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## **History Repeats Itself** **by David Dorado Romo**

WHEN IT COMES to the new wave of anti-immigrant fervor that's spreading throughout the country today, Yogi Berra said it best. It's like déjà vu all over again.

I was born in California to Mexican immigrants but have lived most of my life in El Paso, Texas, where this kind of déjà vu has been going on for more than a century. The first public calls for the construction of a fence along the Rio Grande to keep out illegal aliens were heard in El Paso in 1904. But back then—unlike what the Republicans want to do these days with their proposals for a 700-mile border fence—they weren't trying to keep the Latin hordes out. It was the Chinese who were the undesirable aliens.

Mexicans didn't become illegal in the U.S. until 1917. That's the year Mexican nationals were first required to have a passport to enter the United States. That's also the year that the United States entered World War I. The war, as wars always do, stirred deep feelings of paranoia and anti-foreigner patriotism in this country. Americans were afraid that Germans would launch bombing raids from Mexico. As a protest against Germany, patriotic Americans changed the name of frankfurters to hot dogs, and sauerkraut to "liberty cabbage." To protect the country from the threat of typhus, U.S. customs agents bathed and deloused 127,000 Mexican border crossers at the El Paso-Juárez international bridge in 1917.

All immigrants from the interior of Mexico and "second-class" residents of Juárez were required to strip completely, turn in their clothes and baggage to be steam-dried and fumigated with hydrocyanic acid and stand naked before a customs inspector who would check his or her "hairy parts"—the scalp, armpits, chest, pubic area—for lice. Those found to have lice would be required to shave their head and body hair with clippers and bathe with kerosene and vinegar. Each time the disinfection process was performed, the Mexicans would receive a ticket certifying that they had been bathed and deloused, and their clothes and baggage fumigated.

My great-aunt Adela Dorado would tell our family about the humiliation of having to go through the delousings every eight days just to clean American homes in El Paso. She recalled how on one occasion the U.S. customs officials put her clothes and shoes through the steam dryer and her shoes melted. If anything, this kind of treatment at the international checkpoints exacerbated illegal immigration. Mexican border

crossers who didn't want to subject themselves to the gasoline baths chose to avoid the designated ports of entry altogether. The delousings went on for decades throughout the U.S.-Mexican border long after the threat of either a typhus epidemic or German bombers had passed. Why did they go on for so long? Because in the eyes of those who were terrified of being contaminated by Latin immigrants, no amount of gasoline or bleaching agent could rid the Mexicans of their dirt; for it was their "germ plasm," their degenerate genes, that were ultimately contagious.

California eugenicists – many of them members of the Human Betterment Foundation such as Stanford Chancellor David Starr Jordan and *Los Angeles Times* owner Harry Chandler – played a leading role in restricting the flow of Mexicans into the U.S. during this period. To prevent mongrelization and defilement of what they called the "Saxon and Goth blood of the nation," they called for human breeding, forced sterilization, birth control and the exclusion of inferior genetic stock through immigration reform. In an article entitled "Perils of the Mexican Invasion," Samuel Holmes – who taught eugenics at U.C. Berkeley in the 20s – argued that Mexicans were "the least assimilable of the foreign stocks." (Oddly enough, he shares the same initials with Harvard neo-nativist Samuel Huntington who is pretty much saying the same thing today.) These racial hygienists were highly influential in helping to draft the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 which established the first U.S. Border Patrol to keep genetically inferior aliens out of the country.

A few years ago, several state governments including California's apologized for the thousands of forced sterilizations carried out in the name of eugenics and "human betterment." I wonder how long it will take for any government official to apologize for the hundreds of thousands of forced delousings with noxious chemicals and pesticides – including gasoline, sodium aluminum fluoride, Zyklon B and DDT – that took place between 1917 and the late 50s along the U.S.-Mexico border. Will anyone ever apologize for the connection between eugenics and U.S. immigration laws? I wonder how many decades it will take for someone to ask forgiveness for today's inhumane immigration policies that have resulted in the deaths of so many undocumented immigrants in recent years?

Is it easier to apologize for history that seems safely stored away in the past than for history that keeps repeating itself, over and over again, here and now? I wonder.

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