The Fall of the Incas: A Historical Look at Power Struggles

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The Inca Empire was the largest in the world in the 1500s. Extending across western South America from Quito in the north to Santiago in the south, the Incas boasted of a large population blessed with wealth, knowledge, and an organized class system (read more about the Inca here). With their general size and prosperity, the great Inca Empire seemed an unlikely victim to the Spanish conquistadors, who were greatly outnumbered by the native Incas. While there were many reasons for the fall of the Incan Empire, including foreign epidemics and advanced weaponry, the Spaniards skillful manipulation of power played a key role in this great Empire’s demise.

When Spanish Conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, arrived in 1532, the Incas were fighting amongst themselves in a fierce civil war between two sons of the Inca ruler Wayna Qhapaq. Pizarro skillfully persuaded some of the factions created by civil unrest to turn against their own people, successfully increasing his small army of only 168 men. Even with reinforcements, however, it still seems incredulous that a few hundred could defeat an empire of 40,000 Inca rulers and over 10 million subjects. Material power seems to have favored the Incas. The Spaniards succeeded, in part, because of their manipulation of ideological power, or the ability to have people readily accept your agenda, without considering other options. Pizarro correctly discerned that the Inca people placed a large amount of ideological power on the Inca kings, who were considered living gods. By ruthlessly, and publicly, killing the Inca king in each region he conquered, Pizarro took the power held by Incan royalty, and gave it to the Spanish: the people who could kill gods. With their royalty and focus of worship destroyed, the general population readily accepted Spanish rule as “what was done.” This created local assistance which, along with outside factors, allowed the Spanish to completely conquer the region by 1572, marking the end of the Inca Empire.

This pattern of manipulating a people’s concept of ideological power, in conjunction with relational and material power, is seen throughout history and is often a large component of the fall of great empires. By understanding the geopolitical concepts of power, we can better understand our history and likewise understand the patterns we see around us every day.