



LATINO AMERICANS

THE 500-YEAR LEGACY THAT SHAPED A NATION

RAY SUAREZ

PBS NEWSHOUR SENIOR CORRESPONDENT

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For my children—
Rafael, Eva, and Isabel—
three of my life's greatest joys

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Students at a “Mexican School” in Texas, 1950s. CREDIT: THE DOLPH BRISCOE CENTER FOR AMERICAN HISTORY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

TELLING OUR STORY: AN INTRODUCTION

THIS STORY is different from other conventional histories you may have read. For an author recounting a story of one people in a particular place at a particular time is challenging enough, but this book sets out to tell how numerous peoples, from regions and continents flung across the globe, came together to become one people.

The Latino Americans come from Europe, Africa, Asia, and from the ancient nations of this hemisphere. They are the offspring of Spain's New World Empire. They arrived in the United States by jet aircraft this morning; they crossed a dusty, empty stretch of desert just yesterday; or long years after arriving here to work, they raised a right hand in front of a federal judge and swore to renounce all other allegiances to any other country. And most important, alongside those whose American story is a recent one are the generations of Latinos whose families have been in this country far longer than there has been a place called the United States, even longer than the arrivals from the British Isles who would go on to invent the United States.

They . . . we . . . are all those things at once. We are at once a new people on the American landscape and an old and deeply embedded part of the history of this country and continent. The Spanish names of saints, heroes, captains, and kings dot the landscape of much of the country . . . all the way from "the flowery place," Florida, at the southeast corner, to the San Juan Islands just off the Canadian border in sight of British Columbia. Because restless Americans have steadily moved south and west since World War II, shifting the population away from the Northeast and Great Lakes, millions more Americans unwittingly speak Spanish every day, heading into a Luby's luncheonette in El Paso, "the pass," sitting in traffic in San Diego, "Saint James," or taking that third card in hopes of hitting twenty-one in that "snow-covered place," Nevada.

At its height when the nineteenth century began, the Spanish Empire stretched from the islands scattered at the mouth of the Caribbean to the southern tip of South America, up through the Andes and the western Amazon to the continent's northern coast, through the slender arm of Central America to the vast landmass of Mexico and into North America, including at various times all or part of the territory of twenty-three U.S. states. The first European language heard in these vast territories was Spanish, the first Christian prayers followed the Roman Catholic rite, and the earliest surveys and land titles were granted to Spanish families.



Mexico in the early years of independence from Spain. This 1837 map shows the vast extent of Mexican territory, including all of what is now the southwestern United States from Louisiana and Arkansas west to the Pacific Ocean. Above what is now California lay the vast Oregon Territory, under joint occupation of the United States and the British Empire during the 1830s. CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Like the British Empire, the Spanish Empire had a shifting, often cruel and exploitative relationship with the hundreds of nations and peoples already in place when it arrived. Ultimately, however, the history was different in British and Spanish America over long centuries. This is not to minimize or underplay the horrifying tales of genocide, expropriation, and involuntary servitude brought to its enormous empire by the Spanish crown, but only to note that the two stories are different. As the British Empire and its successor governments in the United States pushed Native Americans west from the Atlantic seaboard until there was no more room left to push them into, the descendants of the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas remain very much present in their home countries, fully represented in the gene pool of the people who have come to the United States from the rest of the hemisphere in the last two centuries.

You cannot understand more than fifty million of your fellow Americans without knowing this history. More important, you won't be able to understand the America that's just over the horizon if you don't know this history. Latino history is your history. Latino history is our history.

The bright lights are scanning the yard. The sirens are wailing in the night. Worried guards with flashlights make their panicky rounds. This is an intellectual prison break. Too many Americans have been taught a siloed American history. The core narrative, the story at the heart of the story, is a grand procession of white guys on white horses, with the "others"—black Americans, women, religious and ethnic minorities—confined to their own separate areas. This book insists that the history of more than fifty million Latinos in the United States is your history too, no matter where in the world you or your ancestors came from.



Massive proimmigrant demonstrations filled the streets of American cities in 2006. CREDIT: STEVE SCHAPIRO/CORBIS



We Serve Whites Only. CREDIT: THE DOLPH BRISCOE CENTER FOR AMERICAN HISTORY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Our country is changing. Latinos are in the same moment among the newest and oldest kids on the block. Juan Ponce de León was tramping around Florida in the sixteenth century and made it part of the Spanish Empire for centuries to come. Today, Spanish-speaking newcomers are inheriting and revitalizing Florida's twenty-first-century culture, and many Floridians are ambivalent about those changes. That is part of our story too.

In more than 235 years since the Declaration of Independence, an essential truth has often been overlooked by the generations who look on anxiously as new immigrants arrive by air, sea, and land. The United States has constantly been transformed by immigrants, and it has transformed them too. Immigration anxiety is fueled when too much attention is paid to the first part, and not enough to the second. Talk to anyone who has come to live in the United States from somewhere else in the world. With each successive year they are in our country, these immigrants become less a part of the place they came from, and more of an American.

Keep that in mind as you read this book. The situation in schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, on TV, in the armed forces, in church—in all the places that make the country what it is—breathtaking change is under way. At some point in the 2040s, a slim majority of Americans will trace their ancestry to people who arrived in this country from someplace other than Europe. For the first time in centuries, people who descended from the European empires that captured the continent, and people who descended from the generations of immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Italy, czarist Russia, and places large and small between Dublin and Moscow will be a minority of Americans.

