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## **POLICY BRIEF**

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### **Mexifornia: A State of Confusion**

By Walter A. Ewing, Ph.D.

It is not surprising that Victor Davis Hanson's latest book, *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*,<sup>1</sup> has transformed him into the new darling of the anti-immigrant movement. Unencumbered by the references, footnotes, facts and figures which clutter most books about immigration, Hanson relies largely upon personal anecdotes and emotional tirades to create a pastiche of fearful imagery: unassimilated Mexican hordes overrunning California, rampantly breeding entire generations of gang bangers and welfare recipients, goaded on by corrupt Mexican elites and U.S. multiculturalists awaiting the rise of a new Chicano nation in the southwestern United States. In general, Hanson's arguments are wildly inconsistent, informed more by stereotype than substance, and characterized by a remarkable unfamiliarity with Mexican history and culture. Despite his experience as a historian and professor of classics, Hanson's primary qualifications on the topic of Mexican immigration seem to be that he knows a lot of Mexicans and has worked on a farm.<sup>2</sup> As a result, *Mexifornia* is a confused, confusing and often bizarre diatribe by one angry, frightened man rather than a meaningful contribution to the immigration debate.

A notable feature of Hanson's stream-of-consciousness style, and the fact that *Mexifornia* is admittedly "not an academic study with the usual extensive documentation,"<sup>3</sup> is his propensity to contradict himself. As a result, the book often degenerates into an argument in search of a point. Hanson observes that Italian families who immigrated to the United States in the 19th century took "sixty or more years to achieve economic equity with WASPs,"<sup>4</sup> but he laments that "the legions of more recently arrived Mexicans" that came to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s have not yet done the same.<sup>5</sup> He argues that "cultural relativism" and "multiculturalism" – which contend that all cultures possess inherent value – "have escaped from the university and circulate like an airborne toxin in the popular culture,"<sup>6</sup> but he confidently predicts that popular culture, with its "radically homogenizing, leveling" influence, "will put out to pasture the race agitator at the university."<sup>7</sup> He says Mexican immigrants are "industrious"<sup>8</sup> and "hardworking,"<sup>9</sup> sympathetically observing that many become "wounded veterans of some of the hardest jobs in America,"<sup>10</sup> but – in explaining the "superiority" of the United States over Mexico – notes that the United States doesn't have a siesta and that Americans 'live to work' while Mexicans 'work to live.'<sup>11</sup>

To the extent a unifying theme can be discerned in the rambling text of *Mexifornia*, it is that the rise of multiculturalism has consigned undocumented immigrants and their children to "ethnic enclaves of the mind and barrios of the flesh," where they become part of an "underclass" dependent on government subsidies.<sup>12</sup> For Hanson, the multicultural ideology propagated by "liberals and ethnic activists," who seek out the undocumented immigrant "as a future 'progressive' voter or as another statistic in their loyal ranks of needy constituents,"<sup>13</sup> has

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**A DIVISION OF THE AMERICAN IMMIGRATION LAW FOUNDATION**

918 F STREET, NW, 6<sup>TH</sup> FLOOR • WASHINGTON, DC 20004 • TEL: (202) 742-5600 • FAX: (202) 742-5619

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been “the force-multiplier of illegal immigration from Mexico,” turning “a stubborn problem of assimilation into a social tragedy stretching across generations.” In Hanson’s view, the varied manifestations of multiculturalism – “de facto open borders, bilingual education, new state welfare programs, the affirmation of a hyphenated identity, a sweeping revisionism in southwestern American history” – have “either failed to ensure economic parity or thwarted the process of assimilation” at the expense of “old methods that worked,” such as “language immersion, autonomy from government assistance, rapid assumption of an American identity, and eager acceptance of mainstream American culture.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, the “social costs of having so many who turn so criminal, remain uneducated, and need highly trained doctors and professionals to clean up their mess has become exasperating.”<sup>15</sup> Hanson thus offers up California as a stark example to other states that are “slowly walking the path that leads to Mexisota, Utexico, Mexizona or even Mexichusetts – a place that is not quite Mexico and not quite America either.”<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with his tendency to undermine his own arguments, Hanson provides evidence to refute his central thesis that Mexican immigrants, in contrast to previous waves of immigrants, are failing to integrate into U.S. society and move up the socioeconomic ladder. He states that between 1995 and 2000, Hispanic income increased “faster than that of any other minority group – as a virtually new class of assimilated and affluent Mexican-Americans arose.”<sup>17</sup> He notes that, despite relatively high drop-out rates, a majority of Mexican Americans graduate from high school, which “implies that every year, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are entering the work force in occupations other than menial labor and slowly finding their way into the mainstream, to join earlier immigrants in the American middle and upper classes.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, inexplicably, he sees this as evidence that “the old assimilationist model...is working efficiently for only a minority of new immigrants.”<sup>19</sup>

