A Malthus Bicentennial Essay

# Stork and Squatter Victory

## *Population politics and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo*

by David Simcox

By the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo a century and half ago this year, Mexico surrendered over half of its territory to the United States. Mexico's defeat can be seen as the final, confirmatory event of an outcome determined by Anglo-American society's two centuries of prodigious population growth and vigorous westward migration.

The war with Mexico may be the most portentous for American national identity of all U.S. wars. Guadalupe Hidalgo drew more than just a political boundary line: it staked out across the shifting quake lands of this hemisphere the cultural and political limits between two great contending cultures, the Anglo-Saxon and the Ibero-American — between the world views of John Locke and Thomas Aquinas; between the religious perspectives of John Calvin and Fray Bernardo De Las Casas; and between the socio-political values of a liberal democratic communitarianism trending toward radical individualism, and a stubborn Iberian familism. Only the rash would consider the dividing line drawn in 1848 to be eternal.

With Mexico's population now growing nearly three times as fast as the United States', and with its northward migration surging, the sesquicentennial of Guadalupe Hidalgo invites reflection on the population politics and realties of both nations leading up to the American occupation and absorption of the U.S. southwest and in the aftermath.

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Spain's new world empire had been running down during most of the 17th and 18th centuries. Its North American holdings were repeatedly threatened by the rival British, French and even Russian powers on the continent. Discomfiting portents of the destiny of Spain's provinces of Texas, New Mexico and upper California in the early 19th century were the rapid infiltration of Florida by Anglo-American settlers, and Napoleon's 1803 decision to sell the vast Louisiana territory to the United States. The Louisiana Purchase cost New Spain its western and northern buffer.

### Colonial America: A Marvel and a Vindication to Malthus

The Anglo-American population early on grew used to surging westward when previously occupied lands became played out, or insufficient for growing families, or hemmed in by settlement. The small-plot, peasant agriculture that had been Europe's response to its own rural population growth, did not suit the expansive spirit of restless American farmers. At the root of land-hunger was explosive population growth. In the six decades between 1790 and 1850, America's population increased six times over and her territory three and a third times.

Thomas Malthus, in his famous 1798 essay and in the 1830 summary revision of it, saw in America's population growth "a rapidity of increase without parallel in history." He observed that in the colonial and early

independence periods, the Anglo-American population doubled about every 25 years. Malthus' preconditions for rapid population growth, "food and room," were present in abundance. He attributed early America's fecundity to a plentitude of land, enlightened political and land tenure institutions, and agriculture's rewarding returns on capital.[1]

America's early population surge was, for Malthus, vindication of his theory that

> *population increases exactly in the proportion that the two great checks to it, misery and vice, are removed, and there is not a truer criterion of the happiness and innocence of a people than the rapidity of their increase.*

By comparison, Malthus noted that while Spain and Portugal's colonies also had plenty of land, they were held back by "vice and misery" in the form of exorbitant taxes, restrictions on trade, colonial mismanagement and corruption. Spain's tragically inefficient colonial land tenure system in Mexico, based on the serf-based *encomiendas* and the debt peonage of *haciendas*, perpetuated unproductive land use and an oppressed and immobile peasantry.

Worth asking now is whether the ideology of "Manifest Destiny" in the early 19th century was an expression of the hubris of a "happy and innocent" people, or whether it was a lofty-sounding recognition of the sobering fact that continuation of U.S. population growth at the pace of that period, which would have taken the nation to 680 million by 1975, would leave no choice but expansion of the nation to the Pacific. The stork and the settler became both objects of the expansion of U.S. national power as well as instruments of it.

## Colonial Mexico: A Century-long 'Sickly Season'

While America's demographic course from the first Anglo-European settlements onward was geometric growth, Mexico's population history was far more checkered — indeed tragically Malthusian. On the eve of the arrival of Cortez in 1521, what is today modern Mexico had a pre-Columbian population estimated as high as 25 million. Mexico would not return to this population level until the 20th century.

Then as now the region lacked well-watered farm land. But the intensive communal cultivation of maize in good times sustained a large population on the edge of its food supply. Famines were part of life. The corn-centered, protein-deficient diet made pellagra, rickets and other nutritional diseases a constant affliction.