Yeah. It's a big deal for people in the old and new majorities alike.

By the conclusion of this book, you should be thinking about the United States, its history, and its people in a slightly different way. There are now so many ways to get cozy with a book—with ink on

paper or in dots of light on dark on the screen of an e-reader or sitting behind the wheel of your car listening to a recorded text. However you consume this work, I haven't done my job properly if you don't say (and regularly), "Hey, I didn't know that!"

This book is a handbook for getting a better perspective on that next America. There's going to be some stretching involved, and getting used to new ideas. It's going to be fascinating. It's going to be exciting for some . . . and uncomfortable for others.

Let's begin.



The Alamo under siege by Mexican troops. CREDIT: BETTMANN/CORBIS

THE CONVERGENCE BEGINS

(LA CONVERGENCIA COMIENZA)

EVERY NATION has an origin story. It's the story they tell themselves, about themselves, to understand who they are.

Americans are no different.

In many ancient civilizations, the origin story ties a people so intimately to the land that they are made out of it, molded by a creator from the literal soil of the place. The Japanese, the Menominee Indians of the Great Lakes, the Yoruba of West Africa, all have creation stories that tie the people and their history directly to the land. There is no memory of another place. In their telling, they have existed along with the land, and had no life apart from it.

Americans are very different.

Our origin story has to bring almost all of us from someplace else on the planet. So where does the story of the United States of America begin? Some of you might say Plymouth Rock, the spot on the damp New England shores where the Pilgrims are said by tradition to have come ashore from the *Mayflower* in 1620.

Others might say Jamestown, some six hundred miles to the south, where in 1607 Englishmen in search of fortune, not fleeing religious persecution, began probing the sandy inlets and started spinning gold from tobacco.

This country was not just a creation of the British Empire, however. There were five hundred nations in North America before a European ship ever dropped anchor off the Eastern Seaboard. Once Europeans started coming over in ever greater numbers, the territory that is now the United States became home to many colonies.

The Dutch made their way up the Hudson River and settled in the breathtakingly beautiful valleys of what is now Upstate New York. At the mouth of the river, Dutch farms and trading houses spread over the tracts of land around the great harbor that became New York City. The Swedes tried to make a go of colonization in parts of what is now Delaware and Pennsylvania. Even the Scots, before becoming part of the United Kingdom, attempted to plant colonies in what is now Maritime Canada, New Jersey, and the Carolinas.

France's North American empire stretched across a vast and rich swath of the continent many times the size of the parent country, including what is today half of Canada, and the U.S. Midwest, Great Plains, and Pacific Northwest. In the far northwest, the expanding Russian Empire pushed east, crossing the Bering Strait, colonizing Alaska, and moving down the coast of what is now Canada's British Columbia toward what would one day be Seattle. The Russians began to probe even farther south to what is now northern California.



Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The Spanish explorer was one of a handful of survivors of a sixteenth-century Spanish expedition that set out from what is now the Dominican Republic and headed west through the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, Texas, and Mexico. He wrote detailed accounts of his wanderings and later made extensive journeys through South America. By the time of his death he had seen more of the Spanish Empire firsthand than anyone. CREDIT: COURTESY PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES (NMHM/DCA), 071390

The Genoese sailor sent west by Ferdinand and Isabel of Spain, Cristoforo Colombo in Italian, Cristóbal Colón in Spanish, and Christopher Columbus in English, made multiple trips to the Caribbean, and began four centuries of Spanish presence in the hemisphere. Looking for “Cathay,” China, he began the creation of an enormous New World empire for Spain.

The empire belonged to Their Most Catholic Majesties the king and queen of Spain. Pull out a map and take a look at South America, where Spain’s possessions included virtually all the continent outside Brazil, all of today’s Central America and Mexico, and all or part of Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, and Idaho, North and South Dakota. At its height in the last years of the eighteenth century, Spanish territory stretched as far north as the southern lands of what are today the prairie provinces of Canada, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

So where does the story of the modern United States begin? On Plymouth Rock, sure, but not *just* there. . . .

In Virginia, sure, but not *just* there. . . .

It turns out there are many candidates for the origin point, a place to visit like the coasts of Virginia or Massachusetts and say, “It all starts here.”

Forty-two years before the men of the Virginia Company of London began to pound the fort at Jamestown into place, and fifty-five years before seasick Protestant refugees stepped onto dry land from the *Mayflower*, a Spanish sailor named Pedro Menéndez de Avilés dislodged French Protestants

from their settlement on the Florida coast and established St. Augustine.

The Florida city is today the oldest continuously occupied European city in the United States. From 1565 to 1821, St. Augustine, *San Agustín*, was a Spanish-speaking city. As European empires fought their wars in the New World, the Florida city lived under different flags, but it was essentially a Spanish place for three centuries. The next time a tense local controversy breaks out in Florida over the use of Spanish, take a second to recall how much longer that tongue has been at home in the state than that relative newcomer, *inglés*.

