



El Cinco de Mayo

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Why celebrate a Mexican national holiday in the U.S.? Because **El Cinco de Mayo** is important to Chicanos and to freedom-loving Americans everywhere! **El Cinco de Mayo** recognizes a major victory against foreign oppression and is second in importance as a national holiday only to the 16th of September in Mexico. The ardent will and pride of the Mexican people to protect and preserve their independence are commemorated and celebrated by **El Cinco de Mayo**. Already sharing cultural and linguistic ties with Mexico, **El Cinco de Mayo** provides Chicanos and other Hispanics in the U.S. an opportunity to also share ideological ties with our brethren to the south.

In our classrooms from preschool to postdoctoral programs, therefore, teachers and professors will want to use the event of **El Cinco de Mayo** to broaden instruction about the history of Hispanics in this country and to teach about the significance of this event to our people. Assuming that teachers will design instruction for the age, grade, and ability level of their students, teachers will want to commemorate **El Cinco de Mayo** in their classrooms by considering the following questions: a) what happened?, b) when did it happen?, c) why did it happen?, d) who was involved?, and e) why are we talking about it in our classroom? Let's discuss each of these pertinent questions.

What happened? At Puebla, Mexico on May 5, 1862, approximately 6000 French troops attempted to take the city of Puebla, the defense of which, had been assigned by President Benito Juárez to General Ignacio Zaragoza. Having recently defeated the Mexican army defending the port city of Veracruz, the French felt confident that they could also defeat a mere 2000 Mexican troops at Puebla which was enroute to Mexico City, their prime target. Managing his troops with great aplomb, General Zaragoza was aided by Brigadier General Porfirio Díaz. Díaz, in turn, saved the day by repelling a French assault on Zaragoza's right flank and this resulted in a French retreat. The French lost about 1000 men and the Mexicans lost only 86 men. This victory became a highlight in Mexico's eventual liberation from control by another European power.

When did it happen? This event happened at a time when Napoleon III of France thought it would be possible to create a monarchy in México. Because México had incurred great debts to many European countries, Napoleon III decided to collect by conquest. Since the U.S. was too caught up with its own inner conflict, i.e., the civil war, it could not enforce the Monroe Doctrine forbidding foreign intervention in the Western Hemisphere. Napoleon III, if he had been successful in Mexico, was planning to aid the Confederate troops. The **El Cinco de Mayo** battle at Puebla, therefore, may have been significant to the outcome of the U.S. Civil War, too!

Why did it happen? We may never be able to explain why there was the victory at Puebla on May 5, 1862, but

one thing that does seem to be true—it was downright miraculous! It has been said that in spite of the superiority of Napoleon's troops in number, training, and arms, they were no match for the inspired defenders. General Zaragoza's soldiers were mostly Indian tribes from the surrounding regions who were inexperienced in battle. Moreover, they had almost no guns. What they did have was a fierce pride in their country." It has been said that Zaragoza was a charismatic leader and that the military skills he and Díaz demonstrated on the battle field were brilliant. Zaragoza inspired his soldiers with the following expression: "Your enemies are the first soldiers of the world, but you are the first sons of México. They have come to take your country from you." Subsequently, the French army never had a chance!

Who was involved? **El Cinco de Mayo** provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to focus in on the key Mexican personalities involved in this event. Prominent among them is General Ignacio Zaragoza, who was born in La Bahía Presidio in Goliad, Texas. Adjacent to that city, the Texas State Legislature has created a state park known as the General Zaragoza State Historic site. It was a Chicano born in Texas who was the chief hero of **El Cinco de Mayo**! Another personality from that historical event and a man also held in high regard by Chicanos was President Benito Juárez. A contemporary of Abraham Lincoln, Juárez is reputed to be the Abraham Lincoln of México, just as Father Miguel Hidalgo (who preceded Juárez) is many times referred to as the George Washington of México. Another key person involved in the battle at Puebla, Brigadier General Porfirio Díaz, later became president of México.

So why should we want to discuss **El Cinco de Mayo** in our classrooms in the U.S.? Because we want to celebrate and share with our brethren in México the moment of success against tyranny and we want to recognize our mutual interest in liberation and freedom. It is also important to recognize, the high regard for, and the extent to which Hispanics in the U.S., especially Chicanos, identify with **El Cinco de Mayo**. A historical event which is significant in the collective consciousness of a cultural minority in the U.S., regardless of the place and time of the historical event, should not be ignored in our classrooms. To do so would be to disrespect the culture and heritage of that cultural minority. Also of importance is the ideological significance of **El Cinco de Mayo**—it celebrates and recognizes freedom and liberty for all, the cornerstones of the political ideology of the United States of America! To ignore this ideological significance is to disrespect what this country stands for and symbolizes for all Americans!

El Cinco de Mayo is a historical symbol of the ideology of liberation. Hispanics in the U.S. will therefore want schools and communities to commemorate this national Mexican holiday because it is important to all freedom-loving Americans, especially those of Mexican descent.