
Ignacio Zaragoza and the Irregular Logic of Resistance

What the Battle of Puebla Still Teaches Modern Irregular Warfare Practitioners

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The popular memory of Ignacio Zaragoza is often compressed into a single date: May 5, 1862. In much of the United States, [Cinco de Mayo](#) has become a cultural celebration detached from the military and political context that produced it. In Mexico, the Battle of Puebla remains a symbol of national resistance, sovereignty, and republican survival. For irregular warfare (IW) practitioners, however, Zaragoza's victory offers something more than commemoration. It offers a compact case study in how a weaker force can impose strategic cost, exploit local conditions, turn defense into narrative advantage, and shape political outcomes beyond the battlefield.

Ignacio Zaragoza was a [Mexican general and republican military leader](#) best known for commanding the Army of the East during the [Battle of Puebla](#) on May 5, 1862. Born in 1829 in what is now Goliad, Texas, then part of Mexico, Zaragoza came of age during a period of political instability, foreign intervention, and internal conflict that shaped Mexico's struggle to define and defend its sovereignty. He served the liberal republican cause during Mexico's Reform War and later became Minister of War under President Benito Juárez before returning to

field command during the French intervention. At Puebla, [Zaragoza successfully led a smaller and less well-equipped Mexican force](#) against a more powerful French expeditionary army that was advancing toward Mexico City. The French intervention continued, and Mexico would face years of occupation, internal division, and foreign-backed imperial rule before the republic was restored. His victory did not end the French intervention, but it disrupted French momentum, strengthened Mexican morale, and transformed Zaragoza into a symbol of national resistance. For irregular warfare practitioners, Zaragoza is important not only because he won an unlikely battle, but because he demonstrated how leadership, legitimacy, terrain, morale, and narrative can allow a weaker force to impose strategic effects on a stronger adversary.

That is why Zaragoza remains useful for modern irregular warfare analysis. Irregular warfare is not only about guerrilla tactics, special operations, resistance networks, or unconventional formations. It is about the political use of military and non-military power to influence populations, impose costs, contest legitimacy, and shape the strategic environment. Zaragoza's conduct at Puebla demonstrates several enduring principles: legitimacy matters, terrain can offset material inferiority, morale is an operational variable, adversary assumptions can become vulnerabilities, and even limited tactical success can generate strategic effects when connected to a larger political cause.

Puebla as a Political-Military Problem

[The French intervention in Mexico was not simply a military campaign.](#) Napoleon III sought to establish a French client state in Mexico and eventually installed Maximilian of Habsburg as Emperor of Mexico. France sought to use Mexico's internal instability, fiscal crisis, and post-civil war exhaustion to impose influence and eventually support an imperial alternative to the republican government of Benito Juárez. Mexico's challenge was therefore not merely to defeat French units in the field. It was to preserve political legitimacy, sustain national resistance, and deny the invader the appearance of inevitability.

This distinction matters for irregular warfare. A weaker actor may not need to destroy a stronger adversary outright. It may need to prevent the adversary from converting military superiority into political control. Zaragoza's role at Puebla should be understood in that context. He was not simply defending a city on the road to Mexico City. He was defending the credibility of the Mexican republic at a moment when defeat seemed likely and foreign intervention appeared to have momentum.

Modern IW practitioners should pay close attention to this political-military linkage. In irregular warfare, the question is rarely only, "Who won the engagement?" The more important questions are: "Who gained legitimacy? Whose narrative became more credible? Whose coalition held together? Who demonstrated will? Who forced the opponent to spend more time, resources, and political capital than expected?"

At Puebla, [Zaragoza achieved several of those effects.](#) He did not end the French intervention, but he denied the French a quick and psychologically decisive march to Mexico City. He showed that Mexican resistance was viable. He gave Juárez's government a symbol around which to rally. He also demonstrated that the French expeditionary force, despite its reputation and advantages, could be checked by a determined defender using terrain, fortifications, morale, and timing.