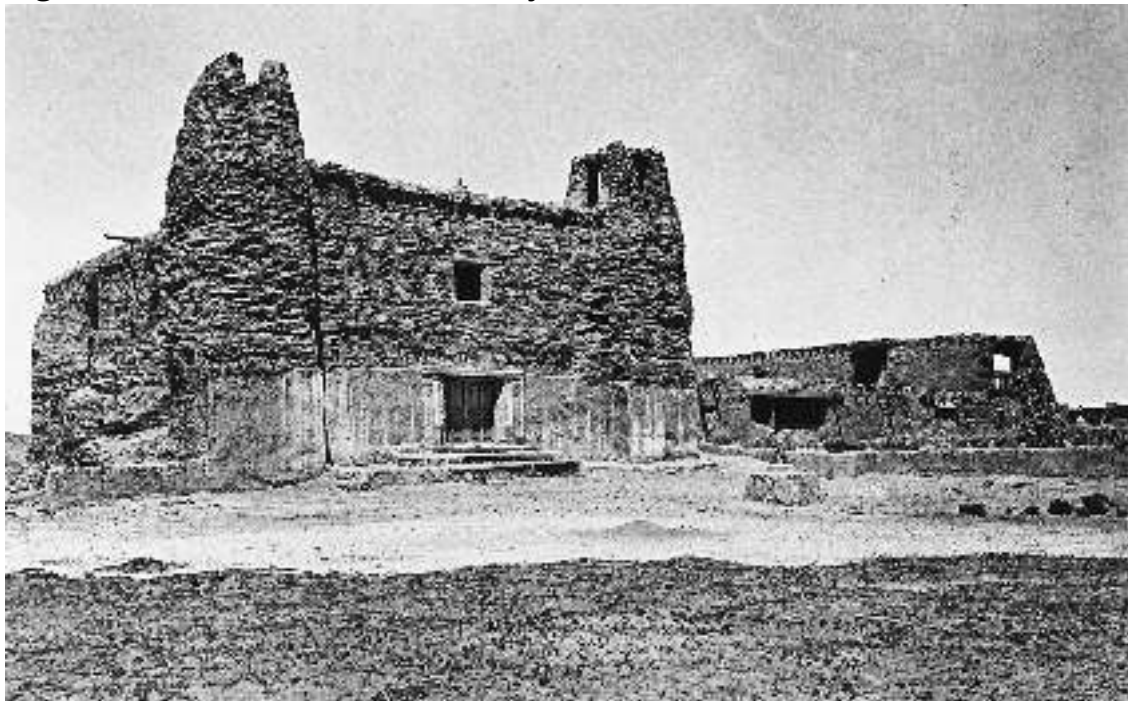
Across the face of this vast continent, the empires moved and probed and jostled and searched. They spent more than two centuries moving their frontiers toward each other, and fighting wars over the bountiful land. The boundary lines shifted and crossed, and eventually disappeared. By the mid-nineteenth century, as the dust cleared from the Mexican War, the shape of the modern continental United States emerged. What had been French and British and Spanish territories now flew under the flag of the United States.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

...

IF YOU WALK out of the church of San Esteban del Rey on the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, it will take a moment for your eyes to adjust to the intense sunlight. Your skin will immediately mark the extreme change from the cool and intensely colored interior of the church to the blast of dry heat rising from the tiny plaza at the edge of the pueblo. A vast valley falls away from the lip of the steep mesa where the Acoma Pueblo stands perched on top.

You can see for miles in every direction. The dry, scrubby landscape dominated by brown and gold and flecked with green stretches out from where you stand to the mountains in the distance.



The Church of San Esteban del Rey, Acoma Pueblo, New Mexico. Built in the 1630s by native people under the direction of a Spanish friar, the church still stands on a butte in central New Mexico. The Acoma Pueblo was the scene of a battle between Mexican settlers and Acoma Indians that eventually led to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the single

Here, another American story began. The Acoma people had lived in this place since the thirteenth century. They were here three hundred years before the Spanish arrived, and began an encounter that would remake their world. There were no straitlaced Puritans dressed in black and white, bundled up against the cold and damp. There were no Elizabethan adventurers hoping to find a way to get Indian to part with land, tobacco, and gold to pay off the investments of shareholders back in London.

In today's New Mexico, and in Texas, Florida, California, and Arizona, soldiers and priests pushed their way north and west from the first places they made landfall from Spain. For decades, small groups of men—explorers, not colonizers—threaded their way through what would become the Southwestern United States, extending the authority the Spanish monarchs exercised from faraway Mexico City in the longer-settled parts of New Spain.

Shield your eyes from the midday sun and try to imagine traversing this landscape in outfits of wool, linen, and leather, with metal armor to protect shoulders, arms, chests. Wearing heavy leather boots on their feet and gleaming metal helmets on their heads, small groups of Spanish soldiers conquered Indian nations.

The church of San Esteban is a reminder of the oppression wrought by these strange men from far away. Inside, heavy forty-foot-long beams frame a particularly beautiful Spanish colonial church. You run your eyes over the vast landscape again and you will see no trees of any size. There are also no roads, no wheeled carts, and no machines. Indians carried those massive beams more than twenty miles across the land and to the top of the mesa. Tons of earth, stone, and clay were similarly hauled up from the valley floor over thousands of hours of Indian labor. It took fourteen years to build the church.

Juan de Oñate was a New World man. Unlike the earliest conquistadores—conquerors—who were Europeans, he was born in Zacatecas in New Spain, to a wealthy and influential family. The Oñate family was made minor nobility by an ancestor's victory over an Arab army in Spain, and they owned a silver mine in Mexico. Young Juan continued the arc of his family's upward mobility by marrying Isabel de Tolosa Cortés, granddaughter of the conqueror Hernán Cortés, and great-granddaughter of the Aztec emperor Moctezuma.

