

Time for historical lesson on Mexican migration into U.S.

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Immigration is driven by historical and economic necessity on both sides of the border. There are times when the United States needs Mexican labor, such as during World War I and World War II, that migration is encouraged. During economic downturns, migration is discouraged. Repression is directed toward this population, such as during the Great Depression, the economic recession of the 1950s and the present downturn.

Perhaps by analyzing and understanding history, we can change our perspective on the issue - not by building a fence across the border but by building a bridge between two countries that share a long history. It is difficult to comprehend that a physical barrier across the border will fence in history.

Most discussions of Mexican migration into the United States lack a historical perspective that lead to characterize it as a spontaneous and recent phenomenon. However, people of Mexican origin are descendants of one of the six original world civilizations and whose ancestors help lay the foundation for the development of the present-day Southwest and other regions.

The melting pot theory of assimilation and its assumptions are most often used by journalists, politicians and citizens who don't believe Mexican immigrants, legal or not, are productive members of society. At best, this theory is applicable to ethnic immigrants of European heritage. Unlike European immigrants who had to traverse an ocean, this theory does not apply to Native Americans or Mexicans who are indigenous to America.

The first significant contact between whites and Chicanos led to the Texas revolt of 1834-36 when the symbolic battle of the Alamo occurred. Many of the whites in the Alamo were undocumented because Mexico barred further white immigration into Texas in 1830. Armed with a strong military and the ideological doctrine of manifest destiny that deemed the United States as people chosen by God to rule from sea to shining sea, the United States invaded Mexico in 1846.

Mexico lost the war and signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Mexico ceded California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and parts of Nevada, Utah and Wyoming for \$15 million. Under the treaty, remaining Mexicans became U.S. citizens with all rights of property, language and religion. However, the provisions were ignored; or, in the case of property, it was taken by legal and extralegal means.

Violence against Chicanos by vigilantes and law enforcement officials was so severe that scores left for Mexico. Violence faced by those remaining was comparable to what blacks faced in the South. By the early 1900s, cheap Mexican labor was needed for work in the mines, railroads, agriculture and other industries. During this period, Mexicans also migrated to the Midwest and Northwest. The Mexican Revolution and World War I also contributed to push and pull factors that brought migration of Mexicans into the United States. It is estimated one-eighth of Mexico's population legally moved into the United States during this period.

Mexican labor has been instrumental in the development of infrastructure and capital accumulation in the United States. However, with the economic depression of the 1930s, Mexican labor was no longer necessary. Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were deported. This deportation included U.S. citizens, a practice that continues.

Racial categorization in the United States is the confusion of race, nationality and ethnicity, whereby people of Mexican origin are always suspect of being foreign, regardless of legal status. To the dominant society, however, they are all indistinguishable. Unlike European immigrant groups who are removed geographically from home countries, Chicano culture and language are reinforced by new arrivals from Mexico. Unlike immigrants from other countries who can forge a new place for themselves, migrants from Mexico have a ready-made niche for them because of historical circumstances. Historical perceptions and stereotypes of Mexicans precede them as they venture into other parts of the United States. Hopefully, by understanding our shared history, we can refrain from stereotyping and scapegoating Mexicans.

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