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Op-Ed Contributor

Immigration — and the Curse of the Black Legend

By TONY HORWITZ
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Vineyard Haven, Mass.



COURSING through the immigration debate is the unexamined faith that American history rests on English bedrock, or Plymouth Rock to be specific. Jamestown also gets a nod, particularly in the run-up to its 400th birthday, but John Smith was English, too (he even coined the name New England).

So amid the din over border control, the Senate affirms the self-evident truth that English is our national language; "It is part of our blood," Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, says. Border vigilantes call themselves Minutemen, summoning colonial Massachusetts as they apprehend Hispanics in the desert Southwest. Even undocumented immigrants invoke our Anglo founders, waving placards that read, "The Pilgrims didn't have papers."

These newcomers are well indoctrinated; four of the sample questions on our naturalization test ask about Pilgrims. Nothing in the sample exam suggests that prospective citizens need know anything that occurred on this continent before the Mayflower landed in 1620. Few Americans do, after all.

This national amnesia isn't new, but it's glaring and supremely paradoxical at a moment when politicians warn of the threat posed to our culture and identity by an invasion of immigrants from across the Mexican border. If Americans hit the books, they'd find what Al Gore would call an inconvenient truth. The early history of what is now the United States was Spanish, not English, and our denial of this heritage is rooted in age-old stereotypes that still entangle today's immigration debate.

Forget for a moment the millions of Indians who occupied this continent for 13,000 or more years before anyone else arrived, and start the clock with Europeans' presence on present-day United States soil. The first confirmed landing wasn't by Vikings, who reached Canada in about 1000, or by Columbus, who reached the Bahamas in 1492. It was by a Spaniard, Juan Ponce de León,

who landed in 1513 at a lush shore he christened La Florida.

Most Americans associate the early Spanish in this hemisphere with Cortés in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru. But Spaniards pioneered the present-day United States, too. Within three decades of Ponce de León's landing, the Spanish became the first Europeans to reach the Appalachians, the Mississippi, the Grand Canyon and the Great Plains. Spanish ships sailed along the East Coast, penetrating to present-day Bangor, Me., and up the Pacific Coast as far as Oregon.

From 1528 to 1536, four castaways from a Spanish expedition, including a "black" Moor, journeyed all the way from Florida to the Gulf of California — 267 years before Lewis and Clark embarked on their much more renowned and far less arduous trek. In 1540, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado led 2,000 Spaniards and Mexican Indians across today's Arizona-Mexico border — right by the Minutemen's inaugural post — and traveled as far as central Kansas, close to the exact geographic center of what is now the continental United States. In all, Spaniards probed half of today's lower 48 states before the first English tried to colonize, at Roanoke Island, N.C.

The Spanish didn't just explore, they settled, creating the first permanent European settlement in the continental United States at St. Augustine, Fla., in 1565. Santa Fe, N.M., also predates Plymouth: later came Spanish settlements in San Antonio, Tucson, San Diego and San Francisco. The Spanish even established a Jesuit mission in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay 37 years before the founding of Jamestown in 1607.

Two iconic American stories have Spanish antecedents, too. Almost 80 years before John Smith's alleged rescue by Pocahontas, a man by the name of Juan Ortiz told of his remarkably similar rescue from execution by an Indian girl. Spaniards also held a thanksgiving, 56 years before the Pilgrims, when they feasted near St. Augustine with Florida Indians, probably on stewed pork and garbanzo beans.

The early history of Spanish North America is well documented, as is the extensive exploration by the 16th-century French and Portuguese. So why do Americans cling to a creation myth centered on one band of late-arriving English — Pilgrims who weren't even the first English to settle New England or the first Europeans to reach Plymouth Harbor? (There was a short-lived colony in Maine and the French reached Plymouth earlier.)

The easy answer is that winners write the history and the Spanish, like the French, were ultimately losers in the contest for this continent. Also, many leading American writers and historians of the early 19th century were New Englanders who elevated the Pilgrims to mythic status (the North's victory in the Civil War provided an added excuse to diminish the Virginia story). Well into the 20th century, standard histories and school texts barely mentioned the early Spanish in North America.

While it's true that our language and laws reflect English heritage, it's also true that the Spanish role was crucial. Spanish discoveries spurred the English to try settling America and paved the way for the latecomers' eventual success. Many key aspects of American history, like African slavery and the cultivation of tobacco, are rooted in the forgotten Spanish century that preceded English arrival.

