

A history of anti-Hispanic bigotry in the United States
This animus bubbles up frequently, with devastating results

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Never before have things seemed so hard for Hispanics. The signals are stark and dire: A drowned father, cradling a dead daughter. A lone mother, defending herself against an armed Border Patrol agent, with a terrified toddler at her side. A diatribe hectoring whites to purge the country of a rising brown tide. A Walmart in El Paso, strewn with the dead. Caravans of the hopeful willing to suffer indignities, splinter their families, cower in cages, risk life itself for a distant dream. And looming over it all: a president who shrugs when a voice in the crowd shouts, “Shoot them!” and who tells Hispanics with roots in this country to go back to the cesspools where they belong. The ground seems to have shifted in this land of the huddled masses.

It has not. These are long-held resentments. For centuries they have been fed by ignorance, racism and a stubborn unwillingness to understand a population whose ancestors were here by the millions — long before the first pilgrim set foot on Plymouth Rock. Now and then, the animus bubbles up. But bigotry against Hispanics has been an American constant since the Founding Fathers. Not 10 years after drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson smugly suggested that these United States might want to snatch Latin America “piece by piece.” John Adams held that a revolution in South America “would be agreeable,” but he wanted little to do with “a people more ignorant, more bigoted, more superstitious, more implicitly credulous in the sanctity of royalty, more blindly devoted to their priests . . . than any people in Europe, even in Spain” — managing to demonize a religion and dismiss a whole human order in one tweet-able and peevish rhetorical flourish.

The hatred was not reserved for Latin America alone but also for its overlords, the Spanish — a hatred inherited from the English, who had warred against Spain for centuries, raiding its shipments of silver and gold to Europe and Asia and profiting from Spain’s woefully mismanaged riches. More rabidly, it extended to the long-suffering indigenous population that predated the European arrivistes. The rationale was not much different from the arguments that had gripped Europe shortly after the conquest: Were the indigenous really human? Wasn’t it more likely that they were beasts of burden? Whoever they were, they were hardly of much importance. They were meant to work the soil, the mines, the bricks; and bear the conquistadors’ children. The law agreed.

By the mid-19th century, when the United States barged past its borders and pushed its dominion into the formerly Mexican lands that are now Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California, that indigenous population had become a mestizo or mixed-race people. Still, the rancor continued. Presidents John Tyler and James Polk seized territory after territory in a fevered campaign to expand America’s Manifest Destiny: in other words, to spread the virtues of American superiority. A grand project of expansion followed, all the way to the wilds of the Rio Grande. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which marked the end of the Mexican-American War, handed 55 percent of Mexico’s territory to the United States. But that victory came with hostages: the Mexican American people. That grudging population was not easy to exterminate; not by war, nor by verdict. There were too many to be herded down trails of tears or consigned to faraway exile, and they were useful, if vexatious. They knew the land, worked the land and could be put to work for white overlords.

Eventually, President William Taft crowed, “the whole hemisphere will be ours in fact as, by virtue of our superiority of race, it already is ours morally.” Taft went on to steel the hand of Porfirio Díaz in the infamous dictator’s murderous reign over the Mexican people, to care about nothing so much as protecting American business interests and to order the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua.

But the hand extended to Mexico did not extend to Mexican Americans in Taft’s own country. Lynchings of Hispanics became legion from California to Wyoming during those years, and they went ignored, tracked only by outraged Mexican diplomats who had little power to control the carnage. As the early 20th century progressed, the volatile politics of our southern neighbor spurred even more Mexican emigration to the United States, delighting American businessmen who needed cheap labor to build railroad tracks, erect towns, toil on ranches and stoop over

agricultural fields. Mexican Americans were wanted for their sweat, their military service, their taxes, but not for their children or their company.

Resentment against a growing Hispanic presence in cities and schools found voice in English-only edicts, emboldening white Americans to treat Latinos as an unwelcome foreign underclass. In the small Texas town of Three Rivers, a Hispanic soldier returning from World War II in a coffin was denied a proper funeral. Farther west, in California, political cartoonists and crime novelists were characterizing a rising tide of young Mexican American males as a menace. In Los Angeles, thousands of soldiers and civilians descended on Hispanic youths in 1943 in a virulent attack known as the Zoot Suit Riots. Brown Americans were pushed into segregated communities, forbidden from serving on juries, their children made to attend “Mexican” schools. In southern Arizona, migrant farmworkers were kidnapped, robbed, tortured — their feet seared over fire — and told to go home.

