



IS THIS THE MOST IMPORTANT DATE IN U.S. HISTORY?

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What is the most important date in American history?

July 4th, 1776 – the date of American independence?

Or April 12, 1861 - the first day of the Civil War that ended slavery in America?

Or maybe December 7, 1941, the day the Japanese Empire bombed Pearl Harbor, bringing America into World War II?

Or how about this one – July 28th, 1588.

Yes, 1588. That's thirty years before Plymouth Rock, and almost twenty years before Jamestown, John Smith and Pocahontas.

So, why is it such an important date in American history?

First, a little background.

In 1588, the most powerful man in the world was the King of Spain, Phillip II. Flush with gold and silver from the New World, he had no rivals, save one: Queen Elizabeth of England.

England was a Protestant nation and Spain was Catholic, as was most of Europe. In addition to considering her a heretic, Phillip hated her for two additional reasons: first, she was financing a rebellion by the Dutch Protestants against Spain in the Spanish Netherlands, which Phillip controlled; and second, because she had executed her rebellious cousin, Mary Queen of Scots. Mary, like Phillip, was a Catholic monarch. Phillip felt that Mary, not Elizabeth, was the rightful heir to the English throne.

Phillip felt that with the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth had gone too far. The time had come, he decided, to discipline her and her heretic nation. He came up with an audacious plan. He would invade England. To do this he needed a large army and lots of ships. He needed an Armada. 130 ships that would carry 30,000 men.

Phillip was very rich, but not that rich. To build such a fleet, he would have to borrow heavily. But this wasn't much of an obstacle. Once he had conquered England, he could use the English treasury to pay off any debts. The Pope, wishing to see England return to the Catholic fold, promised additional financing.. So, the ships were built and the soldiers recruited. Most importantly, Phillip had chosen a competent man to lead them, the Marquis de Santa Cruz.

Santa Cruz asked for more time to prepare his ships and men, but Phillip was impatient. Far too impatient, as it turned out. In a massive stroke of misfortune (the first of many) Santa Cruz died just before the Armada was to set sail. Rather than take the time to seek a suitable replacement, Phillip pushed ahead and appointed Duke Medina Sidonia to take command. There was only one problem: Sidonia was an Army general. He had no naval experience; in fact, he had never been out to sea.

You can't hide 130 ships and 30,000 men. The English knew the Spanish were coming and they were ready for them. What they lacked in fire power, they made up in maneuverability, familiarity with the treacherous English Channel, and the most capable and creative sea commanders of the age -- Lord High Admiral Howard, Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake. They knew they couldn't win a shootout with the Spanish.

So instead, they launched a pre-emptive attack on the Spanish fleet while it was still docked in the French port of Calais. Setting a number of their own ships on fire, they sailed them into the port. The Spanish cut their anchors to flee the flaming English ships, but, in their panic, they only made matters worse. The Spanish ships rammed into each other, tangling riggings, slicing sails and crushing hulls. The vessels that weren't damaged were sitting ducks for the English cannon.

Seeing that England had blocked their escape back to Spain, the badly wounded Armada sailed north into the Atlantic, hoping to regroup. But then the weather turned. Mother Nature finished what the English had started. When it was all over, only 76 of the 130 Spanish ships returned home and half the 30,000 soldiers were on the bottom of the ocean floor. Spain never challenged England again. Spain never challenged anyone again. It was finished as a great power.

So why was the defeat of the Spanish Armada so important to American history?

If the Armada had won, England would have become part of the Spanish Empire. There would have been no further English exploration of the North American coastline. In all likelihood Spain, not England, would have colonized the eastern seaboard and expanded westward.

Spain would have ruled America as it did South America. There would have been no thirteen colonies, no thirteen original United States. The America that we know would not exist.

Without a United States of America there would be no Declaration of Independence, no Constitution, no Bill of Rights. The whole concept of American Democracy, an idea that profoundly changed human history, would be unknown.

The defeat of the Spanish Armada on July 28, 1588 made America possible.

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