The disparities in average earnings and educational attainment between Mexican American and Anglo Californians are indeed urgent social problems. However, as a 2003 Rand Corporation study points out, statistical snapshots of the Latino population at any one point in time shed little light on Latino socioeconomic progress *across generations*. The study found that “Each new Latino generation not only has had higher incomes than their forefathers, but their economic status converged toward the white men with whom they competed.” This has occurred because “each successive generation has been able to close the schooling gap with native whites which then has been translated into generational progress in incomes.” For instance, Mexican men born during 1895-1899 who immigrated to the United States “earned 55 percent as much as native white men over their lifetimes. When their American-born sons competed in the labor market, their lifetime wage gap averaged 23 percent. By the time their grandsons worked, the Mexican wage gap averaged 16 percent.” Similarly, Mexican men born during 1905-1909 who immigrated to the United States averaged “4.3 years of school. Their American-born sons, with 9.4 years, doubled their schooling, and their grandsons were high-school graduates.”<sup>20</sup>

In a related vein, a 2002 survey by the Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that “only 7% of second generation Latinos are Spanish dominant, while the rest are divided between those who are bilingual (47%) and those who are English dominant (46%).” The survey also found that “Among foreign-born parents, 45% say their children communicate with their friends predominantly in English and another 32% say their children use

both English and Spanish equally. Just 18% of immigrant parents say that their children only speak Spanish with their friends.”<sup>21</sup> This is hardly evidence of “the stubborn resistance to assimilation” Hanson so laments.<sup>22</sup>

Another defining feature of *Mexifornia* is Hanson’s often irrational hatred of Chicano Studies professors. He comments that “aging La Raza professors, who drive their SUVs in from the suburbs and send their kids to UCLA and Berkeley, continue in some time warp [from the 1970s] to denigrate a system that has given them and their families so much.”<sup>23</sup> He goes on to say that if stringent immigration restrictions were in place, “Within twenty or thirty years...Chicano studies professors, hobbling with canes and walkers, would scour the campus for a handful of Mexican immigrants they could imbue with distrust of America and its racist past.”<sup>24</sup> He also discloses, perhaps unwisely, his “fantasy that somewhere in some secretive laboratory in Montana a white supremacist and a crackpot racist got together, brewed the germs of our present school curriculum, concocted the virus of the La Raza separatist and racist mythology, and then released these pathogens by night in aerosol form to be inhaled by unsuspecting Californians, who then proceeded unknowingly to destroy the aspirations of millions of desperately poor aliens.”<sup>25</sup> Much of this venom derives from Hanson’s rather dubious assertion that multiculturalists and ethnic-studies teachers are merely “obsessed with the racial prejudice and economic exploitation of the past”<sup>26</sup> and that “the new America...hardly objects to racial integration, intermarriage and open housing,”<sup>27</sup> as evidenced by such historic milestones as Penelope Cruz dating Tom Cruise and Jennifer Lopez becoming engaged to Ben Affleck.<sup>28</sup>

In justifying his disdain for Chicano Studies professors, Hanson transforms them into easily bashed straw men by stereotypically equating them with the minority of activists and academics who dream that one day a sovereign Chicano nation of *Aztlán* or *Republica del Norte* will arise in what is now the southwestern United States.<sup>29</sup> While this particular brand of separatist rhetoric is certainly colorful, its equivalent can be found in virtually any ethnic group and is invariably a minority voice. The simplistic rants of *La Voz de Aztlán*, for instance, do not represent the views of most Mexican Americans any more than the vitriol of David Duke’s European-American Unity and Rights Organization represents most Anglos. Hanson pretends that the small community of Chicano separatists wields far more power and influence than it actually does.

Hanson’s limited discussion of Mexico itself is, to borrow a phrase from *Mexifornia*, “comically ahistorical.”<sup>30</sup> He contends that Mexico “is a proud state that was invaded twice by the United States and defeated, losing a great amount of its own territory – land which then thrived due to *the very fact of its separation from Mexico*.”<sup>31</sup> As payback, “Mexico has now invaded America – but with millions rather than thousands, and as an occupying force that plans to stay.”<sup>32</sup> In Hanson’s worldview, the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 marked the last time the United States, or any other nation, had any influence on the course of Mexican economic and political development. Apparently, U.S. Cold War politics played no role in perpetuating decades of authoritarian one-party rule in Mexico, U.S. trade policies have had no impact on the Mexican agricultural sector, and President Vicente Fox, a former Coca Cola executive, is simply a modern-day Pancho Villa obsessed with the *reconquista* of California. It is

unfortunate that a historian such as Hanson so blatantly ignores over 150 years of modern U.S.-Mexican history.

