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Senate

Statement of Senator Dianne Feinstein

“Commemorating Cinco de Mayo”

MRS FEINSTEIN: Mr. President, I rise today to recognize “Cinco de Mayo,” an important day in both Mexican and American history as well as a symbolic day to honor Mexican heritage.

“Cinco de Mayo” pays tribute to the courage and strength of the people of Mexico and to the profound contributions Mexican-Americans have made to our country’s history and culture.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there are nearly ten million people of Mexican descent living in my home state of California alone. Everyday, Mexican-Americans make huge contributions to our communities – in every sector of the economy, in every level of government and in every aspect of society.

Mexican-American leaders such as the late Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers Union, have left indelible footprints in our national memory.

Organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens, the National Council of La Raza and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund collaborate with government, civic, community and other organizations to improve economic, educational and civil rights for Latinos.

Truly, a comprehensive snapshot of California would be grossly incomplete without full representation of the Mexican-American community.

Many celebrations with traditional food, music and parades take place across the country and throughout California on “Cinco de Mayo.” Hundreds of thousands will gather to embrace and celebrate Mexican heritage.

“Cinco de Mayo” celebrations can be large festivals drawing thousands of people, such as those in San Diego, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco and San Jose as well as small, more intimate events among neighbors.

It is very much the same as the way we observe the Fourth of July -- both in the variety of ways people choose to celebrate and in that a specific historic event inspired the holiday, which has come to symbolize a much broader spirit.

No one would want to limit the meaning of the Fourth of July to a narrow celebration of American independence from Great Britain, nor would you reduce “Cinco de Mayo” to a commemoration of the Mexican military victory in Puebla by itself.

However it is important to recall the bravery of the Mexican army when France, under the rule of Napoleon III, sought to establish a political and economic foothold in Latin America by installing their own ruler in Mexico.

Napoleon’s troops, who had not been defeated in battle for almost 50 years, entered Mexico with considerable technological advantages over the Mexican army. The French army moved west to attack Mexico City,

mindful that if the Mexican capital fell, a complete takeover of Mexico was imminent.

On May 5, 1862 the Mexican army defeated the invading French forces in the city of Puebla under the command of General Zaragoza and Colonel Porfirio Diaz. If not for the great courage of the Mexican army, the course of history would be undoubtedly altered.

In my mind, “Cinco de Mayo” epitomizes what it means for immigrant communities to flourish, making their own unique additions to American culture.

One San Francisco family, the Ramirezes, who immigrated to the United States from Jalisco, Mexico in 1955 are truly an American success story.

Ramon Ramirez and his wife Guadalupe worked several jobs before acquiring a San Francisco deli in 1967. Soon the space proved too small to accommodate their customers and in 1982, they expanded and opened Don Ramon’s restaurant.

I used to frequent Don Ramon’s when I was the Mayor of San Francisco and I was always sincerely impressed with the Ramirez family. Ramon and Guadalupe still work every day at Don Ramon’s, arriving before dawn. Their three daughters remain involved in running the restaurant, though their youngest daughter, Nati, has also pursued another career as director of the San Francisco District Attorney’s subpoena unit.

This is only one of many examples of Mexican-Americans have helped our country to flourish.

Finally, Mr. President, I am pleased to join every American and every Mexican in celebrating this important day in Mexican history. On “Cinco de Mayo” we pay tribute not only to the bravery shown at the Battle of Puebla, we also recognize the contributions of Mexican-Americans to our country as well.