Observation One: Legitimacy Is Combat Power

Zaragoza's force was fighting for more than a tactical position. It was fighting for national sovereignty and republican legitimacy. [France's intervention sought to establish a French-aligned client state in Mexico, culminating in Maximilian's installation as emperor.](#) This

political context made Puebla more than a battlefield defense; it was a defense of Mexico's republican government against foreign imposition.

This is a central lesson for modern irregular warfare. Legitimacy is not a soft add-on to operations. It is a component of combat power. Forces that are perceived as defending community, sovereignty, faith, identity, or political independence can sometimes sustain resistance beyond what material measures would predict. Conversely, forces that appear alien, coercive, corrupt, or externally imposed may find that every tactical action produces political friction.

This has direct implications for irregular competition. The United States and its partners must understand what local actors believe they are defending. They must also understand how adversaries frame U.S. or partner activity. A security assistance mission, infrastructure project, counter-network effort, or information campaign can be technically sound and still fail if it is perceived as serving an outside agenda rather than a legitimate local purpose. This dynamic echoes the critique made famous in William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick's [The Ugly American](#), where American influence fails when officials misunderstand local populations, ignore cultural realities, and mistake presence for effectiveness.

The Zaragoza lesson is not that legitimacy automatically produces victory. It does not. Legitimacy must still be organized, defended, communicated, and sustained. But legitimacy can turn limited military action into broader political effect. Puebla became meaningful because it aligned tactical defense with national purpose.

Observation Two: Terrain Is More Than Geography

[Zaragoza's defense of Puebla benefited from terrain and fortifications.](#) French forces attacked uphill against Mexican positions near the forts of Loreto and Guadalupe. The physical conditions mattered. A superior force chose a costly approach against a prepared defender. Zaragoza used the terrain to reduce the French advantage in training, confidence, and offensive momentum. Modern irregular warfare practitioners should read terrain broadly. Terrain is not only hills, roads, rivers, and urban areas. In IW, terrain includes human networks, information ecosystems, infrastructure dependencies, legal authorities, economic relationships, criminal pathways, identity groups, and public perceptions. The weaker actor often survives by forcing the stronger actor to fight

on terrain where superiority is less decisive.

Zaragoza's insight is that terrain must be selected, prepared, and connected to purpose. He did not meet the French on ground that maximized French advantages. He made the fight harder than the French expected. Modern IW planning should do the same. The question is not only where the adversary is strong. It is where the adversary is overconfident, exposed, politically constrained, dependent on fragile systems, or vulnerable to delay.

Observation Three: Adversary Assumptions Are Vulnerabilities

The French expected a quick victory. That expectation shaped their approach to Puebla. [The Mexican defenders were seen by the French as “outnumbered and poorly equipped,”](#) and while the French battlefield confidence reflected real advantages in force quality and equipment, that confidence led to a costly assault against prepared Mexican positions.

Irregular warfare often turns on this point. Stronger actors frequently misread weaker opponents. They mistake poverty for passivity, disorder for incapacity, internal division for collapse, and lack of conventional capability for lack of strategic will. They also assume that technological or organizational superiority will translate cleanly into political effect. Zaragoza's victory reminds us that adversary confidence can be exploited.

For modern practitioners, this observation has two sides. First, contemporary planners should look for adversary assumptions that can be disrupted. Does the adversary assume a partner lacks will? Does it assume a local population is indifferent? Does it assume that critical infrastructure is undefended? Does it assume that attribution will be too slow? Does it assume that a gray-zone action will not trigger coordinated response? If so, those assumptions can become operational opportunities.

Second, planners must examine their own assumptions with the same rigor. In IW, the United States often assumes that training creates capability, capability creates will, exposure creates deterrence, messaging creates influence, and partnership creates alignment. Sometimes these assumptions hold. Often they require testing. Zaragoza's success was partly the result of French miscalculation. Modern assessment should ask where our theories of change are similarly vulnerable.

Observation Four: Morale and Narrative Can Convert Tactical Action Into Strategic Effect

[Zaragoza's famous message after the battle, commonly remembered as “the national arms have covered themselves in glory,”](#) matters because it did more than report a battlefield result. It translated military action into national narrative. The victory became a symbol of resistance. The moral effect exceeded the tactical result.