The Spanish king Philip II ordered Oñate to colonize the northern reaches of New Spain. The Spaniards' announced intention was to establish the Catholic religion and build new missions north of the Rio Grande. The young soldier, however, also had dreams of finding new silver deposits, a path to the pearls of the Pacific, and also to Quivira, one of the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola and, according to legends, a place where Indians covered in gold ornaments toasted one another with goblets of gold.

Along with souls for God and gold for Spain, the Spanish Empire moved north for solid security reasons, according to Professor Stephen Pitti of Yale University. "Spain is competing with England in particular and Portugal and the Dutch eventually," he said. "The Spanish are interested in securing parts of North America for their own national and imperial advantage. The Spanish are looking for the security of holding places like San Francisco Bay, or the Florida or Texas coasts."

Oñate crossed the Rio Grande at today's El Paso, Texas, and declared it a possession of Philip of Spain. He headed north, and established his capital by what he called the San Juan Pueblo, having extended the Camino Real, the Royal Road from Mexico City, another six hundred miles. (The San Juan Pueblo reverted to its original name of Ohkay Owingeh in 2005.) Construction on new missions

began, sinking roots for the Roman Catholic faith that still thrive in that land four centuries later.

The soldiers who came north with Oñate had a problem. So far, they had found Indians, deserts, salt deposits, and not much else. The young captain was facing mutiny because the promised riches had not been discovered, and the colonists expected to head up from New Spain had not arrived in the new settlement either. Oñate punished rebels, ruled his small domain with an iron fist, and sent his restless men radiating out from his headquarters in search of silver and gold, water and game.

Oñate was now a full-fledged colonial governor of the province called Holy Faith of New Mexico. He visited the Indian pueblos now under his control. He hoped to find a shortcut to the Pacific and supply Mexico City with much-prized salt. He and his men hunted buffalo after failing to capture them, returning to the young settlement with plenty of meat and hides. Today what a buffalo looks like is such a common piece of knowledge, and it is hard to remember that people like Oñate were the first Europeans to see such animals, to draw and describe them in letters.

In a report to the king's representative, the viceroy back in Mexico City, Oñate's secretary, Juan Gutierrez Bocanegra, writes of the bison, "Its shape and form are so marvelous and laughable, or frightful, that the more one sees it, the more one desires to see it, and no one could be so melancholy that if he were to see it a hundred times a day he could keep from laughing heartily as many times, or could fail to marvel at the sight of so ferocious an animal."

In the autumn of 1598, shortly after taking control of the pueblo, Oñate's soldiers, under the command of his nephew Juan de Zaldívar, took sixteen captured Acoma men to the mesa and demanded supplies be delivered to the pueblo for their use. The Acomas' leader, Zutacapan, had abandoned his earlier intention to attack the Spanish forces in the belief that the Europeans were immortal. When the Acomas refused the Spanish demands for supplies, fighting began that, if nothing else, proved the rumors about Spanish immortality unfounded. Oñate's nephew was killed in the fighting along with eleven of his men. The governor sent Zaldívar's brother Vicente toward Acoma on a punitive expedition.

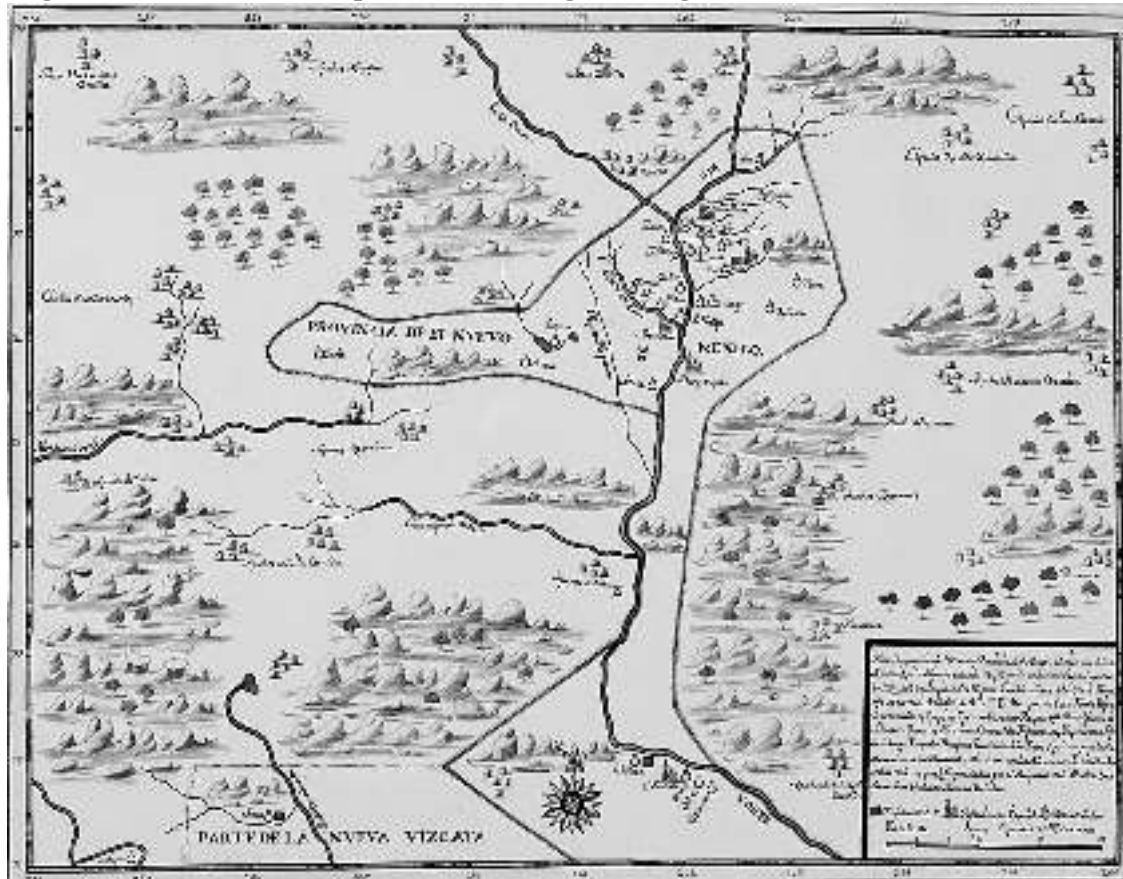
It was not the first example, and it would not be the last: Spanish soldiers were able to bring superior technology and firepower to bear. They attacked the pueblo atop the mesa with a small force and a cannon. Vicente Zaldívar's attackers were able to inflict large numbers of casualties and widespread damage, even as they took terrible casualties in fierce combat with the Acomas. Zaldívar wrote in his diary that after the Indians surrendered, "Most of them were killed and punished by fire and bloodshed, and the pueblo was completely laid waste and burned."

