



Cinco de Mayo, the fifth of May, marks the victory of the Mexican Militia over the French Army at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. Although the Mexican army was eventually defeated, the "Batalla de Puebla" came to represent a symbol of Mexican unity and patriotism. It is not, as many people believe, Mexican Independence Day, which is actually September 16th.

The battle at Puebla happened at a chaotic time in Mexico's history. Mexico had finally gained independence from Spain in 1821 after a difficult and bloody struggle. The aftermath of the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, the Mexican Civil War of 1858, and the 1860 Reform Wars left Mexico devastated and nearly bankrupt. Mexico had accumulated heavy war debts to several nations, including Spain, England, and France, who were demanding payment.



On July 17, 1861, President Benito Juarez issued a moratorium in which all foreign debt payments would be suspended for two years, with the promise that after two years payments would resume. The English, Spanish and French refused to accept this, and instead decided to invade Mexico and demand payment. Britain and Spain negotiated with Mexico and withdrew, but France, at the time ruled by Napoleon III, was eager to expand its empire and establish its own leadership in Mexico.



Napoleon believed that Mexico was too weak to defend itself from a superior military. Napoleon's French Army had not been defeated in 50 years, and was not afraid of anyone, especially since the United States was occupied with its own Civil War. France invaded at the gulf coast of Mexico along the state of Vera Cruz and headed toward Mexico City, assuming that success would come quickly. The French army encountered heavy resistance from the Mexicans near Puebla, at the Mexican forts of Loreto and Guadalupe.



Under the command of Texas-born General Zaragoza the vastly outnumbered and poorly supplied Mexicans awaited the French assault. On May 5th, 1862 the heavily armed French army invaded Puebla. The battle lasted the entire day. When the French, the best army of its time, finally retreated in defeat, they had lost many men.

Word of the battle spread throughout Mexico and Zaragoza became a popular hero. The victory was a much needed morale boost for the Mexican people and helped develop a sense of national unity and pride, and is the cause for the historical date's celebration.



Unfortunately the victory was short-lived. When Napoleon received news of the defeat, he sent 30,000 more troops to Mexico. The French were able to depose the Mexican army, capture Mexico City, and establish Emperor Maximilian I as ruler of Mexico. He ruled for only 3 years, from 1864 to 1867.

With the American Civil war over, the United States was able to supply more military assistance to Mexico to help expel the French government. The Mexican resistance was able to regain their country and Maximilian was eventually executed.



Within Mexico, Cinco de Mayo is not a federal holiday and it is primarily observed in the state of Puebla where the unlikely victory occurred. There is some limited recognition of the day throughout the rest of the country.

In the United States Cinco de Mayo has become a celebration of Mexican heritage and culture, especially along the U.S.-Mexico border and in areas with high populations of people of Mexican descent. Commercialization has helped promote the holiday in the U.S. as a day for fun and celebration with a focus on food, beverages, and music from Mexico.

