

Cinco de Mayo

The Mexican National Holiday Most Celebrated in the United States

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José Cusachs, *Battle of May 5, 1862*, 1903 (oil on canvas).

Mexico's Independence Day is September 16, the date the war against Spain's three-centuries-long domination began. But May 5, or Cinco de Mayo, is also a national civic festivity. On that day, we celebrate the beginning of the fight for the country's second independence, in this case against French intervention, commemorating the defeat of the French army at the Battle of Puebla.

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However, Cinco de Mayo is more celebrated in the United States than in Mexico. Let's look at the possible reasons for this.

BACKGROUND

After 11 years of insurgent warfare, the Mexican people had to fight 15 more years to achieve recognition of their independence from Spain, which attempted to re-conquer the country in 1829. When Mexico was finally recognized as a



Tiburcio Sánchez, *Benito Juárez*, 1899 (oil on canvas).

sovereign country in 1836, the world powers tried to take the place of its previous colonial metropolis. That same year, a conflict began with the United States because of the secession of Texas, which was later annexed by the U.S. in 1845. After refusing to recognize the original borders of Texas, the U.S. army invaded Mexico, beginning a war of conquest from 1846 to 1848; the outcome was that it seized more than 2 378 539 square kilometers of Mexican land, more than half its territory.

Meanwhile, England had taken over the Mexican economy through ruinous loans, part of which were in kind, for example, providing obsolete armaments, while it took over Mexico's mines and controlled its trade through its manufactures.

France did not want to be left out, so in 1838 it blockaded Veracruz, Mexico's main port, under the pretext of procuring payment for damages to its compatriots incurred in the country's constant political conflicts during the construction of the Mexican national state. François, Prince de Joinville, the son of Louis Philippe d'Orléans, was part of the French unit that bombarded Veracruz; this gives the reader an idea of the importance they gave to their intervention in the country.

Later, the United States maintained the pressure to be able to keep more of Mexico; it wanted half the territory of the northern states, the Baja California peninsula, and passage through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Finally, they were able to acquire the Mesilla Valley.¹ France, for its part, wanted Sonora, Mexico's second largest state, so it could work its mines, and in 1854, it encouraged the filibustering

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adventure of Count Raousset de Boulbon. Before becoming emperor of France, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had thought up the idea of intervening in the Americas to stop the United States, which was threatening to swallow the entire continent, just as it had taken over Mexican territory. His uncle Napoleon I had foreseen this danger. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, the chancellor who turned France into the center of Europe, had put forward the need to safeguard international equilibrium by stopping the United States.

Alexander von Humboldt had presented Mexico to the world as a horn of plenty. Michel Chevalier reaffirmed the idea that it was very rich in natural resources and therefore ripe for intervention. In addition, they said that the "Latin nations" had to be helped out of chaos and safeguarded from the Protestant Anglo-Saxons. The idea was to unite the Latin race with France at the head.

Louis Napoleon shared his uncle and Talleyrand's ideas of blocking the United States and uniting the "Latin world." He followed Chevalier's advice about intervening in Mexico, and he also aspired to digging a "Napoleon Channel" communicating the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In 1846, he pub-



General Ignacio Zaragoza.

lished a pamphlet in England explaining his project and even entered into negotiations with Nicaraguan diplomats.² Thus, before becoming emperor of France, he had already thought about intervening in the Americas; in his mind, Mexico was part of Central America, and the ideal site for putting his imperial projects into practice.

In the midst of civil war, in 1859, since they could not defeat the republican Liberals, Mexico's monarchists asked Napoleon III to intervene to establish a second empire in Mexico.³ The emperor of France was delighted to accept; he had only to wait for the best time, which came when the war of secession broke out in the United States, and when in 1861 Juárez's constitutional government requested a two-year moratorium on Mexico's debt.

Napoleon draped his intervention in the Treaty of London, forming a tri-partite alliance with Spain and England, to force payment of Mexico's debt to them. It should be pointed out that the debts were of different dimensions: while England was owed Mex\$68.5 million and Spain almost Mex\$9 million, France was only owed about Mex\$200 000. To that sum must be added fraudulent bonds issued by the banker Jecker, who had made a loan to the conservative head of a coup attempt, Miguel Miramón, for Mex\$15 million at 6 percent interest a year.⁴ Napoleon's influential half-brother, Charles Auguste de Morny, was implicated in this

—clearly illegal— business venture that Mexico's constitutional government refused to recognize. He also invited the United States to join the Treaty of London, knowing that it would not do so because of its internal strife.

