

nails—but the impact of

Spain had the head start on its sixteenth-century rivals because it was then the world's superpower, so rich and powerful that the English looked upon it as a mortal threat to Protestants everywhere. Indeed, Pope Alexander VI considered Spain "the most Catholic" of Europe's many monarchies and in 1493 granted it ownership of almost the entire Western Hemisphere, even though the American mainland had yet to be discovered. It was a gift of staggering size: 16 million square miles—an area eighty times greater than Spain itself, spread across two continents and populated by perhaps 100 million people, some of whom had already built complex empires. Spain, with a population of less than seven million, had received the largest bequest in human history, with just one requirement attached: Pope Alexander ordered it to convert all the hemisphere's inhabitants to Catholicism and "train them in good morals." This overarching mission would inform Spanish policy in the New World, profoundly influencing the political and social institutions of the southern two-thirds of the Americas, including El Norte. It would also plunge Europe into perhaps the most apocalyptic of its many wars and, in the Americas, trigger what demographers now believe was the largest destruction of human lives in history.²