



First Contact Between European and North America Peoples

Native Americans saw the European colonists as an opportunity economically and politically. The European had materials, iron and guns that were new to the Native Americans, and they saw that the Europeans could be used as allies against the enemies regardless of the differences in cultures.

The cultural clash in ideas can be seen in language. European talked in “time,” while Native Americas spoke in “place.” The European would say that we eat at noon, and the Native American would say that we ate under the big tree.

Native Americans did not see that the land could be owned or sold—one could only control it. When the Dutch colonists purchased Manhattan Island from a group of Native Americans, it became part of American folk history. However, the Native American group that sold the land was just passing through Manhattan at the time and were willing to take trinkets for a foolish idea of buying land. The idea of selling or buying the land was completely unthinkable to Native Americans. It would be like a European being offered money to sell the air around himself—an unthinkable proposition.

The economic advantage that one tribe received over another in trade goods gave a degree of political power over the tribe or the nation over other tribes. The Lewis and Clark expedition was seen by tribes outside the Blackfoot nation as a possible force to break to Blackfoot power in the Northwest.

The political power of the tribes, or nations, was always an underlying issue within the tribal politics. The French were favored by Native Americans and would ally with the French in a conflict, except when a tribe saw that a French-Native alliance was a disadvantage to their tribe. Then, they allied with the English colonies to oppose the other Native American tribes allied with the French.

Rarely did the tribes unify against a common foe because of intertribal demands. These demands were so strong that tribal leadership could not set or enforce policies. Native American leadership came from authority given, and chiefs had no power to take to force individuals to follow commands. Native rules were followed by custom and traditions. Native American ambushes were hard to coordinate because of the eagerness of warriors to be first and receive the honor.

The Native Americans and the European colonists used their own cultures to win advantages over each other. Economic and political issues were complicated by each side not understanding the other side’s culture. This misunderstanding of language and political structures leads to conflict. Words did not carry the same meaning to either side. Furthermore, when a chief signed a piece of paper, he did not have the power to see that all within the tribe honored the paper. Nor did the Europeans see the paper as a final binding agreement.

In Mexico, Cortes and the very few men with him were seen by native groups under the Aztec rule as a power that could end Aztec power. They joined Cortes in the thousands. The Incas in South America used the Europeans in a power struggle—civil war.

The history of the New World after 1492 is a complex history and should not be focused on negative or positive facts for a point of view.

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