

Mexamerica at War with Donald Trump

A Case Study in California

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Los Angeles march against Proposition 187, which aimed to exclude undocumented immigrants' access to non-emergency public services.

MEXICAN IMMIGRATION: THE REPUBLICAN PARTY AND DONALD TRUMP

Today, the progress and achievements of the Mexican-origin (Chicano) community have been truly impressive and highly significant in all phases and walks of life in the U.S. Mexican-Americans are now a very visible national minority; they have attained civic and political representation, a flowering culture, a substantial educated middle class, extensive business ownership, and academic renown. At the same time, however, the challenges and unresolved issues confronting the Chicano population have become equally grave and profound. This has been compounded by Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016.

It is the purpose of this two-part article to address, first, the ascendancy of Donald Trump to the presidency and its

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impact in the short and long term on the Mexican-origin population. His policies less than a year into his administration have already had wide-ranging, profoundly negative repercussions. My second aim is to describe and exemplify the current Chicano resistance to Trump's anti-Mexican policies in California. A major hypothesis of this article is that when principled, ethnically conscious, skilled politicians achieve political representation and power, their actions matter and have become a beacon of light in these adverse circumstances. Their goals and initiatives put in place are not only significant, but also truly change the course of history for "La Raza."

It is a fact that Mexican immigration to the United States has become one of the most challenging, debated, and complex policy issues of today. This topic becomes even more

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difficult in the era of Donald Trump's administration, not just for California, but for the nation as a whole. As a *Los Angeles Times* editorial stated, "The nation has a significant illegal immigration problem, and while Trump rode that issue to victory in November, it's clear he still has no good ideas for what to do next."¹ The same editorial pointed out, "At the risk of belaboring the obvious, immigration —despite society's occasional surges of xenophobia— made this country. Not only does it define the nation's past, it will define the future." Yet Trump seems totally oblivious to these facts and insights. Instead of addressing the complex immigration issues with creative, positive proposals, he has conversely aimed his immigration policies very belligerently almost exclusively at the Mexican/Latino population in the United States.

Trump as a candidate and now as president has unleashed a most aggressive and hostile discourse aimed at Mexico and Mexicans on both sides of the border. Although erratic and inconsistent in his daily tweets on a number of initiatives, this is not the case of the Mexican people. Besides hurling horrid insults and name-calling at Mexicans ("Mexico sends the worst to the U.S."), he has adopted harsh executive directives and policies not seen in the U.S. since the Great Depression. It is absolutely a fact that Donald Trump has indeed become the most fervent anti-Mexican president in rhetoric and in practice ever in U.S. history.

Yet, his mindset and actions cannot be interpreted or analyzed as the result of being just one isolated entrepreneur-politician with a deep-seated racism and hostility against Mexicans/Latinos. Quite the contrary, his anti-Mexicanism did not appear overnight; it has precedents. Decades earlier, prominent academics, journalists, and policy-makers sounded the alarm in the United States about the "threat" —to its national culture, identity, and institutions— of the growing presence and rapid demographic growth of minorities, particularly Mexicans/Latinos. A number of influential texts, such as *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, by Samuel Huntington; *State of Emergency* and *Day of Reckoning*, by Patrick Buchanan; and *Alien Nation*, by Peter Brimelow, among others, addressed what to them was the



California Governor Jerry Brown (left) and State Attorney General Xavier Becerra (right).

greatest peril to the U.S. American way of life. They all postulated that if the growth in the number of Mexican/Latinos was not halted or reversed, the situation would be dire.

And while in earlier periods this condition was just a theoretical discussion, it is now a reality. The Mexican/Latino community today is close to 50 million citizens, and it is growing daily. These are numbers that have the potential to be transformed into increased Chicano political power and representation. Mexicans/Latinos are by all accounts almost doubling in number every 40 years. In fact, the most renowned demographers and policy analysts agree that by the year 2050, one in every four persons in the United States will be of Mexican /Latino descent. On a related note, analysts state that these population trends indicate that the Chicano/Latino vote in the states of Texas and Arizona in the next presidential elections (2020) will mean that both states will be contested. The same holds true for various other regions. Furthermore, the Latino-Americanization of the United States is one of the most salient features and realities of the new millennium.

The fact that an African-American, Barack Obama, had been elected —and re-elected— to the presidency made the need for an immediate response to this emerging but dramatic change in the U.S. social and political arena an urgent priority: above all else, it showed minorities' growing spaces of power in society. Moreover, white supremacists and ultra-conservative supporters clearly felt that the United States they were accustomed to living and working in was slipping away from them. Thus, "cultural wars" between two visions and policies for the U.S. became evident during the last election. Trump himself said it best on the campaign trail: "I think this will be the last election that the Republicans have a chance

of winning because you're going to have people flowing across the border; you're going to have illegal immigrants coming in; and they're going to be legalized and they're going to be able to vote, and once that all happens you can forget it."²

With great insight and very forcefully, he articulated his message, aimed to address such fears in his repetitive campaign slogan "Let's take back the heart of the country." Although not fully understood, and often dismissed as sheer political rhetoric, this slogan turned out to be a most effective political platform. What he and his supporters really meant by this statement was let's take the country back from minorities, people of color, women, and the progressive elements that had made much headway and progress in the previous decades. In other words, they wanted to return the country to earlier eras when white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men ruled: an era when all important positions in society and politics (the courts, schools, universities, political posts, the legal system, etc.) labored to maintain the *status quo* that kept minorities "in their place" and thus perpetuated the traditional social order. Donald Trump's election is the clearest indicator of one pole inserting itself into the "cultural wars" fiercely raging in the United States today. Nothing less than the country's social makeup and its political determinants of power are at play and in dire need of resolution.

