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From MexAmerica to Aztlan

by Brent Nelson

MexAmerica ... is more than an economic phenomenon, a good investment for some people. Under the name of Aztlan, it is claimed as their homeland by the Chicano nationalists. Aztlan, they explain, was the name given by the Aztecs to the northern land from which they descended into Mexico to found the city of Tenochtitlan.¹ Today, however, it is a captive nation, subjugated and exploited by the *Yanqui* imperialists.

The name Aztlan was first given currency in 1969 when the Chicano National Liberation Youth Conference was held at Denver. The conference produced "The Spiritual Plan of Aztlan," of which the following are typical passages:

*In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud heritage, but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan ... declare that the call of our blood is ... our inevitable destiny. Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops, and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the Bronze Continent ... We declare the independence of our mestizo Nation ... Before the world, before all of North America ... we are a Nation. We are Aztlan.*²

Partisans of Aztlan in following years contributed to the establishment of departments of Chicano Studies in colleges and universities. These in turn generated a literature in support of their aims. Typical of the revisionist histories produced is Rodolfo Acuna's *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*, which defends the thesis that "The Mexican-American War was not only an unjust war but ... it was just as brutal as the repression perpetuated by other colonial regimes. The Anglo-Texans' treatment of the Mexican was violent and often inhumane. The Anglo-American invasion of Mexico was as vicious as that of Hitler's invasion of Poland and other Central European nations, or, for that matter, U.S. involvement in Vietnam."³

It is not clear whether most Chicano nationalists favor independence for Aztlan itself or seek its annexation by Mexico. If the latter, then the rise of Chicano separatism would introduce to Americans a problem new to the Western Hemisphere, but one that has long been known to Europe. This is irredentism, a

term which, in the definition of Max H. Boehm, "is derived from the Italian *irredenta* (unredeemed). The concept originated in the nineteenth century in connection with the Italian movement which, after the unification of Italy, aimed at the annexation of Italian-speaking regions still under Austrian or Swiss Rule, such as Trent, Dalmatia, Istria, Trieste and Fiume. The concept, however, has become detached from its concrete and specific connotation and has come to denote any movement which aims to unite politically with its co-national mother-state a region under foreign rule."⁴

The classic irredentist situation involves an area of one nation-state, adjacent or in proximity to another nation-state, which was formerly owned by the latter and has a majority of its inhabitants sharing the same ethnic identity as the latter. The demographic factor is the *sine qua non* of irredentism, but no less essential is the conviction, generally held by the citizens of at least one of the two nation-states, that the frontiers of nationality and of polity should coincide, that all nation-states should recognize "ethnicity" as the basis of citizenship even if that involves rectifying historic "injustices" of decades or centuries past.

What "Anglos" see as Chicano separatism is, seen from a perspective south of the Rio Grande, Mexican irredentism. Since even *Yanqui* historians readily and perhaps unthinkingly "admit" that the U.S. "stole" the Southwest from Mexico, and since the moral and historical basis for an irredentist movement has already been established by Chicano authors, it would seem that the rise of Mexican irredentism as a serious political movement awaits only the demographic transformation of the Southwest.

Boehm notes three "counter-remedies for irredentist difficulties...: the rectification of frontiers, assimilation and accord of interests."⁵ Resort to the first procedure as a formal, legal process seems to be of the highest order of improbability in the case of Mexican irredentism. The second is the officially expressed remedy offered by the governing stratum of the U.S. whenever American society is confronted with inter-group conflict. Increasingly, however, the third remedy is the one which will be attempted in practice, albeit that official expressions of public policy will continue to pay homage to the American ideal of *e pluribus unum*.

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Rectification of frontiers following either a protracted guerrilla war or decades of chronic terrorism may, however, not be ruled out as an option by those who seek such rectification. The fact that such an effort is unlikely to be successful may not be sufficient to deter those who are fanatically committed to what they see as self-determination for their homeland. When the small band of enthusiasts following John Brown to Harper's Ferry were apprehended, their plot seemed almost ludicrous for the dimensions of the ambition which inspired it. Nonetheless, history demonstrated that Brown's raid was merely a harbinger of what was to come. Similarly, partisans of Aztlan may one day also choose to act, hoping that even a failed *putsch* might lead to a later and successful uprising.

The U.S. As Enemy

In 1986 *Excelsior*, a leading newspaper in Mexico City, conducted a survey of Mexicans' perceptions of the U.S. The results, as reported in *The Atlanta Constitution*, were as follows: "Fifty-nine percent of 550 people polled said the United States was 'an enemy country' when asked how they viewed Mexico's northern neighbor, compared with 31 percent who said the United States was 'a friendly country.' Ten percent of those polled did not answer."⁶

Irredentism is promoted not merely by private publications such as *Excelsior*, but also by the Mexican government. In 1981 the Mexican government opened the National Museum of Intervention, specifically intended for the education of youth. The following are excerpts from Larry Rohter's article in the *New York Times* regarding this rather unusual museum:

At the entrance stands Uncle Sam, his ax raised triumphantly over a prostrate Mexico. But inside the National Museum of Intervention, the tables are turned, and it is the United States that comes under unrelenting attack.

In the course of their history as neighbors, Mexico and the United States have endured relations often marked by tension, conflict and mutual suspicion. Nowhere in Mexico is that phenomenon more apparent than at this self-described "repository of national memory" maintained mainly for the benefit of the nation's schoolchildren.

Housed in a former convent, the museum contains exhibits, maps, weapons, documents and photographs that convey a distinctly

Mexican view of that uneasy relationship. Financed and administered by the Mexican government, the museum, inaugurated just before Mexican Independence Day in 1981, is both a monument to two centuries of accumulated rancor and an affirmation of national identity....

Much of the museum focuses on the events leading up to and accompanying "the Mutilation," as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo is often called here. In that treaty, which followed the victory of the United States in the war of 1846-48, Mexico lost more than half its claimed territory, which became the American Southwest.

The deaths of Mexicans in that struggle for continental supremacy are referred to here as "exterminations" or "assassinations." American victims like the 365 combatants executed on Palm Sunday in 1836 after their surrender at what is now Goliad, Tex., are described, on the other hand, merely as having been "shot."⁷

While the Mexican government portrays the U.S. as an enemy of Mexico's people, it could be argued that some public officials in California, Texas, and Arizona have been, in fact, overly solicitous of their interests. A few exemplary instances are the following: Property owners in San Diego's McGonigle Canyon, confronted with illegal entrants squatting on their land, experienced difficulty in getting city authorities to enforce the laws against trespassing.⁸ California's Assembly passed a resolution urging the federal government to delay building a ditch along the U.S.-Mexican border because the proposed ditch had aroused protests in Mexico when the governor opened the state's new trade office there.⁹ A "Buy American-Buy Texan" bill passed in the Texas legislature only after Mexico was defined in the bill as American.¹⁰ Also approved was a bill to allow Mexican nationals to pay in-state tuition when they attend five Texas state universities in the border area.¹¹ San Antonio's Mayor Henry Cisneros, in an address delivered to Albuquerque's Hispano Chamber of Commerce, argued that "there is no way to seal the border."¹² Not to be outdone, Texas's Lieutenant Governor Bill Hobby called for open borders, explaining that "by an accident of history, a particular shallow river is now found to be a boundary and people crossing that river without getting a paper stamped are termed illegal immigrants and therefore thought to be some great problem."¹³ Arizona's Governor Bruce Babbitt told LULAC (the League of United Latin American Citizens) that Mexico's debt to the U.S. should be halved because "the banks can soak it up."¹⁴

By the 1990s, MexAmerica had begun to evolve its own regional politics, a politics as unique as was that of the so-called Solid South prior to 1954. The

American officials cited above, as well as others, had begun to make an implicit obeisance to the new political realities of their region. Their compliant attitude may partially explain why the Chicano nationalists, unlike their predecessors in the late 1960s, had apparently elected "the long march through the institutions" as a strategy rather than militance.

Through the Institutions

Chicano nationalists began their long march through the institutions in 1969 when the Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education met to issue "El Plan de Santa Barbara." This plan was directed to the colleges and universities and called for the establishment of Chicano Studies programs. A student organization was also founded, the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* or MECHA. With this development ended what Mario Barrera, in his *Beyond Aztlán: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective*, calls "the classic period" of the Chicano movement. This combined both "communitarian and egalitarian goals under the ideological label of Chicanismo."¹⁵

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In the following years, according to Barrera, the movement "fragmented and diverged," often neglecting the communitarian goal in its pursuit of socio-economic and political equality.¹⁶ The August Twenty-Ninth Movement, however, kept alive the hope of independence for Aztlán. According to Barrera, "The ATM based its position on certain concepts Lenin and Stalin had developed to deal with the political problem of multiple ethnic groups in Russia and Eastern Europe... The key concept here was that of national self-determination, which meant that any group that met certain criteria of 'nationhood' was free to determine its own national boundaries, even if that meant seceding from an existing state."¹⁷

Barrera believes that the Chicano movement in the 1990s is regaining sight of its communitarian goal, especially since American society has begun to evolve towards multiculturalism. His *Beyond Aztlán* might well serve as a *vade mecum* for that movement. It is well-documented, closely argued, and scholarly in tone, avoiding the stentorian rhetoric which characterized "El Plan" in its previous appearances.

