We Come in Peace (not really) - Quetzalcoatl, conquistadors, Francisco Pizarro, Hernando Cortes
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Age of Exploration Unit

Imagine a giant spaceship landing in front of you. A ladder drops down to your feet and an alien climbs out. The alien looks. Its skin is bright purple and you cannot understand anything it says. It seems to be smiling though . . . It points to a tree. Does it want the tree? The tree isn't yours so you're not sure what to say. More aliens climb out of the ship. Why are they here? Do they want war? Do they want peace? Do they just want trees? If you give them a tree, will they then try to take over the whole planet with their technology? Do you trust any of the stories you've heard about aliens? And if so, which ones? What are you supposed to do?

Before you choose, let me tell you two stories about early Americans. Two different empires in Central and South America welcomed people who would bring about the end of their civilization. They welcomed with open arms the people who destroyed them. Why would anyone do that, you ask? Like you, the native people who lived in these places had heard stories. Even though they had never seen an alien . . . I mean, a white man . . . they had still heard stories about them. They also heard of a god who would come to their shores and change the world. Quetzalcoatl is the name of a Mesoamerican god known as a serpent with feathers, who was said to show up at a very specific time on the calendar. He could take many forms, and the thing who showed up was not a serpent with feathers but a white man with a beard. Close enough.

Back on the alien planet . . . I mean, back in Spain . . . they wanted gold. The soft metal was rare in Europe, they thought it was pretty and they wanted a lot more of it. Also, it was worth a lot of money. So they sent people to the New World in the hopes that they would find a lot more of the pretty stuff and bring it back to dress up the palaces. A conquistador is a person sent from Spain to explore, conquer new land, and bring back riches. They came to the new land for the gold, but did not leave until they had taken over the land and turned many of the people into slaves. Maybe you should think about giving that alien
that tree . . .

The most famous "alien" to take over part of America landed in 1519. Hernando Cortes was a Spanish conquistador who is responsible for the fall of the Aztecs. The Aztecs had told stories about white gods with beards who would come and take over their land but in the end, bring about world peace. Even though the Spanish had guns and horses and the Aztecs did not, the Aztecs had many more people. Cortes was smart, though. He found that many people outside the empire had been hurt by the Aztecs and were looking to get back at them. He made these people a part of his army. Just think if only a few alien ships landed on Earth. We would not be worried at first. We could see there were not enough to beat us. But if they got all the everyone who felt that they have been not treated well to rise up with them . . .

If aliens did come to Earth, they would land on the parts that had the most of what they were looking for. Like trees. They also might land on different parts of Earth, looking for different things. Farther south, another explorer landed to find his own riches. In the mountains of what is now known as Chile, the people had lived there for hundreds of years . . . until the Spanish came. Francisco Pizarro was a conquistador from Spain who took over the Incas. In 1532 he landed in South America and attacked several times until they could take the leader of the Incas hostage. The Inca people paid gold and silver to save his life, but his men killed the leader anyway. From there, Pizarro named the land under the rule of his country. Maybe you should throw a rock instead of giving the visitor a tree.

It is not easy to know what to do when a spaceship lands in front of you. It was not easy for early Americans to know what to do when an explorer landed in their country. The Aztecs told stories of Quetzalcoatl, a snake with feathers who would come and bring about a great change to their people. This did not ready them for conquistadors, Spanish conquerors. Francisco Pizarro landed in Peru and brought about the end of the Inca. Hernando Cortes landed in Mexico and brought about the end of the Aztecs. Both men lied in order to get what they came for. You might think this means you should not trust an alien who says "We come in peace." Really, it means be kind to your neighbors. They may join the aliens in the fight.

References:

