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Let’s Break down the Wall between Us

Walls to build houses make sense. But walls just to keep people in or keep people out make no sense whatsoever. --Anonymous

In 1848, the U.S. created a border at the Rio Grande by an invasion that effectively cut off the Mexicans living north of the Rio Grande from the motherland. That was the first wall we had to endure.

Following the end of the U.S. war against Mexico, the Mexicans who chose or had no choice but to stay behind the new border became virtually isolated in then rural communities. Eventually as more white settlors and speculators migrated into the Southwest, the Mexican people lost any dominance they might have had, even though many Mexican settlements were actually the foothold around which towns and then huge cities developed.

The new Mexican American population also became isolated from Mexico. Thirty years later, the Porfirio Diaz regime took root and eventually forced into motion the migration of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans into the U.S. My own abuelos on my mother’s side crossed the border at Rio Piedras in 1903 to settle in San Antonio. Both were of indigenous origin; my abuela a Coahuiltecan and my abuelo Kickapoo from the Nacimiento settlement in Coahuila. 116 years later, I stand before you.

Not till the 1960s, did their descendants rise up in protest to reassert their cultural and political identity, that protest has come to be known as the Chicano\* Movement. Since then, we Chicanos have come to realize more and more that our reality is that of an occupied nation; we live in Occupied Mexico.

170 years later, Mexicans are still maligned in the US, at the highest levels of government, at best as murderers, rapists, gangsters, and at worst as less than human. Yet, the U.S. exploited Mexican workers to build railroads in the Southwest and to the Midwest, on farmworkers from Mexico and the Southwest to harvest the fields during World War I and II under the bracero program, a federally funded operation, and still today, Mexican Americans, mexicanos and peoples from Central America do every kind of so-called unskilled labor all over the U.S.: tend the gardens, care for the children, clean the houses, harvest the crops, build houses, lay pavement, and on and on. And we also have a Mexican American running for the top job in the U.S.

**Mechicamerica**

Consider these figures:

The U.S. indigenous-hispanic population is greater than several countries in “Latin America.” The estimated total is up to about 60 million. At least 40 million of these are of Mexican origin. The Mexican American population, therefore, is greater than several countries in Latin America; only three countries have higher populations, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. Of the rest, 15, Peru comes the closest with 32.9 million.

Mexican Americans boast economic wealth as a whole greater than most of the Spanish speaking countries in the world.

* A report in early 2017 estimated “Hispanic” buying power at $1.4 trillion in 2016, nearly 10 percent of the total U.S. buying power that year.
* The U.S. Hispanic market is larger than the GDP of Mexico and bigger than the economies of all but 14 countries in the world.
* Remesas are the second of Mexico's top sources of foreign income, accounting for $26 billion sent home from January to November 2017; manufacturing exports are first, and oil exports third.

Unfortunately, the bulk of today’s Mexicamerica, the descendants of those first Mexican Americans and of migrants like my abuelos have largely lost touch with our Mexican/indigenous roots. Family relations, language facility, cultural traditions, and religious ties that were closely bound with Mexico have faded away. Why are you concerned, you might ask? You have a rather good life north of the border, your standard of living is relatively quite high, and you have many Chicanans in elected positions, PhDs in academia, noted entertainers and authors, and a Presidential candidate. But, to put it in context, it took about 170 years for all this to happen.

Yet, Mexican Americans still rank lower than White Americans by far in annual income, job mobility, access to higher education, housing ownership, and so on. We do rank high in certain statistics: families living in poverty, homelessness, incarceration, illiteracy and access to health services.

For more than 170 years, the United States government, corporations, financiers, newspaper and magazine publishers, and the entertainment industry to name a few culprits, have suppressed the Mexican American people in many ways. [Julián Castro has broken a very important barrier toward Mexican Americans assuming leadership roles in the U.S. in the future. After his campaign, it should not be a novelty for a Mexican American to run for President, nor for a Mexican American to become President of the U.S. Look at the demographic trends.]