Although American society has held that an ethnic group can achieve equality only by losing its distinctive collective identity, Barrera points to "a tradition of

thought in the United States that supports the concept of a pluralistic accommodation. ... This is the cultural pluralism position, originally expounded by the Jewish philosopher Horace Kallen."¹⁸

Exploring the Concept of Regional Autonomy

Barrera believes that cultural pluralism has "remained a curiously incomplete intellectual concept" in contemporary America, where it seems to be simply "a supportive set of attitudes." He believes, however, that "regional autonomy" is necessary because

a more realistic analysis would take note ... that culture is rooted in and shaped by a whole range of institutions: the mass media, which transmit cultural attitudes in a very direct manner; the schools, with their impact on language learning; the corporations, which reward certain types of language skills and cultural attributes and penalize others; the government, which is a major employer itself and which sets policies affecting all of the other institutions. As the Quebecois well know, a "do-your-own-thing-on-your-own-time" attitude doesn't take you very far toward cultural pluralism if everyone knows that English is the only way to get ahead. To achieve a real rather than an illusory cultural pluralism, then, requires a set of supportive institutions, such as are found in Quebec and Switzerland but not in the United States."¹⁹

Barrera defines regional autonomy as "a kind of in-between solution to ethnic and nationalist demands, poised between separatism and secession on the one hand and assimilation without choice on the other."²⁰ Ironically, the nations which Barrera sees as models for the attainment of this ideal — Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium — are precisely those cited in the warnings of Governor Lamm and others. What is a disaster for one party appears to be an ideal compromise or accord, the third of Boehm's counter-remedies, to the other.

What [former Colorado Governor Richard] Lamm and others see as an extreme solution, Barrera defines as "implicit regional autonomy. In both Canada and Switzerland, a federal system of government has combined with the coexistence of different ethnic groups to produce a system of ethnic regional autonomy that is not called by that name."²¹ Explicit regional autonomy exists in China and, when Barrera was writing, in Nicaragua where the Sandinista government sought to appease the Mesquito Indians.²²

Hannum and Lillich, writing in *The American Journal of International Law* on the concept of autonomy, provide Barrera with a legal model. Hannum and Lillich's definition of "the *minimum* governmental powers that a territory would need to possess if it were to be considered fully autonomous" resembles American federalism. The powers enumerated, all

subject to the principal government, include "a locally elected body with some legislative power," "a locally chosen chief executive," and "an independent local judiciary." Also, "the status of autonomy and at least partial self-government is not inconsistent with the denial of any local authority over specific areas of special concern to the principal/sovereign government" and is also "consistent with power-sharing arrangements between the central and autonomous governments."²³

"Demographic trends, Barrera believes, favor the rise of ethnic autonomy areas."

At first glance, and admittedly without reading the fine print, this legal model seems to be a replica of the American federal system. The crucial difference, however, is that such a regional government would be implicitly or explicitly conducted in the name of a specific ethnic group. The latter, however, is a matter of content, not of form.

Barrera recognizes the practical difficulty that "ethnic groups overlap in their patterns of residence, so that it is not possible to draw neat boundaries around regions. This is the type of argument that the Quebecois call mappism." The answer to "mappism" is China, where "one ethnic group lives in the valleys and another on the ridges of hills, and so on."²⁴

Demographic trends, Barrera believes, favor the rise of ethnic autonomy areas. He cites the demographic studies of Bouvier, the Southern California Association of Governments, and others to conclude that "the most likely candidates for Chicano regional autonomy areas are southern California, northern New Mexico, and southern Texas."²⁵ Chicanos either have majorities or will have majorities of the populations in these areas. In New Mexico, their roots go back four centuries.

It is impossible to predict whether or not Barrera's plan will be realized, but he notes that "no one predicted the Chicano Movement, nor the Quiet Revolution in Canada." The latter revolution was spearheaded by "intellectuals and professionals" when "a rising strata of Quebecois professionals and administrators found their path blocked by the established order with its ethnic stratification system." A similar movement could arise among Chicano intellectuals and professionals "now there are Chicano journals, Chicano Studies programs, and a National Association for Chicano Studies, as well as a host of professional organizations."²⁶

Implementation of Barrera's plan could follow one of the two following models:

One is the explicit model, which would require the designation of special areas specifically for

ethnic autonomy, and would be a modification of the existing federal system. The other route would be to work for the redrawing of state lines, carving out new states that would have a majority or plurality Chicano population. This route would be more along the Canadian or Swiss model, in that it would not necessarily require a change in existing federal principles. ... In passing, it might be noted that the idea of dividing California into more than one state is not a new idea. In the years prior to 1915, many such efforts originated in southern California. Since then, a number of others have come from the northern part of the state.²⁷

The explicit model seems to be outrageously improbable. Something approaching it, however, has already been attempted. In 1985 an Arizona state legislator proposed a state resolution to prohibit "Persons who do not speak a native language indigenous to the region, or who are not descendants of persons living in the area prior to the [Gadsden] purchase from residing in the territory acquired under the Gadsden Purchase Act of 1853."²⁸ The area of the Gadsden Purchase includes the southern third of Arizona. While the attempt failed in 1985, and would undoubtedly have been quashed by the federal courts, it is significant that such an attempt was even made.