But the Spaniards were not satisfied with mere victory. Hundreds of Acoma men were seized as slaves and dispersed to Spanish possessions in the New World. Originally, the governor decided to enslave them for twenty years, and amputate the right foot of every man over twenty-five years old. He relented, to a certain extent, and cut the right foot from just two dozen men. He enslaved many more men, along with girls and women over twelve years of age. Oñate had shown the colonists and the colonized that he could be a cruel man when he needed to be. Now it was time to show his own people he could deliver on the promises of riches.

The stories of great wealth in seven cities north of New Spain had been circulating for decades, since a Franciscan priest told officials in Mexico City that he had seen Cibola, the City of Gold, in what is now New Mexico. When Fray Marcos de Niza wrote about his journey in 1539, he said he first saw Cibola in the distance. It was, he wrote, a city larger than Mexico City, with fine houses. His story continued: "At times I was tempted to go to it, because I knew that I risked nothing but my life, which I had offered to God the day I commenced the journey; finally I feared to do so, considering my danger and that if I died, I would not be able to give an account of this country, which seems to me to

be the greatest and best of the discoveries. When I said to the chiefs who were with me how beautiful Cibola appeared to me, they told me that it was the least of the seven cities, and that Totontec is much bigger and better than all the seven, and that it has so many houses and people that there is no end to it.”

The Spanish monarchs had already taken fabulous wealth out of Mexico in gold and silver. Nothing was bound to get their attention like the promise of even more riches. Earlier explorations headed to modern Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri looking for the cities of gold. They found Indian nations peaceably farming corn, beans, and squash, but no golden goblets.



The Spanish province of Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico. The land corridor leading north from Mexico across the Rio Grande at El Paso connected New Spain to a string of Spanish missions and Indian pueblos in this 1727 map. CREDIT: THE DOLPH BRISCOE CENTER FOR AMERICAN HISTORY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Oñate headed out in 1601 looking for two things: gold and a route to the sea. He brought 130 soldiers and a dozen Franciscan priests, and used Jusepe Gutierrez as a guide, the lone survivor of an earlier, ill-fated voyage in search of the Seven Cities. Oñate roamed far from his home province of Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico. He followed the meandering Canadian River through northern Texas (near today's Amarillo), into Oklahoma, and then north into Kansas. He and his men were received peaceably in the Quivira settlements. There was no gold.

Instead Oñate became the first European to describe the tallgrass prairie, which covered much of the Midwest before agriculture and European colonization.

Back in New Mexico, as the governor ranged over the continent, things were not going well. There were no promised riches. The land was hard to farm. The Indians clearly did not want the settlers there. When Oñate returned from Kansas he found many of the settlers had returned to their hometowns south of the Rio Grande, and only his strongest supporters among the colonists hung on in his makeshift capital.

Ranging far from his arid capital, Oñate saw well-watered land capable of supporting large settlements. Emboldened by what he had seen in the future Amarillo and Wichita, he decided to mount another expedition. This time Oñate, soldiers, priests, and a few Indian translators headed west.

The diaries kept by priests, officers, and, through secretaries, by Oñate himself provide thrilling reading, filled with all the wonder of men seeing unimagined things for the first time and having the rare privilege of being the first Europeans to experience these early contacts with the people scattered across the Southwest.

One of the priests heading west with Oñate, Fr. Gerónimo Zárate Salmerón, describes the people of one pueblo this way: “The men are well-featured and noble; the women are handsome with beautiful eyes, and they are affectionate. These Indians said that the sea was distant from there twenty days’ journey. . . . It is to be noticed that none of these nations was caught in a lie.”