In the absence of any historical context, Hanson concludes that it is Mexico's "*culture* that holds the country back."<sup>33</sup> Multiculturalists in the United States, blind to this truth, therefore "wrongly think that we can instill confidence by praising the less successful cultures that aliens are escaping, rather than explaining the dynamism and morality of the civilization that our newcomers have pledged to join."<sup>34</sup> However, as any first-year anthropology student can attest, "culture" is not the same as a country's political or economic system. Mexican immigrants who come to the United States are trying to escape systemic poverty that has been created and perpetuated by local, regional and global forces over the course of centuries. They are no more fleeing such core cultural values as the importance of family and community than were the Italian immigrants of a century ago.

Hanson's solution to the perceived woes of Mexican immigration is "to adopt sweeping restrictions on immigration and put an end to separatist ideology." This would be accomplished through "a domestic Marshall Plan" that imbues immigrants with "the norms and values of traditional education," together with a "fortification and a militarization of sorts" at the border.<sup>35</sup> How Hanson would stamp out ideologies he finds offensive without repealing the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protects freedom of speech, is unclear. Precisely how he would create the equivalent of a Demilitarized Zone separating the United States from its second largest trading partner, particularly given the ties with Mexico fostered since 1994 by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), also remains unspecified. Hanson notes that "Under conditions of strict legality, illegal immigrants would have to be deported immediately,"<sup>36</sup> but doesn't acknowledge the social, political and economic chaos in both the United States and Mexico that would result if millions of undocumented immigrants, many with deep U.S. roots and most with U.S.-citizen family members, were summarily rounded up and dumped on the other side of the border. Nor does he say how any of this would contribute to improving economic conditions in the Mexican communities from which immigrants originate. Instead, Hanson simply says that, under his recommended solution, "our present problems would vanish almost immediately."<sup>37</sup>

In spite of – or perhaps because of – *Mexifornia*'s intellectual vacuity, it is being championed by anti-immigrant activists. For instance, Representative Tom Tancredo (R-6th /CO), chairman of the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus, has praised the book as "fascinating," "compelling" and "really well written," with a "powerful" argument against multiculturalism.<sup>38</sup> However, in truth, Hanson abandons any pretense of scholarship, objectivity or even academic professionalism in *Mexifornia*. He doesn't check his facts, repeatedly contradicts his own arguments, indulges his fears rather than his intellect, and ultimately establishes his authority as an author by reciting a litany of his friends and family of Mexican descent.<sup>39</sup> However, as with so many statements that begin "Some of my best friends are Mexican, but..." the results are predictable.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Davis Hanson, *Mexifornia: A State of Becoming*. San Francisco, CA: Encounter Books, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p. xii-xiv.

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- <sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p. xii.
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 73.
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p. 126-27.
- <sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 122.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 127-128.
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid*, p. 36 & 40.
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p. 69.
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 54.
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 81.
- <sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 5.
- <sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p. ix.
- <sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 5-6.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p. 69.
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. xiii.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 126.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 20.
- <sup>20</sup> James P. Smith, "Assimilation across the Latino Generations," *American Economic Review*, May 2003 (Vol. 93, No. 2): 315-319.
- <sup>21</sup> Pew Hispanic Center & Kaiser Family Foundation, *2002 National Survey of Latinos*, December 2002.
- <sup>22</sup> Hanson 2003, p. 20.
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid*, p. 106.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p. 147.
- <sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 108.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid*, p. 6.
- <sup>27</sup> *ibid*, p. 138.
- <sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 137.
- <sup>29</sup> *ibid*, p. x-xi, 32 & 75-77.
- <sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p. 33.
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid*, p. 26-27 [emphasis in original].
- <sup>32</sup> *ibid*, p. 31.
- <sup>33</sup> *ibid*, p. 31 [emphasis in original].
- <sup>34</sup> *ibid*, p. 86.
- <sup>35</sup> *ibid*, p. 145-147.
- <sup>36</sup> *ibid*, p. 146.
- <sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 147.
- <sup>38</sup> Congressional Record – House H7002-H7003, July 16, 2003.
- <sup>39</sup> Hanson 2003, p. xiv.