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WHY CELEBRATE *CINCO DE MAYO*?

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Had Mexico not defeated the French in Puebla on May 5, 1862, France would have gone to the aid of the South in the U.S. Civil War and our destiny could have been very different. Justo Sierra (1848-1912), a great Mexican writer who lived that period and wrote "The Political Evolution of the Mexican People," made this observation at the turn of the century.

In 1861 Mexico was bankrupt, owing staggering sums to Britain, Spain, France and the United States. Years earlier the United States had offered to assume Mexico's debt in exchange for a mortgage on part of its territory. Mexico flatly rejected the offer, having already lost half its territory to this country. What kept the European powers from direct intervention in Mexico were the United States and the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 that warned Europe to stay away from interfering in this hemisphere.

But in the summer of 1861 the United States Civil War broke out. In October of that same year, France, Spain and England convened to sign the Covenant of London in which these nations agreed to send troops to Mexico in sufficient numbers to secure payments. They solemnly added that this use of force was not for territorial gain or interfering in Mexico.

Spain and England sent the first bill-collecting expedition, met no resistance at Vera Cruz but was unable to collect, though an agreement was reached.

Meanwhile, France had landed a sizeable force in Mexico and the European intervention became exclusively French.

On May 5, 1862, the French attacked Puebla and the Mexican Army, under General Ignacio Zaragoza, defeated the militarily superior French forces. This victory gave Mexico an electric current of patriotism and inspiration. It gave Mexico a soul of her own and national unity. This is why *Cinco de Mayo* is almost as important as their own Sept. 16th Independence Day.

Meanwhile Robert E. Lee was winning battles for the South. Had France won at Puebla, it would have joined forces with the South and easily convinced England to help free the Southern ports of the Union blockade. Louisiana had at the time been French. France and England also wanted to paralyze U.S. expansionism into Latin America. Napoleon III also dreamt of binding stronger ties between France and Mexico, because both were Latin.

The victory at Puebla not only protected the integrity of Mexico but also that of the United States – "an involuntary service...of inestimable value," wrote Justo Sierra.

A year later, the French won several victories, paving the way for Napoleon III to send Maximilian, Archduke of Austria, and his wife Carlota to set up a monarchy in Mexico. But the Mexican resistance continued, and Washington continued to recognize the Benito Juárez government as the only legitimate one. At times, the Juárez government was situated in *El Paso* (now named *Ciudad*

Juárez) and at times the Juárez government did have to go into temporary exile on this side of the *Río Grande*.

Maximilian and Carlota set up their court, wrote a book on court etiquette and reintroduced Mexico City to the royal grandeur it had known earlier through Spain. There were many upper class Mexicans who supported the monarchy.

In 1865 the U.S. Civil War ended and Maximilian is supposed to have exclaimed, "This is the end of the empire!"

By 1866 the armed resistance against the French occupation was growing and the victorious U.S. Union Army clamored for war against France. It had already been to Mexico as part of the U.S. invasion in 1847. For Mexico, the possibility of American involvement was more frightening than the French presence. At U.S. urging, the French, also facing problems in Europe, departed.

Thus the United States repaid Mexico for its resistance to the French, which prevented the French from becoming allies of the confederates and indefinitely prolonging or changing the course of the Civil War.

By 1867 Maximilian would not abdicate his throne, declaring he was 100 percent Mexican, heart and soul. Besides, Napoleon III had promised to stand by him. Carlota had already returned to France to hold Napoleon to his word. Napoleon III reneged.

Maximilian remained in Mexico and courageously met his execution on June 19, 1867. Carlota became despondent and eventually insane. She died in Belgium in 1922.

Mexico's second war of independence came to an end with a cost of 300,000 casualties.

What did France leave in Mexico? Mexican law is based on the Napoleonic code. Mexico's architecture was greatly influenced. Popular dances such as "*La Varsoviana*" are of French origin. Mexico's bread and pastries were greatly influenced. In Cuernavaca they still call the police "*Gendarmes*." In Mexico City, *El Paseo de la Reforma* was Maximilian's idea of a direct route to his palace from city's center. It was modeled after the Champs-Elysees.

There still exist isolated pockets of French-speaking descendents the way they do in Louisiana.

If you travel through the small towns in the state of Jalisco you will see many blonde blue-eyed 100% Mexicans of French descent.

Maximilian and Carlota loved to entertain. Mexican folk orchestras frequently played at French weddings (*marriages*). Out of this French word evolved the name of Mexico's *mariachis*. What would Mexico be without *mariachis*?

Inconceivable

¡Viva el Cinco de Mayo!

¡Viva México!

(Muralist/artist/poet José Antonio Burciaga wrote this essay for Hispanic Link News Service in 1981. Hailed as the Chicano Renaissance Man, he died of cancer as age 56 in 1996.)

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