

Mexico's Independence Day marks the beginning of a decade-long revolution

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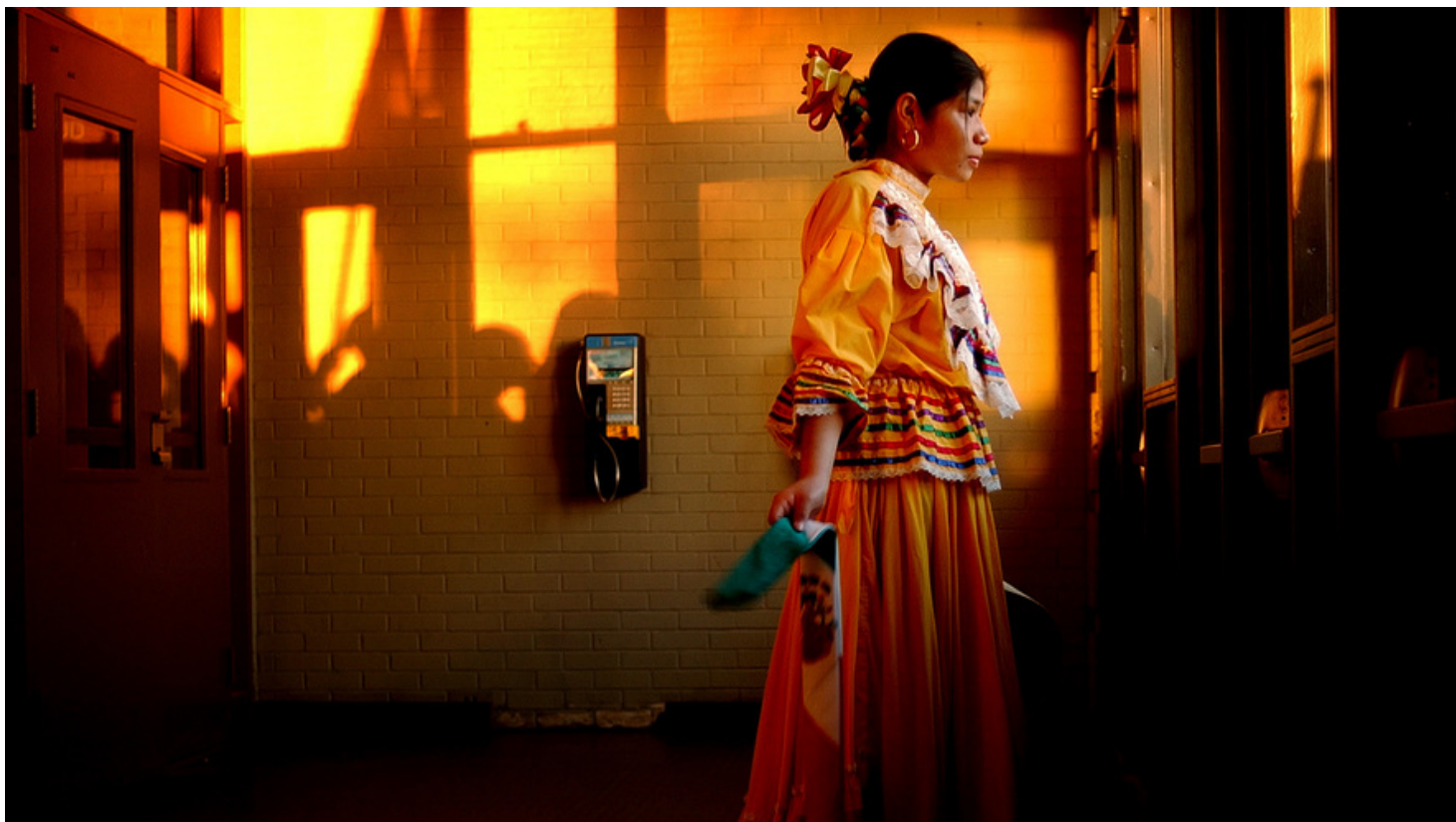


Image 1. Sixteen-year-old Nidian Calzada celebrating Mexican Independence Day at school in Denver, Colorado. Photo: Getty Images/Cyrus McCrimmon.

On September 16, Mexicans celebrate the anniversary of their country's independence from Spain. The day is a national holiday in Mexico. It is marked by a reenactment of a historic speech, fireworks, dance routines and many other performances.

Independence day is a celebration of a speech given in 1810 by Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a Catholic priest known as Father Hidalgo. In the town of Dolores, Mexico, Father Hidalgo called for Mexico's independence from Spain. It marked the very beginning of the long struggle for independence. Hidalgo also used a banner showing the Virgin de Guadalupe, an image of the Virgin Mary that is a symbol for Catholics in Mexico. The Virgin de Guadalupe first appeared to Juan Diego, an indigenous man who later became a saint in the Catholic Church.