The second model is also not as improbable as it seems. Although the U.S. Constitution requires approval by Congress of the creation of new states from old states, and although such approval would seem to be unlikely to be given since such a new state would have two new Senators, attempts to create new states by secession from the old are not unknown. In November, 1980, voters in five of six counties in south New Jersey approved a non-binding referendum which sought approval to initiate a political process toward separate statehood for "South Jersey."²⁹ Advocates of a new state of South Jersey have long felt alienated from ethnically different Newark, which dominates the northern part of the state. A similar estrangement from Detroit and Lansing has moved some people in northern and upper peninsular Michigan to seek independence from southern Michigan. The Republic of Texas, in the treaty admitting it to the U.S., reserved the right to divide itself into as many as five states.

Conclusion

The "worst-case" scenario in the Southwest and elsewhere in the United States may well prove to be not the secession of an ethnic enclave, but the development, hastened by a period of crisis, of quasi-independent city-states and new states, each of which would claim for itself a kind of *imperium in imperio*, while not disdaining to receive more than its share of the federal revenue. Acceptance of this arrangement would be the price paid for civil peace or for securing the territory in question from occupation by the troops

of a foreign power, one congenial to the area's inhabitants or even seen by them as their true homeland. It is not inconceivable that a day may dawn on the U.S. when a curious reversal will have taken place in which States' Rights, from having been the last resort of reactionaries, will have become the favored strategy of revolutionaries. ■

NOTES

¹ See Michael Smith, "The Aztlan Migrations of the Nahuatl Chronicles: Myth or History?" *Ethnohistory*, 31 (1984), 153-86.

² In *Chicano Manifesto*, ed. Armando B. Renden. (New York: Collier Books, 1971), p. 336.

³ (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972), p. 7.

⁴ "Irredentism," in *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 1st ed. (1937; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1950), VIII, 325.

⁵ *Ibid.*, VIII, 326.

⁶ "Majority of Mexicans in Poll View U.S. as 'Enemy'," *The Atlanta Constitution*, 26 Aug. 1986, Sec. A, p. 5.

⁷ "Just Forget the Alamo! Ponder Yankees' Sins," *The New York Times*, 7 Jan. 1988, p. 4.

⁸ See Gideon Kanner, "Whose Rights Are Being Trespassed Here?" *Los Angeles Times*, 22 Jan. 1990.

⁹ See Ron Roach, "Assembly Calls for Delay in Building Border Ditch," *San Diego Tribune*, 26 May 1989, Sec. A, p. 6.

¹⁰ See John C. Henry, "'Buy Texas,' Would Give Edge to Minorities," *Austin American-Statesman*, 31 May 1987, Sec. B, p. 2.

¹¹ See Debbie Graves, "Tuition Break OK'd for Mexican Citizens," *Austin American-Statesman*, 31 May 1987, Sec. B, p. 2.

¹² Patrice Armstrong, "Cisneros: U.S. Must Look South," *Albuquerque Journal*, 1 Feb. 1986, Sec. B, p. 2.

¹³ See "Texas Lt. Governor Wants Open Borders," *Border Watch*, Mar. 1990, p. 4.

¹⁴ See Wilfredo Ramirez, "Babbitt: Halve Mexico Debt to U.S.," [*San Antonio*] *Express News*, 28 June 1987, Sec. C, p. 1.

¹⁵ (New York: Praeger, 1988), pp. 41-3.

¹⁶ Barrera, p. 62.

¹⁷ Barrera, p. 51.

¹⁸ Barrera, p. 158.

¹⁹ Barrera, p. 159.

²⁰ Barrera, p. 160.

²¹ Barrera, p. 162.

²² Barrera, pp. 162-3.

²³ Hurst Hannum and Richard Lillich, "The Concept of Autonomy in International Law," *The American Journal of International Law*, 74(4)(Oct. 1980), 886-7.

²⁴ Barrera, p. 163.

²⁵ Barrera, p. 164.

²⁶ Barrera, p. 171.

²⁷ Barrera, p. 172.

²⁸ See Linda Chavez, *Out of the Barrio: Toward a New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation*, (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 93.

²⁹ See Charles A. Stansfield, Jr., *New Jersey: A Geography*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983), p. 206.