

The Aftermath of War

A War of Violence and Violations: The Consequences of Conquest

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How did the conflict between Mexico and the United States affect individuals and families during and after the war?

The U.S.-Mexican War, like any other war, was fundamentally about violence — a violence that did not end once the war or the military phase of the war ended. The violence and the violations that people experienced were not only in terms of taking away their lands or a taking away their livelihood but, ultimately, was also an effort to take away their language.



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sides in a sense, although they didn't see themselves that way.

Families were literally split in half. Families held land and had homes. Then an artificial political border was created and suddenly part of the family was on one side, and the other part of the family was on another side. Suddenly, these families became enemies on opposite

Ostensibly, the war was about territory, continental expansion, access to the ports of the Pacific, and access to and ownership of all of the wonderful minerals and riches that were in the subsoil. The war was about land, labor, and wealth. But it was also about language, culture, race, and religion. It was about way of being. It was about world view.

We have to understand that the war between the United States and Mexico was about violence, racism, appropriation and expropriation. The war was about slavery and access to more cotton producing land that would increase the size of the slave population. The war was about labor, acquiring or making wealth, about capitalist development and what that means. The war was about profit for some groups and in that process then there were people who were violated. The violence was not just military, but it was a violence of the soul — a violence of the spirit by those who committed that violence as well as by those who were on the receiving end.

How does the war continue to affect us all today?

We live with the consequences of that conquest. We all live with the impact and the effects of the acquisition of that land, the displacement of the people on it, the appropriation of their labor at less than livable wages. In fact, in a sense, we continue to fight the war over and over and over.



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I think that Americans have come to this particular situation because we have not come to terms with our history. We have not come to terms with what it meant to be a conquering nation — what it meant to those who were considered citizens of that nation, and what it meant to those who were on the land base already and were conquered and

subjugated.

In order to be the dominant power that the United States has become, the process erased the history of those people. In erasing that history, you erase the people and people will not be erased. So, people have struggled, they have resisted, and they have survived. It's still part of that struggle to survive. So, how can we live in these different enclaves without really connecting and knowing each other? How do we live these multiple consequences?

We live with them, to some degree, because there has been this historical erasure. That is beginning to change, but it's still in process. Historians are rethinking, looking at documents again and reinterpreting, but that's still principally within an academic realm.

Most of us don't know very much about the history of the place where we live and the people we live with. We assume that we all share one national history. We certainly share that national history, but we have lived it in different ways.

To think about this war of 1846 to 1848 as only a war between two nations leaves out an entire body of people. The mestizo peoples in Tejas, the Tejanos in Texas; the Nuevo Mexicanos in New Mexico, the Californianos in California and in other parts of what is now Arizona — these people were not claimed by either nation. And so to think of the war only in terms of national histories excludes thousands of people who were already here including indigenous populations that were already here even longer. These

peoples are not claimed by the United States or not claimed fully as citizens, and they're lost to Mexico. Where does that leave these people? They've lost their homeland and they don't have a nation because neither claimed them. Where does it leave them? Basically, it erases their existence or subjugates them as less than second-class citizens, which, in fact, happened.



The violations then and now are multiple. This was a violation in terms of land. All of a sudden people lost their land through legal and extra legal means — so, what was a homeland is no longer yours. There is a violation and violence in terms of language — what was your language and your forbearers and your ancestors is no longer acceptable so it's illegitimate and, therefore, you're illegitimate. Cultural forms and formulations, sensibilities and aesthetics were demeaned, dismissed, discredited or delegitimized — in other words, were

unacceptable. The violence of your labor was to not receive a just wage for very early on there were segmented wages for Mexicans, for Blacks and for Whites.

Catholicism for our people who were Catholic was, and still is, a fusion of multiple elements — European, different indigenous cultures, and African. So, even though the American Catholic Church sent new priests and we continued to practice our religion, it was now not necessarily a form we were used to with meaning for us.

From my perspective, we still live that violence — it has not healed. We live with the consequences of that violence. For us to go beyond that is to come to terms with it, acknowledge it, and to accept its reality and meaning for all of us.

The historical experience since the 19th Century has been an effort to erase our language across time. The land, we still don't own for the most part. The cultural wars that we live daily continue in multiple ways. And so we all live with those realities irrespective of whatever position we occupy in society.

For people of Mexican origin or descent, living those realities means consistently affirming their history, their language and culture — individually, as a family, as a collective and as a people. It's a constant daily struggle.

