

Every American needs to take a history of Mexico class

Learning the history of Mexico can help Americans better understand themselves.

Perspective by Gabriela Soto Laveaga

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The recent backlash over a new book on the history of The Alamo is not about partisanship nor misapplied critical race theory. It is, however, about denying who we are as a nation. More than an erasure of historical fact it is another example of the ongoing and dangerous practice of cherry-picking parts of our past to fit prepackaged national myths. This is not a new practice nor is our society the only one to rewrite history to suit current political winds. Yet denying a serious, factual analysis of our past sabotages the ability to achieve a more just and equal society. If we start our national origins story with historical falsehoods, we will continue to repeat and expand these fictions to make the initial lie make sense.

One way to right this tendency is by studying the role of Mexico and Mexicans in the making of an American identity. It will not solve a concerted effort to refuse historical truths, but it may help us develop critical skills to identify the problems with teaching a single story of American history. Why Mexico? Among other reasons, Mexico lost more than 50 percent of its territory to the United States. Put starkly, much of our country was once Mexico. Analyzing the origins of this territorial gain places current debates about immigration, the border and even what languages can be taught in schools in a broader perspective.

Essayist and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz understood the value of this decades ago when he wrote, “by coming to know Mexico, North Americans can learn to understand an unacknowledged part of themselves.” That unacknowledged part is complicated. Let’s use just one example, the Mexican American War or the U.S. Invasion, as it is known in Mexico, to illustrate how this pivotal event could be taught in American classrooms to expand how we study the actions of our then still-fledgling nation.

While the history of The Alamo is not as consequential for Mexico, Mexican schoolchildren learn that when their country granted Anglo-Americans permission to settle in the sparsely populated territory of *Tejas* these settlers agreed to abide by the laws of Mexico and were encouraged to learn Spanish, convert to Catholicism, intermarry with Mexicans and, eventually, renounce slavery.

Instead, Anglo-Americans defied all of these expectations. They started by blowing past the cap on the number of Anglo-Americans who could settle in Mexico. That enabled them to outnumber Mexicans in its northern territory. The Americans then refused to follow the laws of the land; in response, Mexico sent troops to patrol its borders, understanding that a faction of Texans were intent on fostering secession from Mexico.

That is the backdrop for the 1836 siege of The Alamo: a country intent on quelling a rebellion of lawless foreigners who had overstayed their welcome in Mexico.

Yet the fate of Texas would not be decided on the battlefield but in Washington, D.C. In 1837 the U.S. recognized Texas as an independent state, fueling the anger of its southern neighbor. A few years later in 1844, James K. Polk ran his presidential campaign on the annexation of Texas, which many in Mexico still considered a rebel territory that was part of their nation.

Part of the dispute was *where* Texas claimed to draw its border, at the Nueces or the Rio Grande, which would give it an additional 150 miles of territory.

This geographic detail is important. Polk, determined to push for war, claimed that a border skirmish involving Mexican and American troops spilled “American blood on America’s soil.” But this claim was false; the battle happened in this disputed territory. A young congressman from Illinois, future president Abraham Lincoln, objecting to Polk’s lie, introduced the Spot Resolution of 1847, which laid out the evidence that the fight did not happen on American soil.

What if schoolchildren learned to examine Lincoln’s resolution and protests against what he thought was an unjust war? This broader context would show students that national stories are not tidy, they are messy and sometimes brimming with illegal, or at least problematic, acts. It would also teach students to interrogate presidential actions and claims, not simply accept them as fact.

In the past few months, diverse battles over what will be taught in our classrooms have a common denominator: pushback against a triumphalist narrative, which glorifies the actions of one group over another. Studying the Mexican American War can also teach us about the changing roles of race in our country. Specifically, how some ethnic groups that enjoy broad acceptance today were once reviled, such as, for example, the Irish.

One of the most symbolically powerful events of the war is mostly forgotten in the U.S. today. But Mexicans see the U.S. execution of a predominantly Irish regiment — the Saint Patrick’s Battalion — for treason, as a key event in the war.

In the 1840s, the Irish, fleeing famine, arrived destitute, hungry and, as political cartoons of the era show, in droves to the United States. Relegated to low-class jobs and living in crowded ethnic ghettos, the Irish were portrayed as undesirable immigrants with less-than-average intelligence, who were prone to criminality.

Yet when the call went out for an additional 50,000 troops to invade Mexico, immigrants — many of them Irish — answered the call with the hopes of achieving acceptance in the U.S. It did not take long, however, for many Irish to realize that they were fighting an unjust war started on false pretenses. As Catholics, they also sympathized with Mexicans who were appalled at the desecration of churches by the invading American army. Switching allegiances, a battalion of Irish deserted and fought on the Mexican side. While most were captured and hung for treason, today in Mexico you can find memorials to the Irish, considered heroes of the war. Not every Mexican schoolchild will know about The Alamo but they will all know about the Saint Patrick’s Battalion, when a group of unwanted immigrants rose up against a falsehood. In other words, the questions we ask of the past matter.

At the war's end the U.S. gained the future states of California, Texas, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and portions of Oklahoma, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana from Mexico. To carry through with the belief that it was a God-given right to expand from "sea-to-shining sea" Mexicans were transformed into strangers on their own land. The new courts and laws helped take away the rights of Mexicans, setting a legal precedent for making them second class citizens, penalized for speaking Spanish or simply gathering in groups.

To be sure, mandating a history of Mexico class for a fuller understanding of our current society implies that we will have teachers trained and willing to teach a factual past. So far, we have mixed results in that area.