Time and again, the witnesses to these early encounters illustrate the assumption that the Indians should understand that there were new bosses in town. At one point the Spanish column took a local chief hostage, and there was surprise and offense when the chief’s own warriors launched an assault, freeing their leader unharmed.

Many of the languages spoken by Indian nations across this vast region came from different linguistic families and were mutually unintelligible; it is from the distance of four centuries impossible to know who was able to understand what and when. The diaries note that the Spanish expeditions all took Indian translators along with them, but at a time when people were not likely to travel many hundreds of miles from their homeland, the confidence that “our” Indians could talk to “those” Indians must often have been misplaced.

Father Francisco de Escobar’s accounts of the trip west to the Gulf of California tells of energetic gesturing, pointing, and describing done by men encountered near the Colorado River: “They almost convinced me beyond all doubt there were both yellow and white metals in the land, though there is no proof that the yellow metal is gold or that the white is silver, for of this my doubts are still very great.” Father Escobar may have had his doubts, but the feverish speculation was to go on for a hundred years.

When enthusiastic Spaniards animatedly asked about a large lake and deposits of gold, were Indians humoring them, passing along their own legends, or trying to describe a large and faraway body of water they themselves had never seen but only heard about, like the Puget Sound?

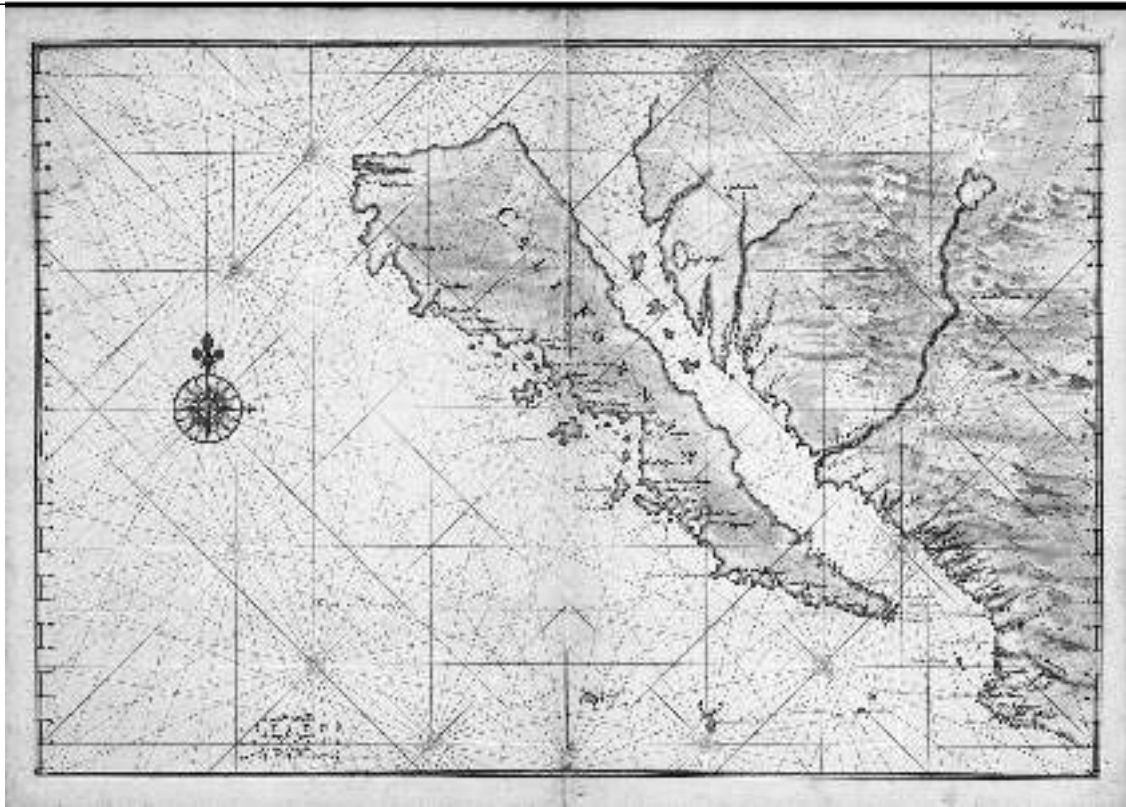
Indians told the Spaniards about a *laguna de oro*, a lagoon of gold surrounded by rich communities. Antonio de Espejo explored the Southwestern deserts in the 1580s, and was told by inhabitants of the Zuni Pueblo of “a large lake where the natives claimed there were many towns. These people told us there was gold in the lake region, that the inhabitants wore clothes, with gold bracelets and earrings, that they dwelt at a distance of a sixty days’ journey from the place we were.”

Espejo looked over a greater distance for the lake of gold than any Spaniard before him, but all he could find were copper deposits flecked with a little silver in modern-day Arizona.

Espejo’s own exaggerated stories of potential treasure waiting to be found in the arid Southwest overwhelmed all the years of failure and what has been taken as proof that there were no cities of gold. Espejo’s chronicles reinvigorated the rumor mill, and led in part to the eventual commissioning of Juan de Oñate to head north to New Mexico.

After all that search and struggle, maybe the Spanish should have seen a pattern emerging. Wherever they heard these Indian tales, the amazing lakes, peoples covered in gold were always a long journey from where they were at the moment. Oñate and his men also heard the stories of the lake of Copalla and gold. In Zárate’s telling, the faraway Indians “wore bracelets of gold, on the wrists and c

the fleshy part of the arms and in their ears, and that from there they were fourteen days' journey.”



