

Book Review: **Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s**. Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez. Albuquerque (2006): University of New Mexico Press.

by Jim Perdue

Why is it that all of a sudden we don't seem to like Mexicans very much? One answer is that such a reaction is not new in U.S. history. **Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s** dares to systematically consider a topic that has been studiously "not included" in the ongoing process of writing U.S. history. Citizens of the USA have always had a love/hate relationship specifically with Mexicans.

The case in point, explored in exhaustive and undeniable depth by Balderrama and Rodríguez, is the forced emigration of one to two million Mexicans from the U.S. back to Mexico during the years of the Great Depression. The story is further complicated by the fact that, among the countless "legal" and "illegal" Mexicans who were "rounded up and deported," fully sixty percent were Mexican-Americans – that is, they were children of Mexicans, who were citizens of the USA.

What this means is that the U.S. public whipped itself into such a frenzied hatred of Mexicans (who by many were blamed even for the Great Depression itself), that it forcibly deported between 600,000 and 1,200,000 of its own citizens without due process. Their only crime was that of being of Mexican descent.

As a result of their exploration of a large number of documents both here in the U.S. and in Mexico, Balderrama and Rodríguez have reconstructed, or better have resurrected, one of the saddest and most indicting scenarios of injustice, incited by a majority of U.S. citizens and planned and carried out by its government at all levels. Terror and tyranny were meted out by we who have dared to call ourselves the "land of the free."

Throughout the book they document the lack of due process afforded to Mexicans and Mexican Americans, by an American nation that succumbed to the worst kind of racial profiling and scapegoating of Mexicans. In addition, they examine the failures of a Mexican government that had just survived a war of independence and was without adequate resources to deal with the sheer numbers of the forced migration. Finally, they interview and present the stories of those who left the U.S. never to return (including many U.S. citizens), those who remained in the U.S. and stayed below the radar, and those who left and later returned to this, their own nation. In the process Balderrama and Rodríguez examine the way in which the same anti-Mexican prejudices then repeated themselves in U.S. society as Mexican American citizens eventually returned here from their forced exile to Mexico.

Perhaps what is the most damaging of all the images presented by Balderrama and Rodríguez are the words and actions of countless white Americans who, even in their attempts to do the right thing, could not see how unjust and prejudiced they were. To let such learning remain lost to the “omissions of history” would be a travesty that would most surely stunt our ongoing spiritual maturation as an American people.

For me, the reading was riveting. I could not put the book down, even though I knew where it was going. It was like reading the story of the Donner party making all the wrong decisions that prolonged and eventually doomed their journey as a people. I sat with the book in hand saying to myself, “No, we can’t make that same mistake again!” But we did; and I fear that we now are making the same mistakes yet again. In the 1980s and 1990s we started a new trend toward blaming Mexicans for all our problems. So when 9-11 occurred, we even began to blame their presence here for our shock and fears. And although much anti-immigration rhetoric today is carefully couched against the “illegals,” when common sense gets lost in the frenzy, history tells us what Balderrama and Rodríguez tell us over and over throughout their book, “In the end, a Mexican is a Mexican.”

Buried deep within the American psyche is something that makes it too easy for us to transfer the guilt for all our problems as a nation onto “the Mexicans.” Without learning some basic spiritual lessons about that great fear neatly tucked away among the combination of our racial, cultural, nativistic and xenophobic make-up as a people; we will forever be destined to become phobic and only feel better by defeating “the Mexicans” again and sending them back across the border. In the words of one of the great twentieth century philosophers, Latino George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” We have already done so in the Mexican War in the nineteenth century, in the 1920s, in the 1930s, in Operation Wetback under Eisenhower, in Operation Gatekeeper under Clinton, and now the proposed increase in immigration enforcement under Bush.

Decade of Betrayal provides us a rare glance into the obscure depths of our American spirit, as well as the further depths to which it is capable of descending. It has brought that spiritual dynamic to the surface with an alarming clarity. This book should be required reading for all United Methodists, because the process that may again lead to the blaming, hatred, rejection and eventual removal of Mexicans *en masse* has already begun to redevelop in our culture – and it has entered the ranks of the church. Few Americans today think to ask why everything has to always be the fault of “the Mexicans,” but even fewer at the moment seem to envision the spiritual disaster of choosing not to ask.