Which is to say, that none of us consider ourselves victims and seek pity. The Mexicamericans, in short, are survivors. We have sustained every kind of effort to wipe us out. We stand together, in this regard, with our other native peoples in the U.S. In fact, data from the 2010 U.S. Census show that 175,000 persons identified as “Mexican American Indians.” (I was one of them.) This new category, Mexican American Indians, amounts to the fifth largest “tribe” in the native population.

In these few words, I only seek to lay the groundwork to urge Mexico, in the name of your president, elected officials, indigenous peoples, academics and others, to sit down with us Mexican Americans and discuss what we must do together to fashion what lies before us. In other words, let’s break down that wall, which for too long has separated Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

There are two areas I would like recommend for further discussion and study:

**1. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo**

Mexican Americans have an internationally recognized document on which to base our assertion of nationhood within a nation: The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.\*\* It is our link to a common foundation of Mexicanidad, of mestizaje shared with Mexicanos. Imagine Mexico granting all Mexican Americans dual citizenship and establishing economic prerogatives to Mexicamericans for trade, business incentives, educational and cultural programs and exchanges, and the creation of diplomatic ties with the Mexicamerican people through some form of bi-national institute dedicated to advancing the social and cultural ties between Mexico and Mexicamerica.

I urge Mexican legal scholars and historians to examine closely the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. A study that I published in 1983 as a graduate thesis for the Juris Doctor argued that the Treaty is a living document. Moreover, I assert that we can trace the roots of current human rights law and international treaty principles back 170 years to the Treaty and its predecessor, the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

In regard to the current situation affecting eventually perhaps millions of people along the U.S.-Mexico border, I refer you to Article 21 of the Treaty. [According to Article 21 of the Treaty, if a “disagreement” arises between the U.S. and Mexico based on political or economic reasons, they should “endeavour” to settle the issue through negotiations (diplomacy), and, that failing, resort to arbitration carried out under a commission for that purpose. I don’t believe that Mexico has ever resorted or even considered the Treaty Article 21 as a means to bring the U.S. to a bargaining table. Were the U.S. to refuse, they would be in violation of international law. Even the U.S. Constitution stipulates that treaties are the law of the land.)

**2. Continentación and Globalización**

Let’s face it, people in the U.S., including Mexican Americans, know very little and understand less about Mexico. But from the Mexican perspective, you probably know more about the U.S. than we know about Mexico. All this has to change.

Which brings me to the latest development in the Chicano Movement. At a conference on civil rights in San Antonio, Texas, in November of 2018, I posed this question during a panel: what does the future hold for Mexican Americans? For the past couple years, several 50 year anniversaries have been held, and there are more to come, but what are we going to do for the next 50 years, just dwell on the past? How are we Chicanans going to face the coming half century? Are we going to let outside forces and events shape our existence? Are there concerns which we must address if we are to survive as a people beyond the next decade?

During the panel, I introduced the idea of setting out a blueprint for us to follow; the idea caught on. The panelists gave me their blessing to attempt to put in writing what such a document might look like. By February 2, 2019, I distributed the first version of the “Blueprint for the Next 50 Years.” (I’m sure everyone knows the significance of that date.)

Since then, I’ve set up a blog (blueprintpapers.weebly.com) and have been holding regular webinars on Saturdays with a small group of scholars and activists dedicated to begin to answer those questions. (Anyone interested can reach me at armandobrendon@gmail.com)

The concerns we listed are: affirming our identity, finding our own voice, alliances with other U.S. native peoples, alliances with Mexico and the rest of Latin America, Chicanismo as a philosophy, and Chicanan literature and the arts. These are topics that concern only Chicanans, that only we could care to confront, and that only we can resolve. The results of our efforts should benefit Mexican Americans in key ways, culturally, economically, politically, and psychologically. Underlying this thought is the realization that the future lies in our recognizing and enriching our indigenous origins. We have largely catered, one might say, to the Hispanic heritage for generations, while for various reasons, ignoring or even suppressing our indigeneity, que somos indios con apellidos hispanos.