Table 1. Decline of Mexico's Indian Population (in Millions) Following Conquest

| Year | Population | Year | Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1519 | 25.2 | 1595 | 1.4 |
| 1532 | 16.8 | 1605 | 1.1 |
| 1548 | 6.3 | 1625-50 | 1.0 |
| 1568 | 2.7 | 1793 | 2.5 |
| 1580 | 1.9 | 1810 | 2.7 |

Source: Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah, estimates in 1960 and 1963

Mexico's contact with European colonizers in the early 16th century ushered in what Malthus called a "sickly season," and one of the great population crashes of history. Within 75 years after Cortez's arrival, Mexico's pre-Columbian population had fallen more than 90 percent to little more than one million by the beginning of the 17th century. Blame goes to the Amerindians' lack of resistance to European and African diseases — smallpox and measles. But chronic native diseases, such as *matlazahuatl* (a form of typhus), carried off more than three million. Overwork and mistreatment by colonial masters contributed a good share of deaths. The Amerindian population entered a century-long downward spiral of disease, exhaustion and famine. Suffering and despair bred suicide, infanticide, and refusal to bear children.[2]

Mexico's holocaust was a virulent display of survival of the fittest. The more resistant European and Mestizo population managed to grow by almost 1 percent a year during the 16th century even as the Indian population plummeted. The Indians needed a century to gain immunity and their numbers began to grow again only during the 17th century (Table 1).

Even with population collapse in 1790, Mexico still had more people than the United States. The whites and Mestizos of Spanish Mexico numbered over 1.1 million, Indians 2.5 million, and Blacks and Afromestizos near 700 thousand, compared to a U.S. population in the 1790 census of 3.9 million. The total population of Spanish speakers in the 800 thousand square miles north of the Rio Grande and the Gila was a meager 50,000 to 60,000.

In a little more than twenty years after the first census, the United States saw its population and territory double in size. Mexico would not double its 1790 population for another 75 years. The ravages of the wars of independence caused half a million deaths and near zero population growth between 1810 and 1830. The U.S. population grew 76 percent in the same period.

Alien microorganisms had changed the history of Mexico. What if Mexico's relatively advanced 16th century Amerindian society had the immunity and the nutrition to survive and grow over the ensuing three centuries? Would that society have filled the population vacuum in Mexico's far north? Mexico's rapid growth since 1930 because of better public health and cheap North American grain confirms that the biological potential was there.

## Spain's Population Policy for Texas and the Northern Territories

While Spain supported the American war of independence, it watched the expanding Anglo-American republic warily. American squatters in Spanish Florida by 1812 would stage an unsuccessful uprising against the Crown's rule. There was no lack of Spanish Cassandras. In the late 17th century Spain began building a chain of military garrisons across east Texas from San Antonio to Nacodoches.

In 1760, Jose de Galvez, Spain's overseer in North America, saw foreign intrusions on Spain's northernmost territories as warranting a renewed colonizing effort in those lands, including the occupation of Upper California with missionaries and soldiers. As early as 1809, the Spanish governor of Durango warned that Texas was the key to Spanish control of America, and if Spain did not settle Texas, another people would. As he wrote, the first American squatter settlements were taking root in the valley of the Red River, the northeastern boundary of the empire. Peopling Texas with settlers loyal to Spanish rule was long a policy priority. But finding the congenial settlers was the sticking point.

Obsessed with the gold and plentiful Indian labor of Central Mexico, Spain had made few efforts to colonize Texas for two centuries after Cortez. The land was remote and plagued with hostile Indians. While market forces and generous government land grant policies had encouraged private migration within the United States, in Spanish Mexico there was no such prospect. The government, particularly the military, and the church were the agents of settlement.

Other than the unintended genocide of the Indians, the early population policies of the Spanish state and church were generally pronatalist. Ubiquitous promiscuity and concubinage between Spanish males and Indian women spurred the rapid growth of a Mestizo class. The church could do little to stop it, other than insist that women taken by Spaniards be first converted to Christianity. The Church and the State encouraged Spanish-Indian marriages as a way of creating stable communities while spreading Catholicism and the Spanish language. Colonial officials and clergy were less complacent about sexual relations between Spaniards and Africans, fearing it would weaken slavery. About 200,000 African slaves were brought to Mexico during the colonial period. Intermarriage or concubinage

between African and Indian produced an Afromestizo population of nearly 700,000 by 1810.

Medieval medical and health practices ensured a high mortality that offset high fertility. Primitive forms of smallpox vaccination, already practiced in the United States in the 18th century, did not reach Mexico from Spain until nearly a century later. Land tenure and labor practices discouraged the mass migration of rural folk. By the early 1800s there were still only about 3000 Spanish-Mexican subjects in Texas, which Iturbide in 1821 noted ruefully had the best land in New Spain.