A Decade-long Struggle

Hidalgo's speech inspired many people to follow him. His followers soon put together a large, unruly, hodgepodge army that included women, children and grandparents. This army was

untrained and difficult to control, and was eventually defeated.

Hidalgo was defrocked as a priest, meaning that he lost his priest title. The Spanish later killed him as punishment for revolting.

Another priest, José María Morelos, took up the revolutionary cause. He put together a second army that was more effective than the first. However, this army was also defeated and Morelos was later killed by the Spanish. Following his death, the struggle for independence sank into a period of chaos as Mexico continued to fight a weakening Spanish rule.

The first successful leader of the Mexican independence movement was Agustín de Iturbide, a Spanish-supporting soldier who changed sides. In 1821, Iturbide seized control of Mexico City and declared the country's independence. Iturbide created the Plan of Iguala, or the Plan of Three Guarantees. This plan wanted to free Mexico from Spanish control, establish Mexico as Roman Catholic, and ensure equality for all citizens. However, Iturbide proved to be a disappointing ruler. He set up a monarchy-style system and spent much of the new country's budget on fancy clothes.

Ultimately, this system failed as well. Finally, in 1824 a democratic republic was set up. It was led by Guadalupe Victoria, a former independence fighter who became Mexico's first president.

"Mexicans don't celebrate Iturbide as the father of independence," says Elena Albarrán, a history professor at Miami University in Ohio. "The hero that's selected as the father of independence uniformly is Father Hidalgo, the charismatic priest who gets the ball rolling."

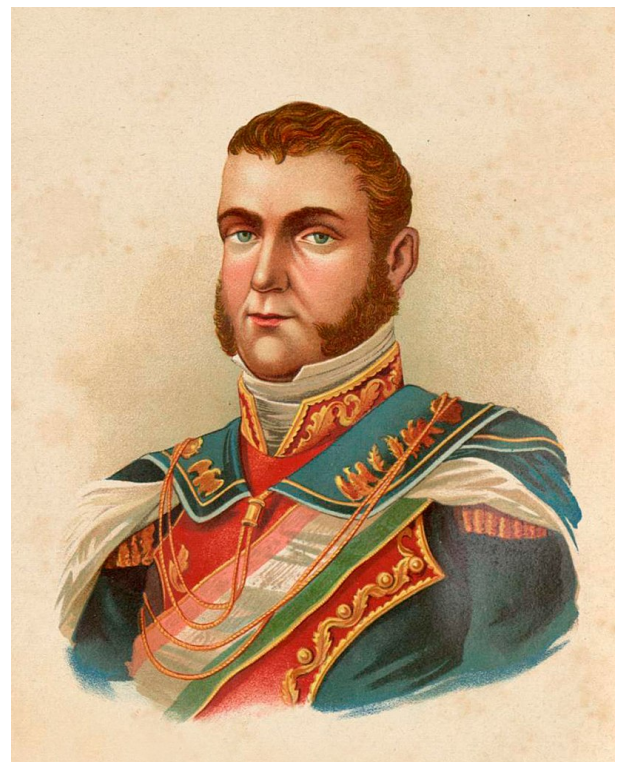
Remembering The First Revolt

On Mexico's independence day, the Mexican president honors Father Hidalgo by performing a reenactment of Hidalgo's famous speech. The reenactment is done from the National Palace in Mexico City.

According to Mexican tradition, at 11 p.m.

on September 15, 1810, Hidalgo went into the parish church in the town of Dolores. There, he rang the church bell, and told the villagers who came running that they needed to revolt. History professor William Beezley says that on September 15, the president of Mexico "will step out on the balcony, ring that same bell, and give a speech that is supposedly Hidalgo's words." Nobody wrote down Hidalgo's speech, Beezley adds, meaning there is no way of knowing what he actually said. Still, Mexicans in Mexico, the United States, and other countries watch the celebrations on TV. That's what's celebrated."

The reenactment of Hidalgo's speech is the centerpiece of independence day. It celebrates Hidalgo's passion for Mexico and its people, and honors the moment when he pushed the country toward its eventual independence.



Confusion With Cinco De Mayo

Mexico's independence day is often confused with Cinco de Mayo by people living in the United States. Cinco de Mayo happens on May 5. This day marks the Mexican Army's defeat of the French at the Battle of Puebla.

Elena Albarrán says many Americans assume immigrant communities brought Cinco de Mayo celebrations to the United States. This is untrue. The day became popular in the United States because beer companies promoted the holiday to increase sales of their products.

Cinco de Mayo is not a national holiday in Mexico. It is celebrated there, but much less and not in the same way as it celebrated in the United States. Albarrán recalls an assignment in which she asked her U.S. students to blog with their peers in Mexico City. The U.S. students posted about Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the United States.

"The Mexican students could not believe it," she says. "They were cracking up, rolling around laughing." Mexican students could not believe how fake and silly the celebration of the holiday is in the United States.