Remember my reference to the 175,000 Mexican American Indians? That is a sign of a growing number of Mexicamericans affirming their indigenous origin, their desire to re-bond with other tribes in the U.S. and Mexico and throughout Latin America. It also points to the realization that much of the shaping of the next 50 years in the U.S. and the rest of the western continents might depend on how we sort out these concerns together.

Our efforts are moving in the direction of our establishing a Chicanan “think tank,” a resource to help address these concerns and tie in the organizing and training of organizers to address these goals at community levels throughout the U.S. I ask anyone here who is interested at least in following our efforts, perhaps forming a parallel group here in Mexico, to see me afterwards so we can exchange email addresses and cell phone numbers.

Finally, I must recall to you that last year when I spoke at the previous conference, I said that globalization would be meaningless for Mexico without it taking into consideration the 40 plus million Mexican Americans north of the border. Now I come with a great deal more urgency.

We see what has been happening at the border. We’re aware of the growing nativist and racist attacks against us. It’s clear that the present U.S. administration doesn’t care to differentiate between Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Central or South Americans. We’re brown and that’s down.

What momentous timing for Mexico to initiate en enlace con Mexicamerica. There are many Mexican Americans willing to dedicate their energy and time to find ways to nurture a relationship between us, for example, through a series of educational and cultural initiatives. To help address globalization concerns, Mexico has a major partner, historically, culturally, and politically in the Mexican American/Chicanan people. That’s why I would suggest a new term, continentación.

I come with an urgent message. Reach out to your familia to the north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Help us shed the mindset that has been forced on us of a conquered people. We have survived attempts at genocide, at wiping out our use of Spanish, of schoolbooks that have passed on vile and untrue depictions of the Mexican people, and we intend to persist.

I ask that you send more scholars to U.S. institutions to interact with professors and researchers there and vice versa, have exchanges of artists and musicians on both sides to entertain and educate la gente about our common roots and aspirations, and seek out common values, ideals and aspirations.

The Blueprint for the Next 50 Years may help encourage a bi-national discussion about issues we can mutually address. We cannot let the strident voice of nationalism be the only voice heard on these continents. We must create and reinforce alliances among our peoples in the U.S. and Mexico, and potentially all of Latin America. My goal at this conference is to ask you to join the discussion about our mutual identity and recognize that when it comes to mexicanidad, there is no wall between us.

Submitted by:

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APPENDIX

\* The word, Chicano, is derived from the name of the mexica (mechica) and the Spanish version, mejicano, hence Chicano. Some historians date its use to the 1920s, in the songs of Mexican workers in the fields and on the railroads. It was considered by barrio families as a lower class term, a word only raza like pachucos would use, until the 1960s, when it was reborn as our own name for ourselves. Until then, Mexicans captured behind the lines by the conquest of Mexican land in 1846-48, had swallowed the imposition of various terms, Mexican-American, Latin American and even Spanish American, to convey some level of group identity until the 1960s.

\*\* Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Article XXI

If unhappily any disagreement should hereafter arise between the Governments of the two republics, whether with respect to the interpretation of any stipulation in this treaty, or with respect to any other particular concerning the political or commercial relations of the two nations, the said Governments, in the name of those nations, do promise to each other that they will endeavour, in the most sincere and earnest manner, to settle the differences so arising, and to preserve the state of peace and friendship in which the two countries are now placing themselves, using, for this end, mutual representations and pacific negotiations. And if, by these means, they should not be enabled to come to an agreement, a resort shall not, on this account, be had to reprisals, aggression, or hostility of any kind, by the one republic against the other, until the Government of that which deems itself aggrieved shall have maturely considered, in the spirit of peace and good neighbourship, whether it would not be better that such difference should be settled by the arbitration of commissioners appointed on each side, or by that of a friendly nation. And should such course be proposed by either party, it shall be acceded to by the other, unless deemed by it altogether incompatible with the nature of the difference, or the circumstances of the case.