California as an island. The long, narrow gulf that separates Baja California from the Mexican mainland long led explorers and mapmakers to assume the territory was an island. The name came from a sixteenth-century adventure novel, *The Adventures of Esplandián*. The author, Garci Rodríguez Ordonez de Montalvo, told of an island at “the right hand of the Indies” inhabited by a race of black women. He called his “rugged island” California, the name that has stuck for 600 years. CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Oñate’s expedition kept heading west, and reached the Gulf of California, the inlet that separates the Mexican mainland from Baja California. However, Oñate did not follow the gulf all the way up to its end, where the Colorado River flows in. It was assumed the water continued northward, contributing to the idea that would persist for decades that California was a long island off the western shores of the North American continent.

Oñate headed back home to New Mexico and attempted to make up for what he lacked in gold with persistence. He petitioned the viceroy for more soldiers, more settlers, and more supplies to take another run at making a success of Santa Fe de Nuevo Mexico.

What he got instead of more help was a summons to return to court. Word had made its way to Mexico City of Oñate’s treatment of Indians in general, and in particular his handling of the conflict at the Acoma Pueblo. King Philip II of Spain had issued a royal ordinance thirty years earlier governing the treatment of Indians by Spaniards. The use of violence against Indians was outlawed, which afforded them some protection from the casual assault and theft that marked so many encounters with Europeans. Standards were put in place for priests and monks, colonists, and military people.

It was five years before Oñate was finally called to New Mexico to face charges of cruelty to the Indians in connection with the Acoma uprising, and when he did the indictment significantly underplayed the carnage at the pueblo. He was also charged with executing mutineers and deserters, and adultery. He was fined, expelled permanently from New Mexico, and banished from Mexico City for four years.

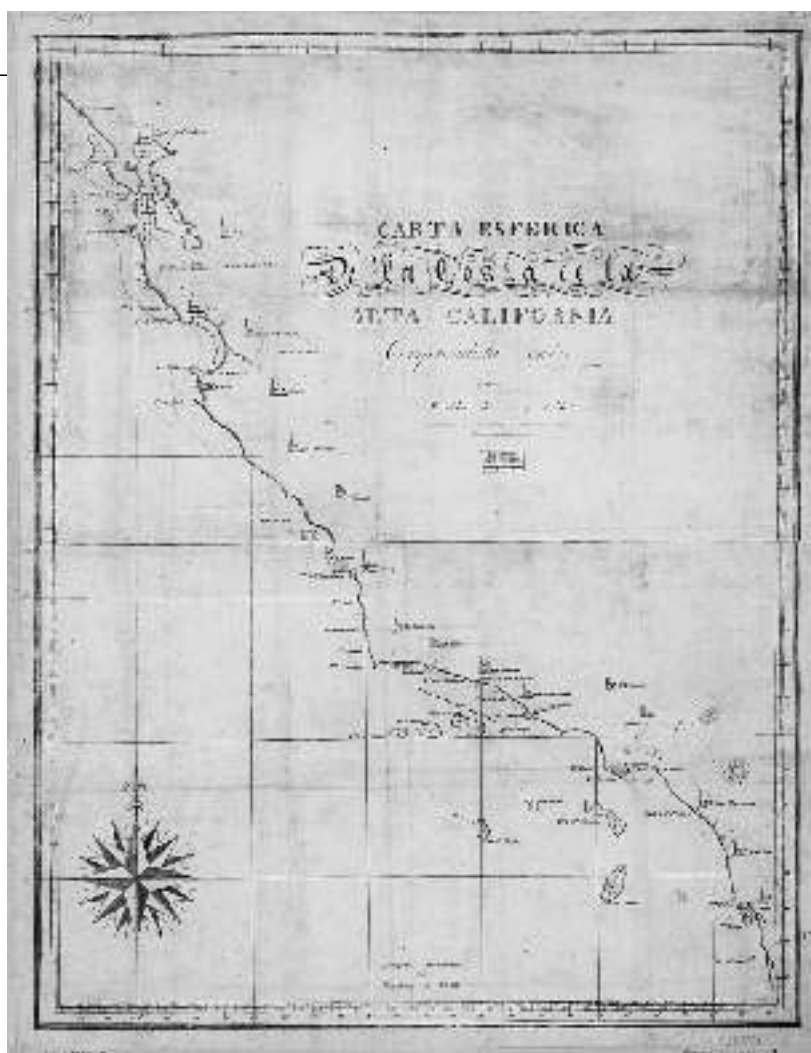
Historian Marc Simmons concludes that given the charges, the sentence eventually handed down was a lenient one. “In the career of Juan de Oñate, we find a summation of the motives, aspirations, intentions, strengths and weaknesses of the Hispanic pioneers who settled the Borderland.” The man often called “the Last Conquistador” died in Spain in 1626.

Founder of what became an American state. Witness to the founding of the oldest capital in North America, Santa Fe. Explorer of half a dozen American states covering a vast slice of the United States from Oklahoma to California. Whose name are you more likely to hear in an American history class? Captain John Smith, admiral of New England, saved from beheading by Pocahontas? Henry Hudson of the Dutch East India Company? Or Don Juan de Oñate, founder of the first European settlements north of the Rio Grande?

