

Published January 2, 2007

Issue looks different through Latino eyes

Iowa's great immigration divide: Four perspectives on the debate

By HECTOR AVALOS
SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

If one were to see illegal immigration through Latino eyes, what might it look like?

We might begin by observing that the first illegal immigrants came from across the Atlantic. Somewhere around 1492, not counting some earlier errant Vikings, the trans-Atlantic invaders arrived in the Americas. By the 1620s, they had set up a permanent shop, in Massachusetts.

These invaders had no titles to land, but they did not seem to mind that. The fact that people were already here posed only a temporary obstacle - nothing a little case of genocide and ethnic cleansing could not cure.

Even before they had completely "pacified" all those natives, these immigrants and their descendants set up what they called "laws." These laws were not really established by a democratic process because the natives did not have much say in those laws, which were written by, and for the benefit of, the invaders from across the Atlantic. It was all very convenient.

Almost as soon as these invaders came in, some of them also decided that they needed free labor. So these now "law-abiding" citizens turned to "forced immigration," which otherwise involved kidnapping and slave-trading millions of souls from another continent called Africa.

Of course, such "forced immigration" into the United States is no longer a good practice because so much cheap or slave labor now is readily available elsewhere. But we don't hear much about that because we don't want Americans to get depressed about how they are still benefiting from slavery. "Out of sight, out of mind," as they say.

Sometime around the 1820s and '30s, many of these EuroAmerican invaders entered in droves into what was then Mexico. The laws of Mexico did not matter much to these invaders. There were so many of these "law-abiding" EuroAmericans who settled in Mexican territory that they started thinking it was no longer Mexico, but rather something called the Republic of Texas.

Mexicans who had owned farms and ranches for generations were none too happy about that. Who did these newcomers think they were in breaking Mexican law and expecting all sorts of services they never paid for? So a war was fought, and in 1848, the Anglo-Texan invaders managed, through superior firepower, brutality and excellent political maneuvering, to dispossess Mexicans who were born and owned land there.

As was a habit now, the EuroAmerican newcomers wrote their own laws, again without much input from the people they threw off the land. Actually, it was no longer "cheating" because you can't cheat someone out of land that the laws you made up say is yours now.

But it was not enough for these Anglo invaders to dispossess Mexicans. Now these Mexicans were told that they had to learn this confusing language called English. English proved ideal for settling any legal complaints the Spanish-speakers might raise.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, and apparently many of these Euroamericans have overlooked how they are benefiting from the blood-soaked inheritance of invading ancestors who made it nice and legal for them to keep farms and land they had no right to have in the first place.

Nor should these upright citizens be surprised that Latin American people would be impoverished by the vast mineral and other land resources stolen from them by these transatlantic invaders. American citizens should not be surprised that people will seek to cross borders because of poverty their EuroAmerican ancestors helped to create.

Shouldn't these "citizens," who have been the primary beneficiaries of a country founded by "illegal" immigrants, be more merciful toward people who cross a border to feed their children?

Through Latino eyes, these American "citizens" should at least be honest enough to say that they are not

really against all "illegal" immigration, but only against illegal immigration that does not benefit them.

HECTOR AVALOS is director of the U.S. Latino/a Studies Program at Iowa State University.