Spain's conquistador outlook rigidified its attitudes about population, making change difficult. The early conquistadors found wealth in gold. But they also found enrichment in Mexico's then abundant people. The *encomienda* and *hacienda* systems were essentially state-sanctioned processes whereby the colonial elites appropriated the wealth of Indians by forced labor, heavy taxes and debt peonage. People were a resource to be mined, like the gold of Potosi.

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To the Spanish, colonization did not mean sending people to establish themselves on empty lands so much as sending colonial representatives to already populous areas to organize, Christianize and exploit the locals. Florida, for example, would to other colonial powers seem to be well suited for European settlement. But Florida, like Spain's other northern holdings, offered no strong incentive to Spain, because it lacked people to dominate.[3]

Immigration of colonists was not a high priority. At most, 300,000 Spaniards migrated to Mexico during three centuries of Spanish control. Spanish nationality and catholic religion were conditions of immigration. "Nothing in Spanish society induced the migration of groups bound together by special ideological or national loyalties, such as occurred with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay or the Germans of Pennsylvania."[4]

## Spain's Demographic Trojan Horse

With little prospect of quickly finding enough settlers for Texas in Mexico or Europe, in 1821 Spain opted to invite in American *empresarios* (grantees) such as Moses and Stephen Austin who would bring settlers, tools and animals to colonize areas of east Texas.

Reasons vary for this risky decision. Many Spanish were convinced that the Americans would come anyhow, so it was better to have some say in the terms. Still others believed that by generous treatment of the colonists, and their conversion to Catholicism, Spain could count on their loyalty. Texas' intractable population of Apaches and Comanches had long impeded Spanish settlement, and officials believed correctly that an Anglo population would pacify them.

Also, settlement of Americans in east Texas would create profits for Mexico's gulf-coast ports. In this case, the Spanish decision was a case study in the power of the elites who stand to gain from population growth to shape immigration policy at the expense of more enduring interests.

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## U.S. Population Policies Toward Texas

The transfer of the Louisiana territory sharpened American covetousness toward Texas. Indeed, Jefferson had believed that the Louisiana territory extended to the Rio Grande. While the United States recognized Spain's claim to Texas in 1819, in return for its cession of Florida, Spanish colonial leaders doubted that illegal migration into Texas would cease. Repeated U.S. proposals to purchase Texas and California alarmed Spain and its Mexican successor state. This glimpse of American

designs, if anything, spurred the Mexicans' search for ways to strengthen their own presence in Texas.

For the United States, then, the migration of American settlers into Texas, and subsequently much of the Southwest, with or without Mexico's assent, became an instrument of national policy. American Emissary to Mexico Joel Poinsett acknowledged this in 1825, a decade before U.S. settlers in Texas revolted, when he urged Secretary of State Henry Clay to delay in recognizing the boundaries of the new Mexican Republic:

> *Most of the good land from the Colorado to the Sabine (in east Texas) has been granted by the Province of Texas and is rapidly peopling with either grantees or squatters from the United States — a population the Mexicans will find difficult to govern.*[5]

The United States eased migration to Texas by putting no obstacle to the spread of slavery there. By stalling on recognition of Mexico's Texas frontier, the United States was also able to pressure against Mexican colonization of the disputed areas.

Mexican diplomats early on protested that American settlers were intruding on Mexican territory. The U.S. response presaged Mexico's response now to similar American complaints by a century and a half: "The United States government lacks the authority to prevent its citizens from leaving its territory, unless they are doing so to attack a friendly nation."[6]

## Mexican Population Perspectives: The Past Is Prologue

When Mexico gained independence in 1821, the preservation of Texas was foremost among its national security issues. Emperor Iturbide's ministers laid plans for building a loyal population by encouraging immigration from three sources considered adaptable to Mexican rule. The first was the Spanish remaining in the Louisiana territory from the 48-year period of Spanish rule there. They shared Mexico's language, culture and religion and had little fondness for American rule.

A second source was the veterans of Mexico's war for independence, who would thereby be rewarded with land for their loyalty, but kept far away from Mexico's center of power.

The third category, immigrants from Europe, gives an insight into Mexican notions about different nationalities. They preferred the Irish because they were Catholics and presumed to be opposed to either American or British rule. Lacking enough Irish, Mexico would seek German and Swiss settlers, who were both industrious and Catholic.[7]

The recommended strategy was to use Mexican settlers to populate the border areas of Texas as a first line of defense, and to increase the population of the Rio Grande valley to be a second line of defense if Texas fell. The Iturbide regime was also concerned about the dangers of under-population elsewhere in their northern realm. They feared the colonization of the two "Californias" by Asians if Mexicans failed to populate them first. Chinese and Filipinos had been arriving in modest numbers in Mexico since the 16th century on Spain's Acapulco-Manila shipping link.

