

A SHARED HOLIDAY

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A new holiday is edging into American consciousness. It did not originate here, but in Mexico, and is known on both sides of the border by its Spanish name, Cinco de Mayo, the fifth of May. It is celebrated in this country largely by binge-drinking college students and young homesick Hispanics, but most of us are mystified as to why it should be celebrated at all. Most people assume the fifth of May is Mexico's independence day, much as the fourth of July is ours. But, Mexico achieved its independence from Spain on September 15, 1810. Cinco de Mayo celebrates another event important not only to Mexicans, but also to the United States. The day truly has joint significance for both our countries and I'll try to explain why this should be.

First, a little history. Mexico struggled for its very existence during the first fifty years following its independence. The Spanish had left behind an oligarchy of wealthy landowners and entrenched civil servants who continued the system of economic and social repression that had existed under colonial rule. The nation suffered under a succession of incompetent and corrupt leaders who did little for the Mexican people.

The United States contributed to Mexico's problems. Fueled by the dual urges of manifest destiny and national boundaries, our nation initiated what President Grant regarded as "the most unjust war in our history", the Mexican-American war. As settlement for victory in this essentially one-sided conflict, the United States acquired almost half of Mexico's territory, including what are today all or parts of ten states extending from Texas to California.

The humiliation of this territorial loss galvanized resistance to the existing Mexican government by liberal forces intent on agrarian reform. This resistance, in turn, became a civil war which lasted from 1858 to 1861, and resulted in the election of a new president, Benito Juarez, in 1861. Juarez was Mexico's first Indian president and his liberal party was composed largely of Indians and part-Indians called mestizos.

When he assumed office in 1862, Juarez took over a country which was deeply in debt to France, Spain and England. One of his first steps was to impose a two-year moratorium on the payment of all foreign debts and this, quite naturally, prompted joint action on the part of his European debt-holders. They decided to sail to Mexico, as a unified force, seize the customhouse at Vera Cruz, and impound all tariffs until their debts were repaid. This was the total extent of the

British and Spanish intentions, but the French had another agenda.

Napoleon III, the ruler of France, had for a long time, harbored resentment against the United States, believing that its rise in world power had come at France's expense and, further, that the existence of the Monroe Doctrine was frustrating France's desires for colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. With the outbreak of the Civil War in the United States, Napoleon saw an opportunity to exploit the situation in such a way as to remedy both these concerns. His plan was to go to Mexico, capture Mexico City and set up a French puppet government that would throw its support to the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War. This would both weaken the United States and give France a foothold for further Influence in the new world. President Lincoln became aware of this plan and its potential consequences for the U.S. At the time, however, he had his hands full trying to subdue the Southern insurrection and could do little more than send the French warning letters, which were ignored.

As an aside, you will recall that the strategy of weakening an enemy by taking sides in an internal struggle was not new to the French. They had done the same thing in the American Revolution to weaken England when it became clear that the colonies had a good chance to prevail. In 1862, the French believed that the South had a good chance of prevailing in the Civil War and it seemed an opportune time to throw their support to the rebel cause.

Enough background. As planned, the French, Spanish and English ships sailed to Vera Cruz in the spring of 1862. The Spanish and English forces reached agreement quickly with the Mexican government on the matter of their debts and returned to Europe. The French had no wish to reach any agreement, however, and used the failure to do so as an excuse to march on Mexico City. They had brought along some 8,000 well-equipped infantry and cavalry for this very purpose and they wasted no time in setting off on their objective.

The task of opposing this force was daunting. President Juarez appointed one of his civil war comrades, General Ignacio Zaragoza, to head up the defense. There was no Mexican standing army of any significance, but Zaragoza managed to scrape up about 4000 men who could be best described as somewhere between militia and guerillas. Weapons were in short supply and some of his infantrymen were armed only with machetes.

On May 5, 1862, near the small town of Puebla, about 70 miles southeast of Mexico City, the two forces met. Zaragoza attacked while the French were crossing a narrow road through marshlands. The French leadership found it difficult to maneuver their infantry into defensive positions and aggravated the situation by diverting their cavalry to a fruitless pursuit of the Mexican cavalry. This was a mistake, as the Mexicans were skilled horsemen who hacked up

their French counterparts rather badly.

The French were routed, retreated hastily to Vera Cruz and returned to France. But, they didn't abandon their plans for conquest and returned the next year, 1863, with a force of 30,000 troops. They had no trouble in capturing Mexico City and deposing the Mexican government; in 1864, they installed the Archduke Maximilian of Austria and his wife, Carlota, as the puppet rulers of Mexico.

So, the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, only gained the Mexicans a year's respite from French defeat and occupation. But, it was an extremely meaningful year for both Mexicans and Americans. For the former, it provided a psychological shot in the arm by proving to them and their Latin American neighbors that they were capable of resisting European colonialists. This new confidence enabled them to wage an effective guerilla war against the French puppet government for the next four years.

The benefits to the United States were more tangible. Union forces in 1862 were back on their heels in almost every theater of the Civil War. Had the French been successful in their initial foray on May 5, 1862, there is every reason to think they would've thrown their weight behind the Confederacy, much as they had with the American colonies 85 years previously. But, the one-year delay in their plans to defeat Mexico changed all that. When the French returned in 1863, the high water mark of the Confederacy had passed with their defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. The French - always at their best in assessing military situations - recognized this and abandoned any ideas of throwing in with the Confederacy. They did not abandon their colonial plans for Mexico, but their days were numbered there as well. At the conclusion of hostilities in the U.S. Civil War, General Grant sent an army corps under the command of General Sheridan to the Rio Grande to station him where he might aid President Juarez in expelling the French from Mexico. Sheridan deployed his troops along the full length of the river, much to the consternation of the French who made a protest to Washington. This led to negotiations which ultimately resulted in our troops being withdrawn from the Rio Grande, in return for France's agreement to withdraw all their troops from Mexico. The evacuation of the French troops, which began in 1866, marked the beginning of the end for poor Maximilian. The loyalist Mexican troops he was left with could not stave off Juarez' guerilla forces. The latter were being openly supplied with weapons and ammunition by the U.S. and discharged Union veterans were encouraged to fight as volunteers with the Mexican forces in return for being able to keep their weapons and uniforms.

In May 1867, Mexico City was retaken by Juarez. Emperor Maximilian was captured, tried by court-martial and executed; his reign had lasted only three years. His wife, Carlota,

supposedly went insane from the trauma of these events; she was permitted to return to France and spent the rest of her life in a convent. A victory parade was held in Mexico City after the French downfall and those American volunteers who fought with the Mexican forces marched in the parade and were called the "American Legion of Honor". Their service could be viewed, <suppose, as merely partial repayment of the debt of gratitude we owe to the 4000 brave Mexicans who defeated a French force twice their size on May 5, 1862, and possibly insured our survival as a united nation.

So, next Saturday, mix up a large pitcher of margaritas, invite your friends in, and raise your glasses with the hearty toast: "Viva el Cinco de Mayo!"