This is especially relevant to modern IW. Tactical actions are rarely self-explanatory. They become strategically meaningful through interpretation. A raid, defense, interdiction, exposure operation, partner engagement, or resilience activity matters only if relevant audiences understand what it means. Zaragoza understood, or at least demonstrated, the importance of communicating success in a way that reinforced legitimacy and will.

In contemporary terms, every IW action competes in the information environment. The adversary will attempt to explain events in ways that favor its objectives. Friendly forces and partners must therefore consider narrative before, during, and after action. This does not mean propaganda should replace substance. It means that substance without interpretation may fail to produce strategic effect.

For NORTHCOM and homeland defense, this lesson is particularly important. A cyber incident, unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) incursion, sabotage event, or infrastructure disruption may create fear and confusion even if physical damage is limited. Public trust can become the center of gravity. Effective response requires more than technical mitigation. It requires credible communication, visible coordination, and a narrative that reinforces confidence rather than panic.

Zaragoza's example suggests that morale is not merely a psychological byproduct. It is an operational condition that can be strengthened or weakened by leadership, timing, narrative, and visible success.

Observation Five: Strategic Delay Can Be a Form of Victory

Puebla did not end the French intervention, but it slowed French momentum. Delay matters in irregular warfare. A weaker force may not be able to defeat a stronger actor outright, but it may be able to buy time, preserve political authority, maintain resistance, encourage external

support, or force the adversary to reveal its intentions.

Strategic delay is often undervalued because it does not look like victory in conventional metrics. Yet delay can change the political environment. It can create space for mobilization, diplomacy, coalition-building, partner adaptation, or adversary overextension. [For Zaragoza and Juárez, the ability to show that the French could be resisted mattered even though the conflict continued.](#)

Modern IW campaigns should consider delay as an intentional effect. In the Baltic context, delay may allow NATO reinforcement and political decision-making. In Taiwan-related scenarios, delay may prevent a fait accompli. In homeland defense, delay may allow attribution, interagency coordination, public warning, and defensive mobilization. In the Arctic, delay may buy time in an environment where distance, weather, and infrastructure gaps already complicate response.

The key is to define delay politically, not just tactically. What does delay enable? Whose will does it strengthen? What adversary timeline does it disrupt? What decision space does it preserve? Zaragoza's defense at Puebla is useful because it shows how a time-bound tactical success can produce strategic breathing room.

Observation Six: Coalition and JIIM-C Integration Are Essential Before Crisis

Zaragoza's victory was rooted in military leadership, but [the broader struggle against French intervention required political leadership, national mobilization, local support, diplomacy, and sustained resistance.](#) No single institution could solve the problem alone. That reality mirrors modern irregular warfare, particularly in the homeland defense environment.

Today's IW problems often sit across institutional boundaries. Cyber defense, infrastructure protection, counter-UAS, border security, maritime awareness, counter-threat finance, public communication, and resilience all require joint, interagency, intergovernmental, multinational, and commercial (JIIM-C) coordination. The "C" in JIIM-C may matter less in some traditional military contexts, but in homeland defense it is often decisive because much of the relevant terrain is commercially owned or locally governed.

Zaragoza's example reinforces the idea that military action must be nested within a broader political and

societal effort. A battlefield success that lacks political integration may dissipate. A technical capability that lacks legal authority may remain unused. An intelligence warning that lacks public communication may fail to build resilience. A partner effort that lacks local legitimacy may become counterproductive.

This means modern IW education and assessment should not treat JIIM-C integration as a coordination annex. It should be part of the theory of success. If the desired effect depends on private infrastructure owners, state authorities, Indigenous communities, allies, law enforcement, or commercial providers, then those actors are not peripheral. They are part of the operational environment and, in some cases, part of the decisive terrain.

Implications for Modern Irregular Warfare

Zaragoza's relevance is not that today's conflicts resemble nineteenth-century Mexico. The technologies, authorities, domains, and political structures have changed dramatically. His relevance lies in the enduring logic of resistance and competition.

