that we should proceed any further.”¹⁰ In reality their lord had told his people to lie in order to drive the foreigners away. This made it seem as though the Spanish would make no advancements in their conquest; but they instead pushed forward to the lord’s city and massacred many Indians.

In all, the conquest was a pursuit whose success was uncertain. The Spaniards lost plenty of battles, and men, in their expeditions, and came upon situations where they were outnumbered. They also had many instances where they were not prepared, whether it be a shortage of food, or lack of knowledge of both language and land. Alas, the Spanish did prevail

⁹ Ibid, 79.

¹⁰ Ibid, 108.

and come to claim the areas of Latin America for themselves through bloodshed and technological advancement.

Aguirre Cast as characters from Star Wars Ep. 4-6:

- Aguirre: Emperor Palpatine
- Ursua: Luke Skywalker
- Inez: Princess Leia
- I can't remember his name, but the short and stocky Latino man that was actually good person: Han solo
- "Emperor of el dorado": Jabba the Hutt
- Friar: Darth Vader
- Dude who sang like a crazy person all the time: the reptilian bounty hunter that worked with Boba Fett... Bossk?
- The one black slave on the expedition: Lando Calrissian