

Francisco Vázquez de Coronado

Importance

In 1540 Coronado led the first Spanish expedition attempting to conquer what is today New Mexico and the southwestern U.S. Coronado and his compatriots failed to find the riches they sought, and this failure delayed Spanish interest in the north. Another expedition would not set out for another forty years. But Coronado's acrimonious interactions with the Pueblos remained fresh in the Pueblos' memories, coloring future relations with the Spanish.

Coronado's Expedition

Over time, the history of the Coronado expedition has generated a number of persistent myths. A common image has Coronado and a few fellow conquistadores riding into the wilderness, dressed in heavy armor and accompanied by a Franciscan friar. In fact, the Coronado expedition was a huge undertaking. It included approximately three hundred European men-at-arms, the wives of several Spanish participants, over three hundred servants, male and female, and around 1,500 native allies. At least six hundred pack horses and mules carried supplies, and thousands of cattle, sheep, and hogs were brought along as a moveable larder.

The man selected to lead this expedition, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, was the governor of the province of Nueva Galicia in northern Mexico. He, and the other Spaniards on the expedition, hoped to find wealthy, populous provinces that they could conquer and receive as *encomiendas* from the Spanish king. An encomienda was a grant of land, and all the inhabitants of that grant owed yearly tribute and taxes to the owner of the encomienda. Thus, although Coronado hoped to find gold as a sign of wealth, he was most interested in finding areas with a high native population density. Only areas of large population would make valuable encomiendas. The native allies who traveled with the expedition, warriors from native societies in Mexico, hoped to find glory and renown on the expedition. In their societies, social status came through winning triumphs and slaves in battle.

The Spanish Crown expected Coronado to read the *requerimiento* to all natives he encountered. The *requerimiento* gave the natives two options: they could submit to the Spanish by choice or they would be made to submit through force.

FACT SHEET



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Under such circumstances, violence was practically inevitable. Plagued by supply difficulties and encountering harsh winters in 1540-1541 and 1541-1542, the expedition turned to taking food and supplies from the Pueblos. When the Pueblos fought back, the large force of native allies with Coronado helped to overcome any resistance.

Still, Coronado did not find what he sought. Although many pueblos that he stayed at were powerful within their immediate region, they did not possess the kinds of resources and population that Coronado desired. Bison hides, corn, and pinyon nuts were paltry forms of tribute. Disappointed and faced with a hostile population, the expedition decided to return to Mexico in 1542. Despite later accounts that depicted Coronado as a great explorer, the party had stuck to well-traveled native routes and contributed little to the geographic knowledge of New Spain. The expedition had been one of "personal aggrandizement," and it had failed (Flint 2008). Forty years would pass before the Spanish again evinced interest in the Pueblos' lands and people.

References

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