Despite these challenges, expanding our curriculum will enrich the understanding of the next generations of Americans. Borderlands scholar Gloria Anzaldua described the U.S.-Mexico border, a product of the Mexican American War, as an open wound, the marker of a collective and traumatic history that continues to have an impact on the present lives of communities and individuals. Problems, whether these be workers' rights, migration, declining ground water at the border, economic development or drug trafficking affect both countries and cannot be solved with unilateral decisions. Unilateral histories also do not work.

The past few years have shown us that to remain purposefully ignorant of history is dangerous for democracy. If we move to erase uncomfortable pasts then we remain tethered to fictions.

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History Professor Calls For U.S. Inclusion Of Mexico Studies

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NPR's Kelsey Snell speaks with Harvard history professor Gabriela Soto Laveaga about her recent op-ed titled, "Every American needs to take a history of Mexico class."

KELSEY SNELL, HOST:

While today's referendum in Mexico casts a spotlight on the past three decades of the country's history, our next guest would like all of us to reach much further back in our understanding of Mexican history. Gabriela Soto Laveaga is a history professor at Harvard. And she recently wrote an op-ed for The Washington Post titled "Every American Needs To Take A History Of Mexico Class." She joins us now from California, where she's visiting family.

Professor Soto Laveaga, welcome.

GABRIELA SOTO LAVEAGA: Thank you so much for having me.

SNELL: First of all, why do you think it's so important for all Americans to study the history of Mexico? What would be the benefit, in your view?

SOTO LAVEAGA: I have been teaching a version of a Mexican history class for the last 20 years. And invariably, students, especially those who are coming from border

states, would say, why didn't I learn this in high school? It would have completely changed my view or even how I perceive or vote. And after two decades of listening to this, I finally sat down to write what I had been saying all along, that much of who we claim to be as a nation, so much of it is linked to the Mexican-American War. How we define ourselves as Americans and the values that that we put forth in our society have links, strong links to the mid-19th century.

SNELL: And thinking about those links and that shared history that you talk about, can you tell me about one specific event in Mexican history that you wish Americans understood better and should be studying?

SOTO LAVEAGA: Absolutely. I think for me, one of the most important ones and one that I mentioned in the op-ed is the St. Patrick's Battalion. When the U.S. and Mexico go to war, the U.S. asks for volunteers, as many as 50,000 volunteers to go fight in Mexico. And among the many volunteers who join up are recently arrived refugees from Ireland, who are coming because of famine. And at the time, the Irish were not seen as good citizens in U.S. society. They were seen as dirty, uneducated, prone to criminality. They lived in ethnic ghettos. So they weren't perceived as being wholesome citizens or those who are wanted.

But Irish join these - this call - or answer the call as volunteers in large part because they want to be included in American society. But when they go off to fight in Mexico and once they cross the border and they're fighting and - they realize that this is an unjust war. And the Irish flip sides. And, they join the Mexican side. They formed the Irish Battalion, composed not simply of Irish but predominantly Irish. They - ultimately, when the U.S. wins the Mexican-American War, they're tried for treason and are executed. But in Mexico, they are seen as heroes because it was unwanted immigrants who rose up and had a clear opinion about what was happening on the ground.

SNELL: You know, in your essay, you mention the fact that Mexico lost more than 50% of its territory to the United States at the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. That includes all of what is now California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah. How big a role does that context play in the respective national identities of the United States and Mexico?

SOTO LAVEAGA: This is huge. I think if we take - just for the case of Mexico, it will take the nation decades to recover this national psyche of having lost a war but also having lost so much of its territory. And let's not forget, literally one month after the signing of the treaty that would end the war and - the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo - gold is discovered in California. At the time, Mexico was bankrupt. If it had been in control of Californian gold, potentially, its financial problems would have been different, and it could have had a very different national path.

But for the United States, it really shaped us as a country when you think of how many thousands of East Coast-based Americans and families headed west in search of the gold of California or headed west and gave us our identity as frontiersmen and - women. But in addition - and this is really interesting - we framed our identity as Americans in a way against what we weren't. And what we weren't, we weren't Mexican. So you had to create this image of a Mexican who was different than us. So it was a lawless Mexican. The term greaser comes into use at this time and a criminal element - also from this time. And that's not who we were. A lazy Mexican, that's not who we were. So this idea of who we are as a nation had to have this back and forth with this play of what we weren't. And it - a lot of it had to do with disenfranchising Mexicans who were already on the ground and who were becoming second-class citizens.

SNELL: History is written from a specific viewpoint, and there are often differences in perspective and interpretation. How would you answer those who might say that teaching American students about the Mexican perspective of history could be divisive?

SOTO LAVEAGA: I don't think factual history can be divisive. Rather, I think that if we examine historical truths and historical facts, we gain the tools to ask critical questions, not just of our past but of our current situation, our present state so we can move away from myths. And I'm not saying that we don't need myths. Every nation is built on histories and stories and myths about who we are. That's how we learn to become who we are as a nation - through these stories that we tell. What I'm asking is that we learn to teach analytical ways of thinking about our past.

SNELL: Your op-ed title says every American needs to take a history of Mexico class. If I'm taking that literally, is one class enough to better understand something as complex as Mexican history? Or should this be part of history education more broadly?

SOTO LAVEAGA: That is a fantastic question. I think it should be part of how we reframe how we teach history, U.S. history here in the United States. It should include multiple perspectives, including different groups within our society but also different perspectives from other nations - how they saw these events, how they were responding or how they were questioning these events at the time. What we need to do is not teach a class but rather to incorporate multiple views into what we're already teaching, to make it a much more complex, a much richer way of thinking of our past.

SNELL: That was Professor Gabriela Soto Laveaga. She is the Antonio Madero professor for the Study of Mexico at Harvard University. Professor, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

SOTO LAVEAGA: Thank you so much, Kelsey. Have a great day.

(SOUNDBITE OF GUSTAVO SANTAOLALLA'S "SENDERO")

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