In December 1861, 5 600 Spanish and 2 400 French troops disembarked in Mexico. The following January, more French soldiers landed, bringing the total to 7 111, while the English sent only 800. Since Benito Juárez's government had already been warned by diplomat José de Jesús Terán that the moratorium was going to serve as a pretext for intervention, he abrogated it. Thanks to this, he was able to come to an independent bilateral agreement with the Spanish and the English. Meanwhile, the French had advanced toward the country's capital, violating all the Treaty of London accords that stipulated non-intervention in Mexico's internal political affairs. They also violated the accords with the Mexican government that had allowed the invading armies to set up camp in a disease-free area of the coast and had stipulated they would retreat to the port where they had disembarked if hostilities broke out.

The head of the French axis, Charles Ferdinand Latrille, Count of Lorencez, planned to take Mexico City in June 1862. However, he was defeated on May 5 on the outskirts of Puebla. After being repulsed during his three attempts to take Forts Loreto and Guadalupe, he decided to retreat without



Primitivo Miranda, *Soldiers of the Reform* (oil on canvas).

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The French Fleet Arriving to the Port of Veracruz.

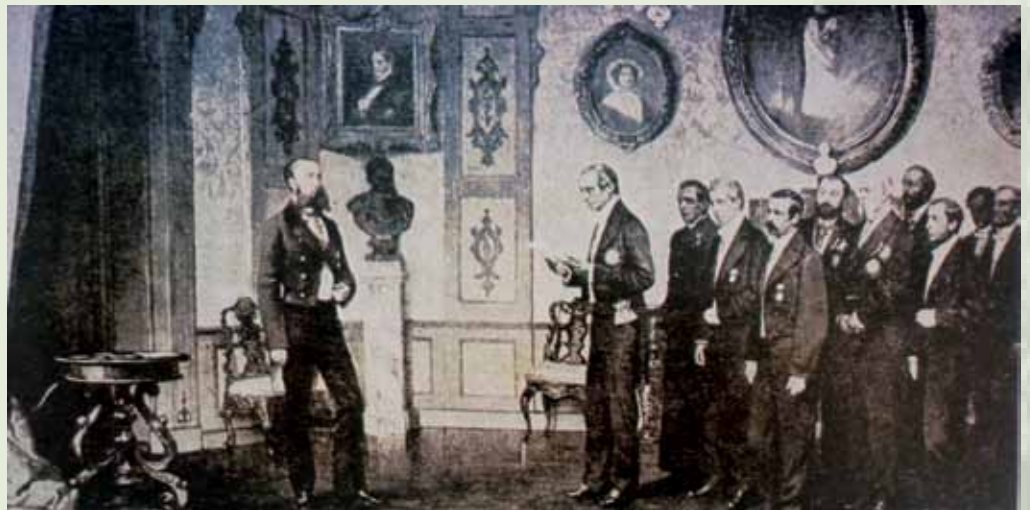
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giving battle again. This Mexican army victory infused confidence in the troops and government that they would be able to achieve total victory, and postponed the intervention an entire year.

The French army attacked with 6 000 men; the Mexicans had 4 800. While the French were seasoned soldiers who had been victorious at Sebastopol in the Crimean War against Russia, and at Magenta and Solferino in the Second Italian War of Independence against the Austrian Empire, the Mexicans did not even have uniforms, much less appropriate weapons. Indigenous from the Puebla mountains, part of the Mexican contingent, were barefoot, clad in rough cotton homespun, and fought with machetes, but with the strength of those who defend what is their own. The Mexican army vanquished the heretofore undefeated French army.

The words of Juarista General Ignacio Zaragoza, both before and after the battle, are an example of the patriotic sentiments that drove the fighting. On the morning of May 5, he spoke to the troops: “Our enemies are the foremost soldiers of the world; but you are the foremost sons of Mexico, and they want to take away your homeland.”⁵ After the battle, he reported to the president, “The weapons of the supreme government have been covered in glory,”⁶ and President Juárez telegraphed “Long live Mexico!”

Mexican General Ignacio Zaragoza had taught a lesson to his French counterpart, who had written to Napoleon that, because the French “race” was superior, they already owned the country. Lorencez was relieved of his command because of the failure and his country’s press tried to forget the blow. France ended by sending nearly 40 000 men but was never able to stamp out the Republican guerrilla fight-



The Mexican Delegation Offers the Crown to Maximilian.



Alberto Beltrán, *The People Acclaim Juárez*, 1968 (engraving).

ers, who wore them down until they had to leave in defeat. Mexico was their nineteenth-century Vietnam. Napoleon III had written that his work in the Americas would be the most glorious page in his reign, but it became the beginning of his fall. Louis Napoleon managed to establish a colonial empire in Asia in Indochina and Cambodia, and also consolidate the domination of Algeria; but he was not able to in Mexico.