...

AS TRIBES ALONG the Eastern Seaboard, through the Great Lakes, and throughout South America learned all during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, defeating a few white men, or giving them what they wanted and sending them on their way, settled nothing. There would always be more.

In the decades that followed the death of Juan de Oñate, the Spanish viceroys in Mexico City continued to work to solidify their control of the vast, dry territories that stretched deep into the continent they maintained Spain owned. Roads poked their way into New Mexico, and eventually into Colorado, connecting routes of commerce and communication between the small cities and the sparsely settled European families heading north to take possession of land deeded by the Spanish Crown. Today, there are hundreds of thousands of descendants of these early families living in the Southwestern United States, including the actress Eva Longoria, and the former U.S. secretary of the interior and U.S. senator Ken Salazar.



The California Pueblos. This network of religious and military settlements consolidated the weak Spanish control of its northern possessions. These missions later grew into many of the largest cities in California and the United States. On this map you can see missions that are today the cities of San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Carmel, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, San Jose, San Francisco, San Rafael, and others. CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Along with bringing Catholicism to the pueblos, the priests brought Indians into the new missions communities that blended Spanish economic and religious ambitions. Native people were moved from their land and traditional systems of land tenure to live and work in complexes that included fields, factories, and churches. This system also made it easier for relatively small groups of soldiers, civil servants, and priests to govern and tax Indian populations many times their size.

In California, exposure to European microbes unintentionally brought suffering and death to long-settled Indian communities. The fact that germs benign in the mouths and guts of Europeans were deadly to Indians has long been understood. What is less remarked upon is the social chaos widespread death and illness caused, leaving many Indians prepared to give up their destabilized way of life and move in with the priests.

The Spanish mission system no longer exists in the United States, but, remarkably, many of the largest cities in the country, and major cities across the once-Spanish lands in the American Southwest, began their existence as missions. The cities include Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego in California, and San Antonio, Texas.

Indian settlements that remained far removed from the expanding Spanish footprint maintained relatively peaceful relations with the Crown. In places where the mission system and Spanish claims for agriculture and mining impinged on existing boundaries and ways of life, the encounter was a

source of growing tension. Defenders of indigenous religions deplored the growing number of priests settling in the region, and resented the forced labor used to build the churches.

In New Mexico, a religious leader from the San Juan pueblo called Popay saw the growing resentment of the Spanish colonists. At the same time, clashes between the native people of the Eastern Seaboard and British colonists were growing in frequency and ferocity, tensions were rising between Spanish colonists and native people in the West. Native people resented the system of forced labor pressed on them by the Spanish, and the pressure to abandon their religion.

In 1675, Popay was one of a group of forty-seven Indians convicted of sorcery in a trial in Santa Fe. The men had continued the rites and rituals of their own religion and refused to convert to Catholicism. Four were hanged; the remaining men were condemned to flogging and imprisonment. The Indian settlements across the colony sent a delegation to the capital to protest to Governor Juan Francisco de Treviño the treatment of Popay and the others. Fearing war, the governor released the prisoners and sent them home with a warning to stop the practices that had brought them to trial.

After a meeting of indigenous leaders in Taos, Popay emerged as a leader of the resistance to Spain. In 1680, he organized a revolt in pueblo communities across New Mexico. Unlike the struggles between the English and native nations in New England and the middle Atlantic states, this one succeeded.

Ask yourself for a moment how diverse groups speaking different languages, spread out over four hundred miles of territory, might organize a revolution. Popay sent runners to each pueblo carrying knotted deerskin strips. Each day a knot in the strip was to be untied. The revolt would begin when the last knot was undone. It was a clever plan, but the Spanish caught two runners on their way to the Tesuque Pueblo, revealing the plan. So the war began two days early, on August 10, 1680. The Spaniards were caught by surprise, and fell back to Santa Fe.

The uprising struck at the spiritual and political authority of Spain. When the uprising began, the strategy was for each pueblo to demolish its mission church and kill its resident priest. Then the rebels were to move to the surrounding areas and kill the Spanish settlers. Once those objectives were achieved, the Indian forces were to move on Santa Fe. The first phases were quickly accomplished, and by August 15, thousands of pueblo Indian fighters were massed outside the capital preparing to attack.

The Spaniards launched a counterstrike to drive the Indians back from the city. They were, however, cut off and made a careful retreat from Santa Fe, but not before destroying much of the city. They headed to El Paso del Norte, today's El Paso and the southernmost city in New Mexico. It was the only successful revolution by native people against European colonialists anywhere in the New World. The pueblo Indian revolutionaries kept the Spaniards out of New Mexico for another twelve years.

During that time Popay tried to extinguish every sign that the Spanish had been in their country. Most of the pueblos destroyed the churches, but eighty years of Spanish rule in New Mexico had left behind an indelible deposit on the land. Some Indian families had been Christian for decades. Many spoke Spanish. Others had kinship links with Spanish settlers. The colonists had left behind European agricultural techniques, tools, and building styles.

Drought plagued Indian country. Quarrels between the different settlements and rivalries over leadership of the loose confederation marked the years of returned self-rule. When a column of Spanish soldiers arrived in 1692, the Indians were promised clemency and protection from nearby native nations if they would swear allegiance to the Spanish king and return to the Catholic faith. The pueblo leaders met in Santa Fe and agreed to terms.

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