Table 2: Population Growth in Texas Before and After Guadalupe Hidalgo

| Year | Population | Year | Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1803 | 4,000 | 1870 | 818,700 |
| 1835 | 30,000 | 1880 | 1,591,700 |
| 1847 | 142,000 | 1890 | 2,235,500 |
| 1860 | 604,000 | 1900 | 3,048,700 |

Source: Rupert Norval Richardson, *Texas: The Lone Star State*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1943.

Iturbide's regime lacked the resources, the time and the focus to carry out its population policies before it was overthrown. The Mexican Republic that replaced it in 1824 was more nationalistic and felt even more urgency to build barriers. The Republic closed vast stretches of its land to further colonization and created "colonist-free zones" 20 leagues deep along its land borders and ten leagues wide on its coasts, but to little avail.

In 1829 a senior Mexican official, Manuel Mier y Teran, returned from an inspection of Texas alarmed by the spread of Anglo-American culture there and the disregard for Mexican laws.

> *The Americans from the north have taken possession of practically all the eastern part of Texas, in most cases without the permission of the authorities. They immigrate constantly,*

*finding no one to prevent them, and take possession of the place that best suits them, without either asking leave or going through any formality other than that of building their homes.*[8]

Mexico's response in 1830 was Draconian regulations of immigrants and colonists which, seen by Mexico as a legitimate exercise of sovereignty, were resented by the Anglo-Texans as oppressive.

The new laws barred immigrants from settling in Mexican states or territories bordering on their country of origin; banned further entry of slaves; required rigorous reporting on population and migration; and further tightened passport controls. The Mexican government further elaborated plans to populate Texas with the creation of penal colonies and more government help for its settlers there.

The changes were too late. An unstable Mexico never had the mobile population or the resources to mount serious resettlement or to enforce immigration controls. The prohibition of slavery proved too provocative. Mexico had abolished slavery in 1829 and believed that the denial of slaves to prospective white settlers would stop them from coming.

With the acquiescence of Washington, Anglo-Texan settlers made a successful uprising that produced an independent Texas in 1836, followed by its annexation to the United States a decade later. The U.S. military victory in 1848 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ratified the dismemberment of Mexico, and radically redrew the map of North America. Yet the geographic and cultural lines now seem more evanescent than a century and a half ago and the movement of peoples is as large a bilateral concern as ever.

Fearful of reabsorption by Mexico, the Republic of Texas continued to encourage the immigration of Americans and Europeans during its brief history. It sought to reduce the presence of Mexican loyalists by denying them rights to own land in the Lone Star republic's constitution of 1835. High in-migration and birthrates accordingly made Texas's population grow exponentially between independence and the turn of the 20th century. Growth stimulants were advances in cotton cultivation and economic depression and high prices for public lands in the United States in the 1830s. The U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 spurred the settlement of both American and European immigrant farmers in Texas and other western territories.

## Population Policies Since Guadalupe Hidalgo

The migration of Mexicans to Texas, once longed for by Mexico City, did not begin to develop its current momentum until the late 19th century under the stimuli of new rail links and quickening population growth. In the 1880s American employers began to look to Mexico for workers when Asian migration was restricted. Some irredentist rhetoric now holds all Mexican and Mexican-Americans in the United States to be the dispossessed victims of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In reality, the total population of the ceded territories in 1848 was about 65,000 to 100,000 Mexican citizens and 200,000 tribal Indians. Less than a million of the nearly 20 million persons of Mexican origin are descendants of Mexicans resident in the territories in 1848.

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Rocky relations with the United States deeply influenced Mexico's defensive population strategies. After 1848, Mexico faced ultimately successful American pressures for the Gadsden territory south of the Gila and transit rights across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, along with agitation in the U.S. Congress for the annexation of Baja California. Not surprisingly, the concept of the strategic placement and enlargement of population has loomed large ever since in Mexico's national security outlook. Mexico's present 1917 constitution banned foreign ownership of property within 120 kilometers of the border and 50 kilometers of the coast, echoing its strategy of the 1820s.

