

Handout 2.3 - A Very Brief Primer on U.S.-Mexican History

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Adapted from a blogpost that appeared on Inspired Faith, Effective Action, August 9th, 2010 (<http://bit.ly/b2iRmY>)

In the early 1800s, U.S.Americans started settling into a territory of Mexico known as Texas. Alarmed by the fact that the immigration rate was so high that U.S. settlers were starting to outnumber Mexicans, Mexico closed the territory to further legal immigration. But U.S. settlers continued to pour in illegally. Rather than attempting to learn the language and culture of the country to which they had immigrated, U.S.American immigrants in Texas declared independence from Mexico in 1836. (One has to wonder what the Mexican families who had already been living on the land thought about that.)

In 1845, the Republic of Texas was annexed as the 28th state, and President Polk was eyeing Mexico's territories west of TX, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. The annexation of Texas, which Mexico continued to think of as a rebellious territory, caused Mexico to break diplomatic ties with the U.S., but it did not declare war. Polk needed Mexico to be the first to engage in hostilities so that he could frame his expansionist intentions as defensive. He sent Gen. Zachary Taylor to Texas to push its southern boundary from the Nueces river (the border that Mexico recognized) 150 miles southward to the Rio Grande (the border that the U.S. wanted). The ploy worked; in April of 1846, a Mexican detachment attacked a U.S. patrol in the disputed area, killing 16 U.S. soldiers. The U.S.-Mexican War was on.

In the meantime, Polk had sent word to U.S.Americans in California, also a Mexico-owned territory, that the U.S. would support any efforts of "independence" against the Mexican government. When word of the U.S.-Mexico war reached California, U.S. settlers there played "the Texas game" and declared revolution. (Again, one has to wonder what the Mexican families who had already been living in California thought about that.)

Weak from internal instability, the Mexican government was no match for the U.S. military. By September 1847, U.S. forces occupied Mexico City. Mexico had no choice but to accede to whatever the U.S. demanded. The U.S. secured its hold on Texas, established the border at the Rio Grande, and received land that would become all or parts of the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, and Wyoming. (At the risk of repeating ourselves, there were Mexican families who had lived on these lands for generations before they suddenly became part of the U.S.)

All of the events above are well-known to anyone who has studied U.S. history. But there is something that is not as widely known – which is that while U.S. forces occupied Mexico City, the Senate debated whether or not to annex ALL of

Mexico. To be clear, there were moral voices against the war and its subsequent land expansion, including but not limited to a then young Rep. Abraham Lincoln of Illinois and former President then Rep. John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts. But overall, the country was in the grips of “Manifest Destiny” fever, and we might well have annexed Mexico if not for the persuasive argument made by Sen. John C. Calhoun of South Carolina:

“...it is without example or precedent, wither to hold Mexico as a province, or to incorporate her into our Union. No example of such a line of policy can be found. We have conquered many of the neighboring tribes of Indians, but we have never thought of holding them in subjection—never of incorporating them into our Union. They have either been left as an independent people amongst us, or been driven into the forests.

I know further, sir, that we have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race—the free white race. To incorporate Mexico, would be the very first instance of the kind of incorporating an Indian race; for more than half of the Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes. I protest against such a union as that! Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race. The greatest misfortunes of Spanish America are to be traced to the fatal error of placing these colored races on an equality with the white race. That error destroyed the social arrangement which formed the basis of society. The Portuguese and ourselves have escaped—the Portuguese at least to some extent—and we are the only people on this continent which have made revolutions without being followed by anarchy. And yet it is professed and talked about to erect these Mexicans into a Territorial Government, and place them on an equality with the people of the United States. I protest utterly against such a project.

Sir, it is a remarkable fact, that in the whole history of man, as far as my knowledge extends, there is no instance whatever of any civilized colored races being found equal to the establishment of free popular government, although by far the largest portion of the human family is composed of these races. And even in the savage state we scarcely find them anywhere with such government, except it be our noble savages—for noble I will call them. They, for the most part, had free institutions, but they are easily sustained among a savage people. Are we to overlook this fact? Are we to associate with ourselves as equals, companions, and fellow-citizens, the Indians and mixed race of Mexico? Sir, I should consider such a thing as fatal to our institutions.”

Sen. Calhoun convinced the U.S. Senate to let Mexico remain an independent nation, not because it was morally wrong to annex countries by conquest, but because Mexicans are Indians and the U.S. could not have Indians as U.S. citizens, as equals to “the free white race.” (I am sorry to say that John C.

Calhoun was a Unitarian, a member of my beloved All Souls Church, in DC. But I am proud to say, so was John Quincy Adams.)

There are three conclusions that we can draw from this event. One, Mexicans have lived on the land that we know as the Southwest long before it was called the U.S. When the U.S. forcibly annexed the land it split extended families apart, making them citizens of two different countries. Two, while they may be referred to by separate labels today, we once recognized the commonality between Mexicans and Indians, and there are Native people who still recognize that commonality today. Some of the most vocal protestors of SB1070 are Native Americans, who object to the exclusion of their sisters and brothers down south, and who themselves are the targets of racial profiling. And three, from very early on there has been a significant and powerful segment of the U.S. who views the United States as a “white” nation and has fought to keep it that way.

Whenever the point is raised about the U.S. having taken land from Mexico, the objection is raised that since Mexico was also a colony (of Spain), it is just as much founded on stolen land as the U.S. Why should we care about taking land from people who had themselves taken it from others? There is arguably some truth to that argument. However, one could just as easily use that observation to call into question the legitimacy of borders altogether. The conquests of the past are of the past; but the injustices perpetuated in the present are our responsibility.