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John Winthrop and the Doctrine of Discovery

John Winthrop, born in 1588 in Suffolk, England, was a prominent figure in American history, best known as the Puritan leader who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. An ardent believer in Puritanism, Winthrop sought to create a new society in America that would adhere closely to his religious ideals. In 1630, he led a large group of Puritans across the Atlantic, aiming to establish a community based on moral purity and strict adherence to religious principles. Upon their arrival, Winthrop famously declared their new colony to be "a city upon a hill," symbolizing their hope to create a model society that would be an example to the world.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony quickly became the largest and most influential of the New England settlements. Under Winthrop's leadership, it was characterized by a rigid social order that aimed to weave together the civil and the sacred. The government was a theocratic one where secular laws were deeply intertwined with religious doctrine, reflecting Winthrop's vision of a community governed by divine law.

Before leaving for the New World, Winthrop wrote, "General Observations for the Plantation in New England." In it, he outlined several justifications and plans for the establishment and governance of the colony. This document is critical for understanding the ideological and practical foundations of the Puritan settlement in the New World.

Winthrop's essay is organized as a series of objections to settlement of the New World and his responses to them. Objection 5 within this document addresses a significant ethical and legal question: By what right did the Puritans claim land that was already inhabited by Native Americans? This objection reflects the broader European debate about the rights of colonizers versus the rights of indigenous peoples.

Winthrop's response to Objection 5 utilized the common justification of the time, which was heavily influenced by the Doctrine of Discovery. This doctrine, backed by European legal and religious thought, argued that Christian nations had a divine mandate to take possession of and cultivate lands held by non-Christians. Winthrop contended that the land in New England was underutilized according to European standards of agriculture and settlement. He argued that since the Native Americans did not cultivate the land intensively nor did they have a concept of land ownership akin to European legal definitions, it was available for English use and settlement.

Winthrop's justification represents a viewpoint that facilitated European expansion into the Americas, often at the expense of indigenous populations. It highlights the complex interplay of religion, law, and cultural supremacy that underpinned European colonial endeavors in North America.