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## Anti-immigration forces warn of Mexican conspiracy to retake Southwest

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LOS ANGELES — On the far fringes of the pro-immigration movement, some Hispanic activists openly yearn for the day when immigrants rise up and retake the American Southwest, more than 150 years after the U.S. annexed it.

"If somebody steals your car, how much of it do you want back? Just the tires? The seats?" asks Olin Tezcatlipoca of the Los Angeles-based Mexica Movement.

Mainstream immigration advocacy groups — as well as academics and experts on nearly all sides of the illegal immigration issue — dismiss these "reconquista" notions as rhetorical, not to be taken seriously.

But such talk appears to be galvanizing foes of immigration. Anti-immigrant activists and some conservatives have seized on such rhetoric to claim that a conspiracy is afoot among illegal immigrants to reconquer the Southwest.

Jim Boyd, for example, ran a losing campaign for City Council in Nashville, Tenn., on the single idea of stopping an "invasion" of Mexicans who he said want to seize much of the Southwest and secede from the United States.

"They're American citizens of convenience, until they can start a new country. Then they'll shuck their citizenship as easily as you or I take off a jacket," he said.

Boyd got only 2 percent of the vote last month. That translates to more than 8,000 people.

Tamar Jacoby, a senior fellow with the conservative Manhattan Institute think tank, called the reconquista conspiracy theory "a fantasy, a boogeyman."

Similarly, Mark Potok, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project, which tracks and monitors hate groups, said the reconquista idea is "completely bogus" but has "made its way into the mouths of national politicians and onto the screens of cable television news."

Conservative columnist Michelle Malkin and CNN host Lou Dobbs, both critics of illegal immigration, may not believe in the existence of an actual plot to retake the American Southwest, but both have talked about the reconquista theory as an example of the extreme rhetoric of some Hispanic organizations and pro-immigrant groups.

Charlie Norwood, a congressman from Georgia who died earlier this year, appeared to accept the conspiracy at face value, accusing the National Council of La Raza, a mainstream Washington advocacy group, of acting as a front organization for the "radical racist group" MEChA, or Chicano Student Movement of Aztlan.

In an article last year for the conservative newspaper Human Events, he complained of a grant La Raza made to MEChA, which he said was seeking "to carve a racist nation out of the American West."

"It doesn't end with secession," Norwood wrote. "The final plan includes the ethnic cleansing of Americans of European, African and Asian descent out of `Aztlan.'"

Aztec folklore puts Aztlan in northern Mexico, possibly along its western coast. Other accounts place it farther north in what is now Arizona, Colorado or New Mexico.

Mexico's huge territorial losses were a result of defeat in the Mexican-American War. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded what are now California, Utah and Nevada, and parts of present-day Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Wyoming, to the United States.

Anti-immigration critics often cite a MEChA manifesto, written in 1969 and filled with nationalist rhetoric, as proof the organization has a hidden agenda.

"Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans," the manifesto reads. "With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture."

Marcos Zamora, chairman of MEChA's California State University, Northridge, branch, said those documents should be understood in historical context: "People were really radical back then." The organization's main mission now is to promote higher education for underprivileged youth, he said.

Many prominent Hispanics, like Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and former California Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante, were once members of MEChA, and that only convinces some anti-immigration critics that the radicals are taking over.

Cecilia Munoz, senior vice president for La Raza, said the accusations of a radical separatist agenda are "a little like accusing the NAACP of being the Black Panthers."

"We've been trying to play by the rules and have a polite policy debate about how to reform immigration," she said. "And everybody else has got their gloves off and is hitting below the belt."

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