There's another, less-known legacy of this early period that explains why we've written the Spanish out of our national narrative. As late as 1783, at the end of the Revolutionary War, Spain held claim to roughly half of today's continental United States (in 1775, Spanish ships even reached Alaska). As American settlers pushed out from the 13 colonies, the new nation craved Spanish land. And to justify seizing it, Americans found a handy weapon in a set of centuries-old beliefs known as the "black legend."

The legend first arose amid the religious strife and imperial rivalries of 16th-century Europe. Northern Europeans, who loathed Catholic Spain and envied its American empire, published books and gory engravings that depicted Spanish colonization as uniquely barbarous: an orgy of greed, slaughter and papist depravity, the Inquisition writ large.

Though simplistic and embellished, the legend contained elements of truth. Juan de Oñate, the conquistador who colonized New Mexico, punished Pueblo Indians by cutting off their hands and feet and then enslaving them. Hernando de Soto bound Indians in chains and neck collars and forced them to haul his army's gear across the South. Natives were thrown to attack dogs and burned alive.

But there were Spaniards of conscience in the New World, too: most notably the Dominican priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, whose defense of Indians impelled the Spanish crown to pass laws protecting natives. Also, Spanish brutality wasn't unique; English colonists committed similar atrocities. The Puritans were arguably more intolerant of natives than the Spanish and the Virginia colonists as greedy for gold as any conquistador. But none of this erased the black legend's enduring stain, not only in Europe but also in the newly formed United States.

"Anglo Americans," writes David J. Weber, the pre-eminent historian of Spanish North America, "inherited the view that Spaniards were unusually cruel, avaricious, treacherous, fanatical, superstitious, cowardly, corrupt, decadent, indolent and authoritarian."

When 19th-century jingoists revived this caricature to justify invading Spanish (and later, Mexican) territory, they added a new slur: the mixing of Spanish, African and Indian blood had created a degenerate race. To Stephen Austin, Texas's fight with Mexico was "a war of barbarism and of despotic principles, waged by the mongrel Spanish-Indian and Negro race, against civilization and the Anglo-American race." It was the manifest destiny of white

Americans to seize and civilize these benighted lands, just as it was to take the territory of Indian savages.

From 1819 to 1848, the United States and its army increased the nation's area by roughly a third at Spanish and Mexican expense, including three of today's four most populous states: California, Texas and Florida. Hispanics became the first American citizens in the newly acquired Southwest territory and remained a majority in several states until the 20th century.

By then, the black legend had begun to fade. But it seems to have found new life among immigration's staunchest foes, whose rhetoric carries traces of both ancient Hispanophobia and the chauvinism of 19th-century expansionists.

Representative J. D. Hayworth of Arizona, who calls for deporting illegal immigrants and changing the Constitution so that children born to them in the United States can't claim citizenship, denounces "defeatist wimps unwilling to stand up for our culture" against alien "invasion." Those who oppose making English the official language, he adds, "reject the very notion that there is a uniquely American identity, or that, if there is one, that it is superior to any other."

Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado, chairman of the House Immigration Reform Caucus, depicts illegal immigration as "a scourge" abetted by "a cult of multiculturalism" that has "a death grip" on this nation. "We are committing cultural suicide," Mr. Tancredo claims. "The barbarians at the gate will only need to give us a slight push, and the emaciated body of Western civilization will collapse in a heap."

On talk radio and the Internet, foes of immigration echo the black legend more explicitly, typecasting Hispanics as indolent, a burden on the American taxpayer, greedy for benefits and jobs, prone to criminality and alien to our values — much like those degenerate Spaniards of the old Southwest and those gold-mad conquistadors who sought easy riches rather than honest toil. At the fringes, the vilification is baldly racist. In fact, cruelty to Indians seems to be the only transgression absent from the familiar package of Latin sins.

Also missing, of course, is a full awareness of the history of the 500-year Spanish presence in the Americas and its seesawing fortunes in the face of Anglo encroachment. "The Hispanic world did not come to the United States," Carlos Fuentes observes. "The United States came to the Hispanic world. It is perhaps an act of poetic justice that now the Hispanic world should return."

America has always been a diverse and fast-changing land, home to overlapping cultures and languages. It's an homage to our history, not a betrayal of it, to welcome the latest arrivals, just as the Indians did those tardy and uninvited Pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth not so long ago.

Tony Horwitz, the author of "Confederates in the Attic" and "Blue Latitudes," is writing a book on the early exploration of North America.

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