California Dreaming
A State of Confusion

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

California's gubernatorial recall election highlights a number of crucial issues facing the residents of our nation's most populated state: California's looming $38-billion budget deficit; a financially bloated and deteriorating educational system; a tripling of the state's car tax; an energy crisis aggravated by inept regulatory mismanagement; an overburdened health-care system; a state that issues driver's licenses to illegal aliens, and grants instate college tuition costs to illegal aliens, yet charges out-of-state tuition fees for *legal* residents of other states.

The media's coverage of these issues (as one usually expects) tends to dwell upon superficial features (personalities and anecdotal accounts), which often leave the impression that these matters are disjointed problems. Put simply, journalists are reluctant to recognize a common causal relationship between the state's simmering political, social and economic upheaval and California's shifting demographic population base. For obvious liberal and egalitarian reasons, the "mainstream" press (as promoters of "multicultural diversity") selectively avoids connecting the dots: hence, as a "nation of immigrants," we should continue to indefinitely absorb the flow of legal and illegal migrants; the "benefits" of "cultural enrichment" will easily outweigh financial costs to the state, and besides what does the state's budget deficits, educational,

Mexifornia: A State of Becoming
by Victor Davis Hanson
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150 pages, $24.95

Kevin Lamb is the Managing Editor of Human Events. *From 1989-2002, he worked as a researcher and library assistant for* Newsweek's *Washington bureau. His writings have appeared in the* Asian Wall Street Journal, National Review, Chronicles, Society, *and* Right Now!

welfare and health-care costs, traffic congestion, water shortages, pollution and environmental burdens have to do with the state's demographically expanding and changing population base? Let them come and the assimilation process — with the right mix of government policies — will work itself out.

This sort of thinking is endemic and shows how the media and cultural elites continue to view this seemingly disparate matrix of political, social, economic and cultural indicators: legal and illegal immigration levels simply have a negligible adverse impact on the average native Californian. Crime rates are disproportionately higher in certain neighborhoods, not because of the presence of violent Hispanic gang members, but because of the state's *overall* higher unemployment rate. Welfare costs are increasing, not because of the presence of more low-wage, low-skill Mexican immigrants, but because the state's minimum wage fails to cover the costs of single-parents struggling to raise a family on a low-wage salary. Traffic congestion is worse than ever, not because more people are driving more cars and thus clogging up highways, but because the state fails to spend more on highway construction.

What compounds this perplexing mindset is Victor Davis Hanson's recently published book *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*. As a classicist at California State University (Fresno) and fifth-generation Central Valley farmer, Hanson brings to the table an interesting background — the insights of a scholar steeped in history, language and culture combined with the experience of an agricultural farmer who has first-hand experience in witnessing his hometown of Selma transformed from a "unicultural" community to a Hispanic-dominated enclave. A perfect mix one would expect in terms of providing a first-rate analysis of the implications of California's ethnic transformation.

While he seems to grasp the fact captured in the words of the Pretenders' song—"my city was gone" —

Hanson seems nearly delusional in attempting to explain this phenomenon: ethnicity and demographic factors are, in his view, irrelevant when it comes to understanding how California communities have changed. The problem is one of process — simply *allowing* assimilation to work. Illegal immigrants who refuse to assimilate have turned a once successful melting pot into a balkanized cauldron not because of who they are and what they represent, but because of a host of other reasons (cultural, social, and economic barriers) in which Western values and norms have failed to take root.

Hanson's explanations for his conclusions in this slim 150-page volume are less than convincing. As political scientist James Q. Wilson noted, "[*Mexifornia*] is less a book than an expanded magazine article." And since it contains no footnotes, references, bibliography or index, Hanson essentially wedges undocumented facts, assertions and statistics between anecdotes. Tipping his hand, he stated in a recent *National Review* article, "objective data cannot tell us whether a front-line state like California is saved or lost because of illegal immigration."

What is baffling about Hanson's book is that he seems to have his pulse on the symptoms of California's immigration problems, even to the extent that these are properly attributed to the nonstop flow of illegal immigration, but in the final analysis he fails to properly diagnose the causes which contribute to this dilemma of "assimilation." For Hanson, the problem underlying the flight of illegal Mexicans into the U.S. is a despotic Mexican government that is exporting its undesirables (Mestizos and Indian underclass) northward beyond the country's border. Hanson seems to recognize what is patently obvious: Mexican society — from the government on down — breeds corruption. The question he tiptoes around is: *What makes it so comparatively corrupt*? He argues that the heart of California's immigration problem is "complex," and this complexity is reflected in a lack of "domestic" reforms on the part of the Mexican government, reinforced by U.S. foreign

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policies toward Mexico that will force an end to its "tribalism" and "class" discrimination. Once reforms take hold in Mexico, minimizing and reversing government corruption, then the conditions will be ripe to diminish the northward flow of illegal immigrants.

For any sophisticated reader with commonsense, the frustration boils down to this: Only someone of this intellectual caliber can miss something so strikingly obvious. Some points that Hanson raises seem to abruptly dodge the logical extension of his reasoning. Other positions strike a bizarre degree of inconsistency: He describes the deplorable conditions that have turned his hometown into a Third World community as the small community turned largely Hispanic, then expresses his personal admiration for the contributions of Latino culture to America's diversity. Hanson is a firm believer in the "melting pot" metaphor. So long as Mexican immigrants are properly assimilated into the grain of American culture, then America benefits from this ethno-cultural integration. He fails to adequately address the alternative: perhaps some cultures are simply *unassimilable* or *incompatible* with the cultural standards, norms and traditions of the majority population. Suppose, even more

significantly, some immigrant cultures are *assimilable only up to a point*.

What is missing from his analysis is any consideration of the *law of averages*. If, on average, Latinos commit more violent crime than say non-Hispanic whites or Asians; if, on average, they rely upon state welfare services more than say other major California ethnic groups; if, on average, they depend on low-wage, low-skilled jobs; if, on average, they perform more poorly and score lower grades than other comparative ethnic groups, so on and so forth, then how will this impact the social and political landscape? This can be viewed for what it realistically is, and to some extent Hanson seems to suggest that if current levels of illegal Latino immigration persist as projected to 2050 by census bureau estimates, the lack of low-skilled jobs could eventually lead to a Brazilian-style balkanized society increasingly divided by class, race, and ethnicity. The situation is one in which these ethnic differences are likely to persist rather than dissolve in the great "melting pot." If so, native Californians are likely to either flee the state or seek refuge in areas of California that remain relatively insulated from the ghetto conditions associated with Latino-majority communities. Liberal politicians will seize on this development, seeking the ethnic-block vote of Latinos, denouncing their plight as victims of "racism" and "discrimination."

To his credit, Hanson would reform our immigration system and limit the flow of illegal immigration into the U.S., even though he offers few specifics as to how he would accomplish this task. Since 9/11 two years ago, he has replaced Daniel Patrick Moynihan as the neo-conservative's favorite liberal — he remains a registered Democrat, claims to be an old-fashioned liberal — but has managed to write 121 bylined articles for *National Review* and *National Review Online* in the past two years. Hopefully, over time Hanson will reassess some of these positions, shed the meaningless clichés of the "melting pot," and apply his first-rate historical insights toward a more sound resolution of California's demographic transformation before it is too late.   •