

# Cinco de Mayo



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We will soon be celebrating *el Cinco de Mayo*. Even though *Cinco de Mayo* is widely celebrated throughout the United States, many are unaware of its significance in Mexico, and much less aware of the historical tie *el Cinco de Mayo* has to the United States.

Many believe that *el Cinco de Mayo* is Mexican Independence Day. Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821. *El Cinco de Mayo* commemorates the Battle of Puebla fought on May 5, 1862, 50 years after Mexican Independence was gained.

### BACKGROUND OF EVENTS LEADING TO THE BATTLE OF PUEBLA



From the time of Mexican Independence in 1821 to the time of the Battle of Puebla in 1862, Mexico suffered numerous

setbacks in its attempts to form a stable republic. The country endured several incursions into its sovereignty as an independent nation. Fifteen years into its independence, Texas seceded from Mexico. The Texas Revolt

was led by “American-Mexicans,” Anglos who migrated from the United States to Mexico, promising to obey Mexican laws and respect Mexican traditions. Also, one of the conditions of their being able to migrate to Texas was that they not own slaves. Slavery was forbidden in the Mexican Constitution.

Since many Anglo settlers did not respect Mexican laws and traditions as they promised to, Mexico decided to enforce its laws. Thus, the Texas Revolt eventually led to the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), a war won by the U.S. As a result, Mexico was forced to surrender approximately half of its territory to the U.S.

Mexico, which had never been financially stable, underwent a severe economic crisis during the 1850s. President Benito Juarez inherited Mexico’s troubled political and financial situation, which included a bankrupt Mexican treasury. As a result of these problems, President Juarez issued a moratorium in 1861 halting payments on Mexican foreign debt. Much of this debt was owed to France. Shortly thereafter, France sent troops to Mexico to secure payment of its debt.

At the time, the French army of Napoleon III was considered the premier army in the world. It had en-

joyed recent victories throughout Europe and Asia. The French expected to march from the port city of Veracruz to Mexico City without encountering much resistance. The plan was to march through Mexico to easily occupy it and then to join the Confederacy in the Civil War to fight against the Union Army. The trade-off would be free and unfettered access for the French to the southern ports once the South was victorious.

President Juarez sent troops, under the command of Texas-born General Ignacio Zaragoza, to Puebla to confront the French. The Mexican troops consisted almost entirely of indigenous soldiers, much like today. General Zaragoza's troops were outnumbered and were severely under-equipped. The Battle of Puebla raged on for two hours, after which time the French were forced to retreat to Orizaba. Despite tremendous odds, the humble Mexican Army defeated the most powerful fighting unit in the world!

One year after the Battle of Puebla, the French brought in more troops and re-attacked. This time they were able to make their way to Mexico City, take the capital, and install Emperor Maximilian as the reigning monarch of Mexico. Maximilian ruled Mexico for about four years,

until his execution in 1867 by troops loyal to President Juarez, who regained power.

### ***El Cinco de Mayo's Historical Significance for Mexico***

Although the Battle of Puebla was rendered militarily insignificant by the French's subsequent victory, it did inject the Mexican people with pride and patriotism they had never before enjoyed. Since its independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico had suffered one tragedy after another. The Battle of Puebla was the first time that the Mexican people could rally around a common cause and proudly proclaim *¡Yo soy Mexicano!*

### **Historical Significance for the United States**

The Mexicans had won a great victory that kept Napoleon III from supplying the Confederate rebels for another year, allowing the United States to build the greatest army the world had ever seen. This grand army smashed the Confederates at Gettysburg just 14 months after the Battle of Puebla, essentially ending the



Civil War. Some scholars believe that it is possible the Civil War may have had a different outcome if the French had been able to join the Confederate army as planned.

## Chicano Activists' Role in Establishing Cinco de Mayo as a U.S. Holiday

Chicano activists fighting for equality and civil rights in the '60s and '70s began celebrating *el Cinco de Mayo* because it represented victory in the face of great odds. Just as they were at battle to gain greater rights and respect as a minority group in the United States, they felt that if the young, ill-equipped Mexican army at the Battle of Puebla was able to prevail over a super power, then they, too, could prevail in their efforts to obtain equal voice and equal rights in voting, education, housing, and representation, to name a few areas of focus and advocacy.

Many Chicano activists from the '60s and '70s take pride in knowing that *el Cinco de Mayo* has become widely accepted as a holiday to celebrate cultural heritage. However, they also lament the fact that so few know the historical significance of *el Cinco de Mayo* for both Mexico and the United States. So in the spirit of education and information for all, the Greater Dallas Hispanic Chamber of Commerce is proud to put the spotlight on that historical significance.

*Feliz Cinco de Mayo* to all – may we all experience victory when we are faced with great odds!

Verbatim Sources:  
[www.azteca.net](http://www.azteca.net)  
[www.vivacincodemayo.org](http://www.vivacincodemayo.org)

