

# How France Conquered Mexico, and then Lost It

The year is 1862. The location: Puebla, Mexico. The army of the liberal Mexican government, led by President Benito Juarez, clashes with French forces sent by Napoleon III. The battle is bloody, with the French boldly assaulting the city head-on. The Mexicans, meanwhile, have fortified defenses with a large ditch and a brick wall. They turn back the attackers—using a brutal barrage of gunfire to kill over 1,000 Frenchmen. The result? A monumental victory for Mexico.

This day will eventually be etched into the history books. The day Mexico stood up against foreign invasion... and won. The holiday of *Cinco de Mayo*.

And even if it's not the biggest holiday in Mexico, it bears mention for its importance on a global scale. It shows that America isn't the only country that stands against imperialism. But the thing is, even though Mexico won that day, they didn't win the war. After their loss in Puebla, the French retreated, regrouped, and in 1863, they returned with reinforcements, laying siege to the city instead. Eventually, this forced the Mexicans to surrender.

So how did we get here, with the French trying so hard to conquer Mexico?

Well, to answer this question, we'll have to go back to 1861, when Juarez was just wrapping up a taxing civil war against conservative opposition, led by his opponent Felix Zuloaga.

At this point, Juarez has made his way from Veracruz all the way to Mexico City. He's recognized by the United States as the legitimate president, but there are still two problems. First, instability continues, with conservatives seeking to regain power. And second, the Mexican government is buckling under the weight of foreign debt, which Juarez needs to pay back, and fast.

Enter U.S. Secretary of State William Seward, who sees an opportunity to strike a deal with Mexico for valuable resources. His proposal is to loan Juarez the money he needs in exchange for mining rights, but as the U.S. is dealing with its own civil war, Congress rejects the plan.

This leaves Juarez high and dry. With no other options, he suspends payment to Europe. Obviously, Europe doesn't like this. In December of 1861, Spanish, French, and British forces all land in Veracruz, Mexico. The conservative Mexicans see these powers as potential allies in their struggle against Juarez. Juarez successfully negotiates with the English and the Spanish, but the French, led by Emperor Napoleon III, develop greater ambitions. Napoleon sees Mexico's plight and he sees an opportunity to take the country for himself and create a new monarchy that answers to him.

Eventually, the French ally with the conservatives in Mexico, who throw support behind the idea of a monarchy as well. And in 1863, after conquering Puebla, the French easily take Mexico City, solidifying their control. Napoleon then turns around and offers the position of emperor to Austrian Archduke Maximilian van Hapsburg. He sees Maximilian as the perfect foreign leader to begin a Mexican dynasty, but there's one problem.

Thing is, Maximilian is a good person; he isn't going to rule in a place where he's not wanted. So how does Napoleon finally convince him? Well, in 1864, Maximilian arrives in Mexico believing that the Mexican people have voted him to be their king. In fact, as he eventually discovers, the truth is far from that. Only the conservatives and the French want him as emperor. The rest of the country is ready to revolt.

But despite the hostile environment, Maximilian rules from 1864 to 1867. He views himself as protector of the peasants, choosing to uphold many of Juarez's liberal policies, such as freedom of religion and land reforms. This alienates conservatives, weakening his position. But the reality is, this is how Maximilian has always been. Back in Austria, he was once dismissed from his post as viceroy after he angered his brother, Emperor Franz Joseph I, with liberal tendencies.

And in Mexico, it's not only his liberal policies that make him disliked. To the liberals, he's the wrong type of ruler at the wrong time. Juarez was beloved by the people as the first ethnically indigenous president. Maximilian represents a continuation of imperialism... a continuation of white men ruling in a country where they don't belong.

Maximilian tries to assimilate into Mexican culture. Despite retaining many comforts of European aristocracy, he incorporates Mexican cuisine into his diet, goes on tours to see different parts of the country, and even adopts the grandsons of Mexico's first emperor, Agustine de Iturbide. But due to his heritage and the color of his skin, he's always viewed as a foreigner. And though his liberal policies win over some of Juarez's supporters, he also alienates them with laws like his Black Degree, which orders the execution of any Mexicans who bear arms against him.

Still, Maximilian retains the support of the French and the conservatives. The French eventually push Juarez's forces north almost to Texas, and for a while, it seems that they have won. Juarez is on the brink of defeat.

And then, in 1865, the civil war in the U.S. ends. Now in a more stable position domestically, the U.S. turns its attention to Mexico, and Maximilian, who they view as a threat. They don't like monarchies—and they especially don't like them close to their border. They're not going to roll over and let the French have Mexico. The U.S. makes strong demands of France—withdraw your troops as it's a violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

And by this point, the Monroe Doctrine has been around for decades. It's very clear. Back in 1823, U.S. president James Monroe stated, for the whole world to hear:

"We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and [European] powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

France is slow to comply with the U.S.'s demands. But as the U.S. begins to send Juarez guns, the French government buckles. Despite a plea from Maximilian's wife for help, Napoleon chooses to withdraw troops in 1866. He urges Maximilian to follow suit.

However, Maximilian is torn. He tries to abdicate on several occasions, but is discouraged, first by his wife, and later by his few remaining supporters. At one point, he's so close to leaving that he has packed his luggage, but in the end, he can't go through with it. He feels it's wrong to desert, "his people."

After Juarez retakes Mexico City and reestablishes control, he meets Maximilian in Querétaro City—a force of 30,000 liberals against 9,000 conservatives. For Maximilian, it's one of the worst places to do battle. Juarez starves out the former emperor with a siege lasting from March to May. Then, on June 19, 1867, Juarez executes Maximilian by firing squad, officially ending the monarchy and France's occupation of Mexico once and for all.

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