

The Lyrics of History

'We're more American than every last one of the Gringos'

by Glynn Custred

T*igres del Norte* (Tigers of the North) is a Grammy-winning Latin band that caters to a growing Latino audience in the United States. Their album *Uniendo Fronteras* (Uniting Borders) was played on Spanish language radio stations across the country and in 2001 ranked near the top on *Billboard's* Latin album chart. One of the album's most popular songs is *Somos mas Americanos*, (*We're More American*). Judging by its ratings the song's message resonated with Mexicans and their descendants in the United States. Here are some of its key verses (translated by Alan Wall).

*A thousand times they have shouted at me
 'Go home, you don't belong here'
 Let me remind the Gringo
 That I didn't cross the border,
 the border crossed me.
 America was free –man divided her
 They drew the line so we had to jump it
 And they call me the intruder ...
 They purchased from us without money,
 the waters of the Rio Bravo
 They took from us Texas, New Mexico,
 Arizona and Colorado
 California too and Nevada
 Even with Utah it was not enough –
 they also took Wyoming from us
 We are more American
 than any son of the Anglo-Saxon ...*

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*We are more American
 than every last one of the Gringos.*

Historical facts, of course, never get in the way of political myth. The victorious Americans after the Mexican War of 1846-1848 did indeed extend the sovereignty of the United States over the territory that today comprises California, New Mexico and Arizona. But under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 the United States also paid Mexico \$15,000,000 and agreed to assume all claims from U.S. citizens against Mexico. Residents of those territories also received full United States citizenship, many of them later participating in the governments of the newly created states. Property rights were also maintained for the residents going back to the earliest Spanish land grants.

In 1854 the United States bought a strip of land in southern Arizona, the Gadsden Purchase for \$10,000,000. The sale was not made under duress. It was a straight forward business deal between the United States and the Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. The Americans wanted the land as a southern route for a transcontinental railroad. Santa Anna in turn wanted the money for a treasury he had drained through what historian Hubert Herring has described as Santa Anna's "profligate luxury, dirty intrigue and criminal waste." Santa Anna's many rivals attacked him for the purchase, accusing him of treason. In 1855 he was finally driven from office and into permanent exile.

To hear many Mexicans talk today, the territory transferred to the United States by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo had been an integral part of Mexico. This was by no means the case. The colony of New Mexico, founded at the very end of the sixteenth century, was firmly established by the nineteenth century, yet had remained for over two hundred years a small, remote and isolated outpost on the far northern fringes of the Spanish empire and later of its Mexican successor. The other settlements in what was to become the American

Southwest were far more recent efforts on the part of the dying Spanish empire to establish a presence in a part of the continent that the Spaniards had ignored until Spain's other imperial rivals, Britain and France, began to cast their eyes on that vast and remote part of the world. For example, the mission and presidio at San Francisco were established in 1776, the year that the Declaration of Independence was signed.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821 she also inherited the same problems in the far north as her predecessor had faced. Chief among them was the vast distance that separated the over-extended northern limits of the Spanish empire from the heartland of Mexico, making colonization from the populated center of Mexico unfeasible and supply extremely difficult. For example, California at that time was one of the most remote places on earth, best reached from Mexico by sea, and so hard to supply that Spanish and later Mexican garrisons on the coast did not have enough gun powder to return the salutes of visiting ships. The Mexican administration in California was also corrupt and negligent, inspiring little loyalty from the population and sometimes provoking their enmity. By the end of the Mexican period the people identified themselves more as Californios than as Mexicans.

The commander of the Mexican army in California, General Mariano Vallejo, protested government corruption and criticized the unwillingness of the Mexican authorities to take adequate measures for defense against the Indians and to counter the designs of the Swiss adventurer John Sutter, who harbored grandiose plans for the establishment of a New Helvetia in California, and the Russians who had moved from Alaska to establish a post north of San Francisco at Fort Ross.

When the government in Mexico City finally responded, Santa Anna, the dictator of Mexico at the time, sent a new governor and an army; not a serious body of well-supplied fighting men, but a band of convicts rounded up from Mexican prisons and granted full pardons if they enlisted for service in the remote hardship post of California. Money was appropriated to pay their expenses but was never delivered. The armed convicts thus robbed the civilian population and pillaged the countryside. The Californios finally rebelled and the new governor and his hated convict army sailed back to where they had come from. Thus Mexico's only gesture on behalf of California turned out to be shabby and

counterproductive and roundly rejected by the Californios. Nothing more was done by Santa Anna, leaving California virtually abandoned, hanging onto Old Mexico by the slenderest thread.

During the Mexican War the Californios briefly contested American forces in the field, engaging in several skirmishes and winning one short battle in Southern California known as the Battle at San Pascua. Another brief encounter, the "Battle of the Old Woman's

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Gun," illustrates how badly the Mexican government had neglected California's defense, and why Mexico had in essence forfeited its claim to the possession of that distant province. Drastically short of artillery and gun powder, the Californios hastily retrieved an old cannon that had once been used to fire salutes on the town square. The gun had lain buried for some time in the garden of an elderly lady. The soldiers dug it up, cleaned it, rigged an apparatus to make the once discarded piece mobile, and fired it at the Americans with homemade gun powder ignited with a cigarette.

Vallejo, a man of liberal convictions, eventually came to advocate the American cause. He later served as a member of the convention that drew up the state constitution. He also donated land from his vast estate for a new city that he hoped would become the state capital. That city, on the Carquinez Strait, bears his name today. Vallejo's brother Salvador had been a captain in the Mexican army and had fought Indians under the Mexican flag. During the Civil War he was commissioned a major in the Union army and saw service in Arizona.