WHY IS CINCO DE MAYO MORE CELEBRATED IN THE UNITED STATES?

You will ask yourselves why Cinco de Mayo is more celebrated in the United States than in Mexico. There are different reasons. The Mexican-American communities celebrate the

Mexican army's May 5 victory with legitimate pride in order to strengthen their identity *vis-à-vis* the non-Latino U.S. community.

It has been said that one reason Cinco de Mayo is celebrated in the U.S. is that General Ignacio Zaragoza was born in what is today Goliad, Texas, but obviously the town was part of Mexico in 1829 when he was born. It has also been said that the U.S. celebration is due to the fact that, when the European interventionist army was defeated, the Western Hemisphere fell to the U.S. zone of influence. The Monroe Doctrine, "America for Americans," turned into "America for the United States." This is a weighty reason, but there are others.

Countries in South America and the Caribbean declared President Benito Juárez the "Worthy of the Americas" because he headed up the fight to defend national sovereignty in the face of the French intervention.⁷ The countries of the region considered the victory in the defense of Mexican sovereignty their own. When European imperialist undertakings were defeated, the Americas would stop being seen as a land ripe for conquest and colonization. In that same sense, we must keep in mind that the United States was vulnerable amidst its war of secession when Napoleon decided to put his imperialist project into practice. There was a risk that the French Empire would also want to intervene in the United States, which would explain the celebration of a Mexican victory there.

The fear of this possible intervention would also explain the United States' constant violations of its neutrality declaration *vis-à-vis* the French war in Mexico, which the represen-

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Montage of the Execution by Firing Squad of Maximilian, Mejía, and Miramón.



Patricio Ramos Ortega, *The Battle of Puebla, May 5, 1862, 1862* (oil on canvas).

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tative of Benito Juárez’s constitutional government, Matías Romero, protested.⁸ The U.S. Americans were selling arms to the French, but they denied them to the Mexicans; it was not until the end of the war of secession that the United States declared itself against intervention in Mexico.

Cinco de Mayo celebrations began from the moment the Mexican army defeated the French at Forts Loreto and Guadalupe on the outskirts of Puebla. Both the government and the Liberal and republican press celebrated the unexpected victory over the invader, a natural reaction given the defeat of what was considered the world’s best army. The festivities were a way of encouraging the struggle against the invader.

After four years of foreign occupation, in June 1866, Juárez wrote that when the war ended, “the American republics—I do not mean Washington, but at least Mexico— will be absolutely free of the triple yoke of state religion, privileged classes, and onerous treaties with the European powers.”⁹

In 1867, on the day the president returned to Mexico City after defeating the Second Empire, Benito Juárez declared that Mexico’s second independence was being consummated.¹⁰ This declaration shows the importance of what happened beginning with the battle of May 5. Thanks to that, Mexico had not been turned into a protectorate of either France or the United States. ■■■

NOTES

¹ In 1853; this episode is also known as the Gadsden Purchase.

² Christian Schefer, *Los orígenes de la intervención francesa en México (1858-1862)* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1963), p. 30.

³ In 1856, the former head of the Mexican delegation in London, Tomás Murphy, asked Napoleon III to save Mexico from the internal strife that put it at the mercy of the United States. That same year, the French diplomat the Marquis de Radepon proposed Napoleon intervene in Mexico. During the 1859 civil war, Mexican diplomat José María Gutiérrez de Estrada had an audience with Napoleon to request his intervention to establish a monarchy.

⁴ This involved 133 000 bonds of different partial values for a total of Mex\$15 million that would earn 6 percent a year in interest, which would be paid in two equal parts (3 percent) to the Treasury and Jecker’s banking house, and which would be accepted as payment of taxes for up to 20 percent of the amount owed. The house of Jecker received almost the entire issue, making it the owner for 10 years of 20 percent of the government’s income, plus the 3 percent interest on that amount. Justo Sierra, *Juárez, su obra y su tiempo* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1972), pp. 300-303.

⁵ Jorge L. Tamayo, *Benito Juárez. Documentos, discursos y correspondencia* vol. 11 (Mexico City: Libros de México, 1974), p. 119.

⁶ “Proclama al amanecer,” in Jorge L. Tamayo, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 435.

⁷ Colombia declared Juárez the “Worthy of the Americas” on May 1, 1865; the Dominican Republic’s Congress declared in April 1867 that Juárez deserved “the good” of the Americas.

⁸ Matías Romero, *Diario personal (1855-1856)* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1960).

⁹ “Carta de Juárez a Pedro Santacilia, El Paso, 1° de junio de 1866,” in Tamayo, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 119.

¹⁰ Tamayo, op. cit., vol. 12, pp. 272-274.