

Cinco de Mayo celebrates unity

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San Antonio's spring Fiesta continues with the celebration this weekend of Cinco de Mayo, which commemorates the most famous battle in Mexican history, the defense of Puebla against the French on May 5, 1862.

In the mid-1800s, a very divided Mexico was struggling to define itself as a nation. Political factions within Mexico facilitated France's dream of an empire in the Americas. In short, there were Mexicans who preferred to live under French rule than concede on the political issues they supported.

Divisions in Mexico dated to pre-Columbian days. At that time, the several geographical, social and economic regions of Mexico, and Meso America were held together artificially and tenuously by the Aztecs. Those regions did not come together under Spanish rule.

Independence from Spain in 1821 also did not resolve differences among Mexicans, who then engaged in a number of civil wars. Those conflicts left Mexico vulnerable to external attack and an economic ruin.

In those circumstances, the government borrowed from England and France. When Mexico failed to pay back its loans, these world powers took over the port of Veracruz to collect import tariffs as repayment.

Napoleon III went farther. He ordered the French army to take Mexico City. The Mexican government responded by massing its troops outside Puebla. On May 5, the Mexicans soundly defeated the French.

The French army retreated, then reinforced and proceeded to take Puebla and Mexico City and occupy most of Mexico. In the summer of 1864, Maximilian of Austria assumed the Mexican throne.

In their effort to retake Mexico, patriotic Mexicans made Cinco de Mayo their rallying cry, and by 1867 they had driven out the French.

The Conservative or Centralist Party believed Mexico could be held together only through central rule. They opposed any regional autonomy. They also opposed the principles of individualism that challenged the rights and privileges of the Church and the Army.

They did not listen to arguments made by their opponents, the Liberals (or Federalists), and would not compromise, rejecting all middle ground.

Tragically, only force could prove to them that their principles were not absolute and that being Mexican was more inclusive than they could imagine.

Of course, some of the Liberals were just as rabid, and they, too, must bear the burden of the chaos in 19th-century Mexico.

Sadly, one or another side resorted to force to have its rights respected.

Besides celebrating autonomy and self-determination, Cinco de Mayo also calls attention to the need for respect for differences — social, political, cultural and intellectual — within all communities. It calls attention to the pitfalls of proclaiming one view over all others when discussing issues that can be interpreted differently.

Thus, Cinco de Mayo also celebrates community.