Californio General Andres Pico, victor of the brief

battle of San Pascua, had signed the Treaty of Cahuenga with the American commander John C. Fremont that ended the hostilities. Afterwards Pico became an assemblyman in the legislature and was active in establishing the borders of the new state. During the Civil War he offered to raise a regiment in California to fight on the side of the Union. He was deeply disappointed when the federal government turned down his offer because of the cost of transporting the regiment of cavalry to the theater of war on the other side of the continent.

California prospered under American rule, and commerce in Santa Fe was greatly enhanced by unrestricted access to the American market. The impact of change of sovereignty was minimal in Arizona where the population had been so small that it could not provide a base for economic development. And there was no Mexican population at all in the vast region to the north that had been claimed by Spain and later by its Mexican successor but which was too remote for either to develop. Americans were the first to populate and develop that region and to bring civil administration to it in the form of the states of Colorado, Utah and Nevada.

Texas, however, was another matter. In 1821, just before Mexican independence, the Spanish government made a belated attempt to secure that vast empty wilderness against possible competitors. The government sent a few settlers from northern Mexico and the Canary Islands to establish three tiny villages in the eastern part of the territory. By 1821 there were only about 2,000 whites and Metizos in the province. In order to promote development, the Spanish government granted Steven Austin certain concessions which included provisions for the immigration of American settlers. By 1835 there was a sizable Anglo-American population in Texas holding Mexican citizenship and calling themselves Texicans.

In 1824 Mexico became a federal republic with a constitution modeled in part on that of the United States. When in 1835 Santa Anna abolished the federal system the Texicans rebelled. The majority at that time did not favor independence. Their quarrel, they said, was not

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with the nation but with the sudden centralization of power in Mexico City in the hands of a dictator. It is significant that the flag that defiantly fluttered over the Alamo when Santa Anna's army approached for the kill was the red, white and green flag of Mexico embossed with the date of the liberal constitution, 1824.

By 1836 Santa Anna's popularity was beginning to wane. Seeing the chance to play the hero and strengthen his hand in the country, he conscripted an army mainly of Indians, shoddily equipped by corrupt contractors,

and marched them north to teach Texas a lesson. The response in Texas was a declaration of independence. After massacring the small militia garrison of San Antonio at the old Franciscan Mission called the Alamo, and after annihilating another small garrison at the town of Goliad, Santa Anna advanced to the San Jacinto River where he was met by an army of eight hundred Texans. The Mexican army was over twice the size of the Texas force but was quickly overwhelmed when the Texans surprised them at siesta time. Six hundred Mexican soldiers were killed in the engagement and Santa Anna was taken prisoner while napping in his tent.

The defeated dictator was forced to recognize Texas independence, then permitted to return home where he wreaked further havoc on his battered country. The Texans applied for admission to the United States but due to tensions, which eventually resulted in the Civil War, had to wait ten years until 1846 before becoming a state. By that time the United States had made up its collective mind to spread its language and its laws all the way across the continent to the Pacific Ocean, a spirit known as manifest Destiny that helped sweep the United States into war with Mexico in 1846 over a border dispute in Texas between the two countries.

Texas was not the only part of Mexico that declared its independence during that period of misrule. Three years later in 1839 Yucatan in the far south seceded. Yucatan was soon plunged into violence when the native Maya Indian majority rebelled against the exploitative Mexican elite in what is known as the War of the Castes. Yucatan was so weakened by internal violence that in 1843 Mexican forces were able to retake the country. Three years later during the Mexican War Yucatan once more tried to assert its independence as did several states in the northern part of that chaotic country.

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General Winfield Scott, commander of the American army that occupied the Mexican capital, was asked by some of the prominent people of that city to remain as president. And in the 1860s Prince Maximilian von Habsburg, brother of Franz Joseph emperor of Austro-Hungary, was invited by Mexicans weary of chaos to become their emperor hoping that a European ruler might bring stability and prosperity to the nation. The Habsburg prince accepted, bringing with him French troops supplied by Emperor Louis Napoleon of France. Maximilian was eventually deposed by Mexican insurgents with aid from the United States government, and the cycle of democracy and dictatorship that has characterized Mexican history continued.

History thus reveals Mexico as a country that proved incapable of maintaining order, of operating proper civil government, of administering justice and of promoting economic prosperity. Instead Mexico in the nineteenth century was characterized by dictatorship, venality, mismanagement, exploitation and poverty from which the far northern fringe settlements escaped when Texas became independent in 1836 and the rest of the Southwest became part of the United States in 1848.

As for the tiny Mexican population living in those territories, some of them did well under American rule while others did not. All, however, have long since been assimilated into the American population. The Mexicans who live in the American Southwest today have nothing to do with that by-gone era. They are simply immigrants from a foreign country who began their massive migration across the border in the 1980s, newcomers who have no more a claim on the land than did the Irish, German and Chinese immigrants who came before them. Yet unlike those earlier immigrants the Mexican newcomers do not have to navigate an ocean to get here. All they have to do is to step across a land border that stretches two thousand miles across the continent over which they are coming in ever increasing numbers every day. Also, unlike earlier immigrants, this wave has for the most part violated American law by coming here illegally. Also unlike their predecessors they potentially challenge the sovereignty of the United States and the culture of the people who constitute the American nation – attitudes clearly revealed in the song sung with such defiance by the *Tigres del Norte*.

Some might say, “Lighten up. It’s just a song.” Indeed it is, yet a song that goes well beyond a few lyrics and a melody to narrate a political myth held by millions of Mexicans, actively encouraged in Mexico, and expressed in a manner that would be considered racist and xenophobic if sung by Americans in reference to Mexicans. Moreover those many immigrants who believe this political myth are quietly concentrating in rapidly growing numbers in the Southwest, creating a situation in a large part of the country that has never before been seen in American immigration history. •