Within our own lifetimes, things have often looked grim. “Latin America doesn’t matter,” said Richard Nixon, even as he was issuing directives to throttle Chile’s economy and bring an inconvenient socialist government to its knees. “People don’t give a s---” about the place. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger concurred: What happens down there “has no importance,” he said. And so Americans have not been very curious about the region that is feeding our burgeoning Hispanic population. We’ll do anything for Latin America, except read about it, James Reston, a former executive editor of the New York Times, once quipped. “You’d be surprised!” Ronald Reagan told the American people, after his first official trip to Central America. “They’re all individual countries!”

So it should surprise nobody that a generation later, in 2006, Hal Turner, a prominent radio talk-show host in New Jersey whose show is broadcast across the country, would revel in the idea of Latin America as the sinister, dark continent. “These filthy, disease-ridden, two-legged bags of human debris are too stupid to believe,” he said on the air. “Just think, America, if we bring enough of them here, they can do for America exactly what they did for Mexico! Turn our whole country into a crime-ridden, drug-infested slum. . . . These people are subhuman. I would love it if folks who do have such weapons used them on the crowds. . . . I advocate machine-gunning these invaders to death at their rallies!”

It’s not a big leap from those words, uttered on American radio waves a dozen years ago, to the rhetoric in the statement linked to the El Paso shooting suspect (“If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable”). And it’s not a far cry from labels like “subhuman” to the tweets of a president: from words like “stupid,” “filthy,” “human debris” to words like “rapists,” “criminals,” “invasion.” These slurs against Latinos, in one form or another, have been in the American parlance for a very long time.

The pity, of course, is that like the starving Irish fleeing the famine, or the Russians eluding the life-or-death dangers of the pale, or the Germans shucking the very real hazards of religious oppression, Latin American immigrants risk the flight north to escape concrete, life-threatening conditions: crime, drugs, poverty. Of the 50 most violent cities in the world, 43 are in Latin America. Of the 25 countries with the highest murder rates, nearly half are south of the Rio Grande. To understand why this is so, we need to understand a half-millennium of history, the cruel legacy of a brutal colonial structure and the rampant corruption of the white-brown caste system it has engendered. We need to understand the region’s greatest affliction: its dire inequality.

Latin America is the most unequal region on Earth precisely because it has never ceased to be colonized — by exploiters, conquerors, proselytizers, and, for the past two centuries, by multinational corporations and its own tiny elite. As economists have long argued, extractive societies such as Latin America’s are built on social injustice. They are designed and maintained by a ruling class whose primary goal is to enrich themselves and perpetuate their power. They thrive when absolute privilege reigns over absolute poverty. But extractive nations are also programmed to fail. The damage caused by their endless raid on natural resources is all too enduring. It is violence, resentment, poverty, environmental damage, crime. Fear is the engine that drives Latin Americans north.

The irony is that so many are here because they were always here; as Mexican Americans like to say: They didn’t cross the border, the border crossed them. Or they are here because the lure to emulate Hispanic Americans who are living better lives is irresistible. Never before has a wave of immigrants joined such a large minority. Latinos in the United

States now number 56.5 million, a full 18 percent of the population. According to the Pew Research Center, that's a whopping 40 percent increase over 40 years. Almost two-thirds are native-born. By 2050, Hispanics will account for a third of this country's residents.

Which is to say that whatever Jefferson and Adams and Nixon thought is obviously wrong. Latin America *does* matter to the United States, and it always has. The long, complicated history that has convulsed nations and propelled Hispanics to our shores should be of utmost importance to us. Latin America's history is not remotely like U.S. history. Its colonies were more exploited, its revolutions more extreme. It is a region unlike any other, where theories or doctrines fashioned elsewhere seldom have purchase. We would do well to study it. It's about time we understood what Latin Americans bring with them when they come. And it's about time we understood the deeply held racism that has always met them.