

Holiday Cinco de Mayo

The Story of Cinco de Mayo

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CINCO DE MAYO, celebrated today in Mexico and throughout the American southwest, has more in common with St. Patrick's Day than the Fourth of July. While many Americans will share in the food, spirits and dancing of Cinco de Mayo, many mistakenly believe they're honoring the date Mexico separated from Spain. They'll party anyway.

In Mexico, Independence Day is September 16. On May 5, Mexicans celebrate "Battle of Puebla Day", honoring a seminal victory by Mexican forces over French invaders in 1862. At the time of the battle, Mexico had been a liberated republic for 41 years.



Porfirio Diaz

Still, the Battle of Puebla is an important moment in Mexican history. The victory there became a rallying cry (similar to our "Remember Pearl Harbor") behind which the divided, chaotic Mexican spirit coalesced into the proud nationalism celebrated on Cinco de Mayo.

The battle against the French was won; but the war was lost, and Mexico was governed by French-appointed King Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph. However, the new-found spirit grew unchecked and the Mexicans rallied to eventually oust the French and execute Maximilian in 1867. The republic was restored and although Mexico went through another 40 years of inner turmoil, it was never again invaded.

Events leading up to the battle at Puebla trace back to the Presidency of Benito Juarez. Following a lengthy civil war, Juarez firmly controlled the nation in 1861. But the battle left most of Mexico's economy in tatters. Juarez inherited a bankrupt treasury which owed \$80 million to European creditors. As the nations of Britain, France and Spain demanded repayment, Juarez slapped a two-year moratorium on debt paying, sparking anger across the Atlantic.

In December 1861, British, French and Spanish troops seized the port city of Veracruz. Following long negotiations, the British and Spanish departed but Napoleon III was aggressively expanding his empire into Indochina, Africa and the Middle East and saw Mexican instability well suited to his desire to regain a French grip on the Americas.

One month following the departure of British and Spanish forces, Napoleon dispatched 4,500 troops under General Charles Latrille, charged with the capture of Mexico City. French diplomats told Latrille that he'd be well received by the Mexican clergy (which was at odds with Juarez) in the small hillside town of Puebla south of Mexico City.

Instead, Latrille was greeted by a company of 2,000 Mexican infantry. He attacked the hillside fortress three times on May 5, 1862. Within two hours, Latrille's forces had expended their ammunition while the Mexican troops, led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, dug in.

To make matters worse for the French, the European troops were suffering from a digestive-tract malady common to newcomers to Mexico and did not, thus, exhibit intestinal fortitude. Puebla was temporarily spared.

From historic battles come unknowns who rise to greatness. One hero at the Battle of Puebla was young brigadier Porfirio Diaz who repelled a late-day charge by the frustrated French forces. Diaz later emerged as Mexico's strongman at the end of the 19th century, ruling the country with an iron will until he was deposed in the Revolution of 1910.

The French eventually overran Mexico, driving Juarez to the American border where he slowly massed support for a military response. In 1864, Maximilian arrived in Veracruz to assume the new Mexican throne.

By now the United States had ended its tragic Civil War and the Army turned its eyes south where it viewed the French invasion of Mexico an impingement on the Monroe Doctrine. The Army began supplying arms to Juarez through California and the Mexican leader turned small victories against Maximilian into widespread revolt.

Napoleon withdrew his troops and Maximilian stayed on to his death at the hands of a Juarez firing squad in June 1867.

In Mexico, the celebration of the victory at Puebla is marked by parades, feasts and revelry. Though it is not as festive as the September 16th Independence Celebrations, Cinco de Mayo has a special place in Mexican life. A street in



Benito Juarez

Mexico City has been named "Cinco de Mayo" and downtown is the scene of flag-bedecked buildings and a large parade.

Mexicans visit friends or attend celebrations in city parks and plazas. They have a festive dinner in the afternoon and many dance until dawn.

The town of Puebla, now a medium-sized city, has not forgotten its heritage either. Each year the residents stage a mock battle between French expeditionary forces and Mexican troops.

In the city of Penon, near Mexico City, a full-scale recreation of the Puebla battle is staged. Beginning at 11 am, a parade of forces led by actors portraying Generals Zaragoza and Latrille march through the streets, joined by an entourage of Zacapoxtas Indians (who helped wage the original battle), women and children.

After the mock battle is won, participants sign a treaty and then proceed to party through the night as the French flag is lowered until the following year.