Thus, it is no wonder that Mexican and Latin American population growth figures prominently in Donald Trump's political and social agenda. The president and his followers are concerned—even alarmed—at the growing presence and influence of Chicanos/Latinos in the country's emerging realities. It is quite obvious to them that little can be done to halt the natural demographic growth of the Chicano/Latino population because of its high birth rate, as well as the fact that the

overall average age of these groups is much younger compared to the Anglo population. Yet the one aspect of the growth of the Chicano community that can be diminished is continued immigration—certainly a factor in demographic growth.

This is the main reason why in this new millennium the immigration debate is no longer only economic. Few voices today claim that Mexican immigrants are taking jobs away from Anglo workers in the U.S., or that they are a cost or burden on the U.S. economy and its institutions. Evidence is overwhelming that in fact Mexican immigrants contribute much more than they receive, and that they are seminal in such economic sectors as agriculture, construction, and service. And yet, one might ask why a successful economic elite such as Donald Trump's does not seem to recognize the simple fact that Mexican immigrants are currently an institutional necessity for the U.S. economy, and that their absence by all accounts would wreak havoc and have catastrophic consequences. His fiery opposition to Mexican immigrants defies logic if it were not for his deep-seated racism and his absolute obsession with the restoration of white supremacy that obviously supersedes all notions of economic pragmatism.

Thus, the explanation for such hostile rhetoric and practice against Mexican immigrants presently lies elsewhere. Its true basis is linked to the social, cultural impact of immigrants in society, and specifically their potential as future voters. In fact, immigration was instrumental in bringing about important victories for the Republican Party in decades past in California. However, it also sealed its fate: a grave decline from which the party has not recovered. The major, definitive moment and event in California for the Grand Old Party (GOP), as it is also known, took place in 1994, when Governor Pete Wilson opted to instigate a severe anti-immigrant campaign for his reelection by placing Proposition 187 on the ballot to deny undocumented immigrants access to public education and social and health services. The proposition also promised a much more aggres-



California farmworkers' leader Cesar Chavez.

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sive policy of rounding up and deporting Mexican immigrants. In the end, although voters passed Proposition 187, mostly because of massive, deceitful media coverage, it was actually never enforced. Immediately upon passage, Chicano organizations and lawyers brought legal action claiming its unconstitutionality on the basis that immigration matters were a national and not a state issue. In the legal battle, the public learned the opportunistic “truth” behind Proposition 187 as well as the very positive contributions immigrants make to California’s economic and social well-being.

When the hypocrisy, blatant distortions, and racism of California’s Republican Party were revealed in their entirety, the tide changed, thus signaling the beginning of the GOP’s decline and free fall in California. From then on, immigration rights and reforms would be a central platform issue of the state Democratic Party and would continue to be emphasized by Chicano organizations, academics, policy makers, activists, and media outlets.

Proposition 187 also prompted young Chicana and Chicano activism. Their outrage about the proposition’s possible implementation spurred them to join the massive mobilization against it. For many, that was the beginning of their activism and political involvement, which would continue in their later lives; several of them become influential elected and appointed officials in the state.

In recent years, as the GOP has consistently moved to the right and to more extreme agendas on immigration—the party has been the single most powerful and consistent force in preventing comprehensive immigration reform—, California Republican Party members always followed their national counterparts. And now they have a champion for their cause in President Donald Trump. Trump’s election vividly showed that any Republican candidate who took even a moderate stand on immigration would face a brutal backlash.

Yet, the Republican national position on immigration is one of the main reasons for its profound decline in California. The state has become more Democratic since then. Currently, both houses of the state legislature are in the hands of Democrats. In fact they have a super-majority that allows them to pass legislation comfortably. The state’s public opinion regarding immigration has also shifted greatly. In a recent state-wide poll by the University of California and the *Los*



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Angeles Times (March 2017), 65 percent of the population favored comprehensive immigration reform and opposed policies for the deportation of law-abiding immigrants. Nowadays, in multi-ethnic, multi-lingual California, most people understand immigrants’ vital contributions to the economy. They most definitely perceive this diversity as a major plus and a reason for California’s strength and progress. Hopefully, this attitude is one more instance of the truth of the saying “where California goes, the country follows.”

Finally, it is important to highlight that a generation of Chicano politicians currently hold positions of power in California (the leadership of the State Assembly and the Senate, for example). For them, immigration is critical—and even a personal matter. They have been defiant and absolutely opposed to the Trump administration’s policies on the subject. Part II of this article will look at “Chicano Power v. Trump” in California. ■■

NOTES

¹ *Los Angeles Times*, “Trump Needs a Better Approach to Immigration because Bullying Isn’t Cutting It,” April 29, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-trump-sanctuary-20170429-story.html>.

² Interview with Donald Trump by Pat Robertson, *Christian Broadcast Network*, September 9, 2016, quoted in Robert P. Jones, “Trump Can’t Reverse the Decline of White Christian America,” *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/robert-jones-white-christian-america/532587/>, accessed August 8, 2017.