We can make an analogy of the end of the United States' war with Mexico as being very similar to the European conquest of the Americas. In fact, it is a continuation of that same process. Lives, cultures, languages, livelihoods, governments, structures and ways of being of the people that occupy those spaces were totally altered, changed, turned upside down within a very short period of time. Everything known was completely altered and changed. One then had to remake, reform, draw upon, recreate, reestablish and reaffirm oneself in the face, and with the weight of institutional, social, political, economic, cultural structures that tried to deny or erase all that once was.

We must, I believe, all understand that the war — its aftermath and its continuation that we live with on a daily basis — is about violence and violation. The democracy and freedom that some of us live has been bought and continues to be bought with the violence and subjugation of others. That violence has taken many forms — it wasn't just about military or armed violence. It was also the violence of removing people from their land. It was and is the violence of trying to silence their language. It's the violence of broken treaties, of telling people "You are citizens," then treating them as anything but citizens, by denying them the rights and privileges of full citizenship. It was a violence of demeaning and trying to delegitimize a culture and a way of being.

All of those denials, efforts to silence, removals, and displacements are rooted in violence and continue in violence. Perhaps not in physical violence, but there is and continues to be psychic violence, spiritual violence and psychological violence, as well as economic violence. Poverty is a very violent reality. We continue to see these various manifestations of violence, but at the same time we also continue to see people resisting. The resistance that I talked about earlier continues.

If we try to gain an understanding of the war, it would not come from a place of judging who was right or who was wrong. I think, from my perspective, what will get us to another place of understanding is a recognition, an acknowledgment, an acceptance of the reality of violence that is rooted in the development and the establishment of democracy and how we all live with the consequences of that violence. That violence dehumanizes both those who perpetuate the violence, as well as those who are on the receiving end of the violence. So in that sense we're all dehumanized.

How can we, as people, begin healing the wounds inflicted by the war and its aftermath?

I think it's only by finally recognizing the existence and the meaning of that violence in all of our lives, in the lives of our families, in the lives of our communities, and the life of this nation, can we begin to go beyond it. But that's something that I don't think we've necessarily tried to do. Healing is not healing unless it is a healing of a whole body. Part of the body in and of itself cannot be healed — it has to be the whole body. And if we look at the nation as a body then it continues to be diseased — it's not very healthy.

We're all interconnected, and this, this nation, this country could not be what it is without all of us. And yet, that connection isn't made or isn't made frequently. I've talked about violence, but beyond that violence, if we could understand how we are all interconnected — even though some of us were subjugated and some of us were the subjugators — we are all interconnected. Your privilege rests on my labor, and my labor rests on somebody else's. We're all connected. We all form part of the fabric that is this country. For me as a teacher and a historian, it's important to provide a basis for students to see and understand those connections.

For me, what is healing is to come face-to-face and to confront reality. The idealism that was present at the founding of the nation, and in that magnificent document, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence — that idealism was also purchased with someone's labor. And for most of the signers of those documents, it was purchased with slave labor, and with the removal and the genocide of indigenous populations.

The idealism that was present is still there. I'm very idealistic, and I think you know, I want to make those principles work. But the reality of that exploitation and oppression and all that goes with it, is also still present.

Whoever we are and whatever nation we belong to, whether it's Mexico or the United States or someplace else, we are contradictions of conflicts and contradictions of histories. Our racial, ethnic, and cultural selves are, indeed, an incredible amalgamation of indigenous, of African, of European, of Asian. We are, indeed, all of those elements, and all of those histories at the same time.

If we face those realities honestly, from my perspective, we make common cause with others who are different than us, whether that difference is based on race, on gender, on sexual orientation, on income. Whatever those differences are, we begin to see ourselves as part of the human family, and that my actions affect you, and vice versa. It seems to me that humanity is a good basis — a willingness to be humane with each other, whomever the other is, and to see oneself in the other, and wanting to do right by that other person. It seems to me that is the basis for change. It's a basis that will change how we treat the earth. I think we mistreat the earth in much the same way that we have mistreated each other.

What do you think is at stake if we don't?

What's at stake? A continuation of war, and a continuation of acrimony, anger, rage, distrust and hatred based on the same issues. Maybe recognizing it, acknowledging it won't immediately change it, but I think it offers a greater possibility of change than not. Because, for me, the alternative is to continue the way we have — talking past each other, blaming each other and refusing to accept responsibility.