Guadalupe Hidalgo gave Mexican citizens in the territories the option to remain in the United States or return to Mexico. Mexico City saw this as an opportunity to buttress its new northern border against U.S. intrusions and Indian attacks with 18 new frontier military colonies. In 1849 Mexico sent commissioners to New Mexico,

Table 3: U.S. and Mexico
Population Growth Since Guadalupe Hidalgo

| Year | Mexico | United States | US-Mex Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1850 | 7.7 | 23.2 | 3.0/1 |
| 1910 | 15.2 | 91.9 | 6.0/1 |
| 1930 | 16.6 | 122.8 | 7.4/1 |
| 1950 | 25.8 | 150.9 | 5.9/1 |
| 1970 | 48.2 | 203.3 | 4.2/1 |
| 1990 | 86.2 | 248.7 | 2.9/1 |
| 2000* | 99.0 | 275.0 | 2.7/1 |
| 2025* | 142.5 | 338.3 | 2.4/1 |
| (* projected) | | | |

Sources: Instituto Mexicano de Estadistica y Geografia (Mexico), Population Reference Bureau, United States Census Bureau

California and Texas to urge its citizens to resettle on the new border with funds provided by the United States. Relatively few accepted. The country's development planning since the 1910 revolution has favored incentives from tax breaks to maquiladoras to encourage development and population growth of its northern border region.

Mexico was unambiguously pronatalist from independence until 1974, when it gave constitutional protection to family planning. Mexico in the 1850s and 1860s had also courted European immigration. But because of instability, religious intolerance, and mismanagement, the 3000 arriving annually during this period did not even match the out-migration of Mexicans to the United States.

Mexico's population growth turned sharply upward in the 1930's. Improvements in public health and education caused a "death dearth," lowering infant mortality and raising life expectancy. The death rate fell from 26.7 in 1930 to 11.3 in 1960. Mexico's population of 16.6 million in 1930 had quintupled by 1990.

The relative population sizes of the two nations have narrowed accordingly. In 1930 there were 7.4 Americans to every Mexican; in 1980, 3.3 Americans to each Mexican; and by 2000 the ratio is projected to be to 2.75 to 1 (Table 3). Mexico began making family planning assistance widely available in the 1970s. Since 1930 fertility of Mexican women has fallen from more than 7.0 to 3.1 in 1998. But the 36 percent of the population under age 15 in 1998 ensures sustained population momentum, with a population doubling time of only 38 years.

Has Mexico's government viewed population growth and migration as a means of altering the verdict of Guadalupe Hidalgo?

Some Mexican clergy, intellectuals, journalists and radical student groups boast that high numbers and high migration will produce that outcome. Yet since 1848 there have never been explicit public claims by responsible Mexican policy makers that Guadalupe Hidalgo lacks legitimacy or that Mexican immigrants have a special right to settle in the ceded territories.

Rather, Mexico's constitution and laws have tended in the past to put conditions on the emigration of its citizens, such as the requirements of pre-approved work contracts, proper travel documents and legal border crossings. The real Mexican policy may be not in those laws but in the consistent non-enforcement of them, and in proclaiming every Mexican's unconditional right to leave his country.

Mexico's diplomatic strategy for decades has been to insist that the human and labor rights of its migrants in the United States take precedence over their immigration status. Mexico City seems to recognize that proclaiming the border invalid would be most dangerous to Mexico itself.

Nevertheless, Mexican leaders relish the added clout given their diplomacy by a large population and a huge diaspora within the United States. The recent liberalization of Mexican citizenship for Mexicans resident in the United States seeks to amplify Mexico City's voice in U.S. policy. Even the most romantic of irredentists recognizes that military re-conquest of the southwest is not in the cards. But key Mexican policy makers appreciate that the growing ethnic, linguistic and regional fragmentation of American society, and the complacency of American leaders toward it, could bring rich opportunities to a neighboring nation allied with the stork and the squatter. -//-

NOTES

[1] Malthus, Thomas, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798, 1830/1985), London: Penguin Books, pp.105, 226-227.

[2] Gibson, Charles, *Spain in America*, New York: Harper and

Row, 1966, p.141.

[3] Gibson, p.190.

[4] Gibson, p.113.

[5] Poinsett letter of July 27, 1825 to Secretary of State Henry Clay, cited in Carlos Bosch Garcia, *Materia para la Historia Diplomatica de Mexico: Mexico y los Estados Unidos, 1820-1848*, Mexico: Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Politicas y Sociales,1957, pp.38-39.

[6] Bosch Garcia, pp.330-331.

[7] Bosch Garcia, pp.15-20.

[8] 1928 letter from Mier y Teran to Mexican President Guadalupe Victoria, cited in Wayne Moquin and Charles VanDoren (eds.), *A Documentary History of the Mexican Americas*, New York: Bantam/Praeger, 1971, p.185.