Montezuma II
1466?–1520

WHY HE MADE HISTORY  Montezuma II was the most powerful leader in the Americas in the sixteenth century. He ruled the Aztec Empire from its capital city Tenochtitlán, later known as Mexico City. His meeting with Spanish adventurer Hernán Cortés and his men in 1519 was a dramatic event. Two years later, Cortés overtook the Aztec Empire and its capital. This brought together the cultures of Europe and the Americas to form what is now largely Mexico.

As you read the biography below, think about Montezuma’s strengths and weaknesses as a leader.

Montezuma II (or Moctezuma II) inherited the Aztec Empire from his uncle Ahuizotl in 1502. At that time, the empire included about six million people. The region stretched over an area of what is now Mexico and Nicaragua.

Montezuma spent much of his effort on war. He gained territories in south-central Mexico. Many of the conquered tribes were resentful because of the Aztec’s demand for high taxes and victims for sacrifices.

The Aztecs feared the coming of a white, bearded god. Prophecy said this god would take over the empire. In the decade prior to Spanish arrival in Mexico, a series of bad omens filled the Aztec people with anxiety. Even Montezuma had terrible dreams about the future. He asked for advice from astrologers to help explain these signs. They told him the end of the kingdom was nearing.

Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés and his men came to Mexico in 1519. Cortés was able to gain support from some of the Aztec people who were unhappy with Montezuma and his ways. When Montezuma met Cortés, he gave him gifts. He also gave Cortés’s men food and a place to stay. However, an outnumbered Cortés suspected he would be attacked. To protect himself, he took Montezuma prisoner.

After many months in prison, Montezuma was killed. Some historians believe that the Aztecs killed Montezuma using stones and arrows. These historians believe that Montezuma was killed while Cortés was away from
Tenochtitlán. Another historical record says that the Spaniards killed Montezuma.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Recall** What did Montezuma do that made his people angry with him?

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2. **Express and Support a Point of View** Was Montezuma a successful leader? Provide reasons or examples to support your point of view.

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ACTIVITY

Montezuma and his official translator have been captured by Cortés; only the translator survives this imprisonment. Although the translator was not present for Montezuma’s death, he must now explain to Montezuma’s people how their leader was killed. Compose a speech for the translator to deliver, including all the details you can about his imprisonment and how he gathered information about Montezuma’s death. Research Montezuma’s death and the Aztec kingdom to provide accurate details. Write your speech on a separate piece of paper.