The Mexican-American War also known in the United States as the Mexican-American War in Mexico as the American War of Independence and the Mexican War, 

Mexico's independence was not actually obtained until September 28, 1821. Mexico's independence was the result of the Mexican War of Independence (La Guerra de la Independencia). Independence Day (September 16) is celebrated as the traditional day Mexico became independent in 1810.

Cinco de Mayo (“Fifth of May”) is an annual celebration commemorating the Mexican Army’s victory over the French Empire at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. Although often confused with Mexican Independence Day, Cinco de Mayo celebrates a victory over the French during the American Civil War, not the independence of Mexico.

Benito Pablo Juárez García (March 21, 1806 – July 18, 1872) was a Mexican lawyer and president of Mexico, of Zapotec origin from Oaxaca. He was also a rural, indigenous origin, who became a well-educated, urban professional and politician, who was a son of Oaxaca City, Margarita Munoz. He identified primarily as a Liberal and wrote only briefly about his indigenous heritage.

Juárez’s political role was a continual struggle to transform his liberal ideas of economic capitalism and separation of church and state, into a permanent modernization in the last quarter of the 19th century and freed Mexico from the most-flagrant remnants of neocolonialism. His leadership against the French modernization in the last quarter of the 19th century and freed Mexico from the most-flagrant remnants of neocolonialism.

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Juárez hosted a celebration of Mexico’s post war “debt” offered the perfect excuse for invasion. Taking advantage of the relative weakness of the United States during the US Civil War, in December of 1861, the governments of France, Great Britain, and Spain landed an allied military force in Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico.

This invasion was intended to secure some payments, and the British and French forces began to make landfall from Mexico. Napoleon III, however, had decided to withdraw his troops and he formally ended the war on June 16. Under the Convention of London, Benito Juárez was recognized as the legitimate government of Mexico, and the French troops were ordered to leave the country.

Important Dates Leading up to the Battle of Puebla...

1810-1821

1846-1848

1857-1860

1861

Important Figures

Benito Pablo Juárez García

Ignacio Zaragoza

The Battle of Puebla During the Mexican-American War, on May 5, 1862, a Mexican force led by Ignacio Zaragoza met the French invasion at the Puebla Battle. The French force led by Napoleon III had decided to withdraw his troops and he formally ended the war on June 16. Under the Convention of London, Benito Juárez was recognized as the legitimate government of Mexico, and the French troops were ordered to leave the country.

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France’s intervention in Mexico was the first phase in Louis Napoleon’s “Grand Design,” a scheme that had been conceived during Louis’s long exile in England and the United States. Napoleon III’s design envisioned Paris as the political hub (with Rome the religious hub) of a cultural, commercial, and religious empire uniting all the Catholic nations of Europe. Latin America, a term Napoleon III coined, was a critical part of his so-called Latin League. With a new canal in Mexico or Central America to complement the Suez Canal already being built with French investment, the League would dominate world trade.

In 1862, over 6000 French troops landed at Veracruz intending to reach the capital of Mexico City. The French advance was along a route that had been used several times in the past to conquer Mexico, first by the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes and most recently by U.S. General Winfield Scott during the Mexican-American War. On May 5th 1862, near the city of Puebla, the outnumbered Mexican Army held their ground defending two forts (Guadalupe and Loreto), resulting in over 500 French deaths and a retreat. The Mexican victory at Puebla against a much better equipped and larger french army provided a significant morale boost to the Mexican Army and also helped slow the French Army’s advance to Mexico City, so newspapers throughout the country ran headlines intending to spread the message of national unity and hope. This battle was also one of the first to be telegraphed not only domestically in “real time” but even going so far as the United States. Zaragoza’s success at the Battle of Puebla on May 5th represented a great symbolic victory for the Mexican government and bolstered the resistance movement. An important significance of the Battle of Puebla is that up until this point in history there had been no official National Mexican Army. During the War of Reform the confederate army was drafted or pardoned for prison time or debt to fight in the war. The army that defeated the French at Puebla was made up of volunteer brigades from different Mexican states. There was also the indigenous peoples of the northern sierra highlands of Zacapoaxtla, Tetela, Xochiapulco, and other Nahua. It was the first time the country came together as an independent nation fighting for sovereignty. Most of them were recently recruited and untried in battle. Before battle Gen. Zaragoza told them simply: “Our enemies may be the world’s best soldiers, but you are the best sons of Mexico, and they want to seize our country from you. Today, you are going to fight for a sacred objective; you are going to fight for the motherland and I promise that this day we shall triumph in a day of eternal renown. I see victory in your faces. Let us have faith! ¡Viva la independencia nacional! ¡Viva México!” The soldiers enthusiastically echoed the call.

The following year the French returned with a much larger army of 40,000; under a new commander, took Puebla in a three-month siege, and marched unopposed into Mexico City to seat Maximilian on his long-anticipated throne. Zaragoza did not live to see it, having died of typhoid four months after the Battle of Puebla. Maximilian and his wife Charlotte arrived in Mexico, believing that they had the support of the Mexican people, but nationalism in Mexico was running high. Maximilian was too liberal for the conservative Mexicans who supported the monarchy, and lost the support of the papal nuncio (the envoy representing the Pope) when he declared freedom of religion. In the summer of 1867, after heavy American diplomatic and military pressure, Napoleon III brought his last troops home, consigning Maximilian to a Mexican firing squad and his own Grand Design for the Americas to the trashcan of history.
Within Mexico, Cinco de Mayo is primarily observed in the state of Puebla, where Zaragoza’s unlikely victory occurred, although other parts of the country also take part in the celebration. Traditions include military parades, recreations of the Battle of Puebla and other festive events.

In the United States, Cinco de Mayo is widely interpreted as a celebration of Mexican culture and heritage, particularly in areas with substantial Mexican-American populations. Chicano activists raised awareness of the holiday in the 1960s, in part because they identified with the victory of indigenous Mexicans (such as Juárez) over European invaders during the Battle of Puebla. Today, revelers mark the occasion with parades, parties, mariachi music, Mexican folk dancing and traditional foods such as tacos and mole poblano. Some of the largest festivals are held in Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Austin, Texas for Mexic-Arte Museum’s Taste of Mexico.

In 1896, under a petition started by the French Society of Remembrance, the bodies of all French and Mexican soldiers who fought in the Battle of Puebla and later during the French Intervention were relocated and buried with honors at the French Cemetery in Puebla City. At the top of the mausoleum is a bronze sculpture by a French master, which depicts the Angel of Peace; flanked by a French soldier and Mexican General Porfirio Diaz, who shake hands. The Angel of Peace raises the olive branch of peace above Diaz. This gift from the French was a symbolic restoration of the bonds of friendship between countries as well as a symbol of healing for the Republic of Mexico.

Puebla City donated a bust and monumental plaque to Zaragoza Park and recreational center in Austin, TX. The park was established in 1931 to be a community and social center for Mexican and Mexican-American people to come together and celebrate “las fiestas patrias.” In 1996, Austin artist Fidencio Duran was commissioned to paint murals inside the rec center depicting Hispanic culture both in Mexico and Texas. Duran chose to focus on patriotic Mexican heroes and Ignacio Zaragoza, whom the park is named for, is a central image.

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