First, weaker actors can impose disproportionate costs when they align military action with political legitimacy. Second, terrain must be understood as physical, human, informational, and institutional. Third, adversary confidence can be exploited when it produces predictable behavior. Fourth, tactical events require narrative interpretation to become strategic effects. Fifth, delay can be a meaningful operational objective. Sixth, military action must be integrated with broader political and societal resistance.

These observations are directly applicable to current irregular warfare concerns. In Ukraine, resistance has combined territorial defense, international narrative, partner support, commercial technology, and strategic communication. In the Arctic, infrastructure gaps and local knowledge shape what military power can and cannot do. In homeland defense, adversaries may exploit cyber systems, UAS, information operations, and commercial dependencies below the threshold of armed conflict. In the Caribbean and the approaches to the United States, infrastructure investment, illicit networks, and influence activity can create access and leverage without a conventional military footprint.

The Zaragoza case also cautions against overclaiming. Puebla was not a final victory. Modern IW practitioners

should avoid romanticizing tactical success or assuming that symbolic victories automatically produce strategic outcomes. The French returned with greater force. Mexico's struggle continued. Resistance required endurance beyond the celebrated moment.

This is perhaps the most important lesson. Irregular warfare is often a contest of persistence. Zaragoza created a moment of strategic possibility, but political survival required continued effort, adaptation, and national will. Modern IW campaigns must likewise connect moments of tactical or informational success to sustained strategy.

Recommendations for Practitioners

First, assess legitimacy before designing activity. Planners should ask what political purpose an operation serves, whose legitimacy it strengthens, and how adversaries will frame it. Measures of effectiveness should include changes in trust, will, cohesion, and perceived legitimacy; not only activity counts.

Second, map terrain beyond geography. IW assessments should identify infrastructure dependencies, information channels, legal seams, local grievances, commercial actors, illicit networks, and community power structures. The operational environment is not merely a place. It is a system of relationships and vulnerabilities.

Third, treat adversary assumptions as targets. Red teams should identify what the adversary believes will happen quickly or easily. Campaign design should then look for ways to disrupt those expectations, impose delay, force exposure, or create political cost.

Fourth, plan for narrative effects before action. Every activity should include an information logic: what happened, why it matters, who needs to know, and how friendly credibility will be protected. This is especially important in homeland defense, where public trust may determine whether response efforts strengthen resilience or generate fear.

Fifth, define delay as a strategic effect. If an activity is intended to buy time, planners should specify what that time enables: mobilization, attribution, reinforcement, partner decision-making, legal authorization, public warning, or coalition response.

Sixth, build JIIM-C relationships before crisis. The actors required for homeland defense and resilience

cannot be improvised after disruption begins. Private sector, state, local, tribal, territorial, interagency, allied, and community partners must be included in exercises, assessments, and planning before they are needed.

Conclusion

Ignacio Zaragoza's victory at Puebla endures because it was more than an unlikely battlefield success. It was a political-military event that transformed defense into legitimacy, terrain into advantage, morale into operational power, and delay into strategic effect. For modern irregular warfare practitioners, the case is valuable not because it provides a template to copy, but because it reveals enduring patterns in how weaker actors resist stronger ones.

The United States and its partners often study irregular warfare through the lens of insurgency, counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, or great-power competition. Zaragoza adds another perspective: the defense of sovereignty against a superior expeditionary power through legitimacy, preparation, leadership, narrative, and the exploitation of adversary overconfidence.

In an era of cyber disruption, infrastructure vulnerability, gray-zone coercion, contested narratives, and strategic competition below the threshold of armed conflict, Zaragoza's observations remain relevant. Modern IW success will not always come from decisive victory. Sometimes it will come from denying the adversary inevitability, preserving political will, imposing unexpected cost, and creating the time and confidence needed for a broader strategy to succeed.

That is the enduring lesson of Puebla: in irregular warfare, the weaker side does not always need to be stronger everywhere. It needs to be legitimate where it matters, prepared where the adversary is careless, and capable of turning limited success into strategic meaning.

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