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Old battle haunts new U.S.-Mexico tensions

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MEXICO CITY - More than 1 million migrants flood into the United States each year across a border cutting straight through what once was Mexican territory, a touch of history that haunts the immigration debate 158 years after the land changed hands.

The territory north of today's 1,952-mile border was ripped away in 1848 after a U.S. invasion that ended with the capture of Mexico City.

Ulysses S. Grant, who took part, called the invasion "the most unjust war ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."

The loss changed Mexico's destiny and still tears at the country's heart. Primary school textbooks harp on it. Intellectuals often refer to it. Museums are dedicated to it.

In the United States, some anti-immigration activists see migrants as a threat to American land and culture, part of a Spanish-speaking invasion that will reclaim the American Southwest.

Their concern is fed by occasional Mexican references to the booming immigrant population as a *reconquista*, or re-conquest, and by the Mexican government's efforts to reinforce the migrants' ties to their homeland.

Recovering land

When hundreds of thousands of mainly Latino marchers turned out for a pro-immigrant demonstration Los Angeles in March, Mexican television reporter Alberto Tinoco sounded almost giddy.

"With all due respect to Uncle Sam, this shows that Los Angeles has never stopped being ours," Tinoco said on the nightly newscast.

Prominent Mexican writers Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Fuentes have spoken of a *reconquista*. Poniatowska said Mexicans are recovering their lost lands "through migratory tactics."

Fuentes portrays it as a powerful northward thrust of the Spanish language that will enrich both nations.

It may not be on the minds of job-seeking migrants, but the memory of the Mexican War "is a very important issue in the bilateral relationship. And it's always kind of floating around in the background . . . at the diplomatic levels," said Ana Maria Salazar, a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of Defense.

Treaties and heroes

"Re-conquest," too, may be misleading. Before the war, most people in the Mexican territory north of the current border, from California to Texas, were Indians. They spoke little Spanish and paid little allegiance to Mexico.

Spain began establishing missions in "Alta California" shortly before the American Revolution, and the land became Mexico's after its own independence from Spain in 1821.

But only a few thousand Spaniards and Mexicans were living in the area when the United States took the land under

the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo decades later, paying \$18.25 million in cash and assumed debts, the equivalent of about \$434 million today.

The treaty also included Mexico's first formal recognition of the loss of Texas, which won its independence in 1836 and was absorbed by the United States in 1845.

Just as Texans used the temporary loss of the Alamo to Mexico in 1836 as a rallying cry, Mexicans have made national heroes of fighters slain resisting the American invaders 11 years later: the "child heroes" who reportedly jumped to their deaths rather than surrender and the San Patricio Battalion of Irish soldiers who put up a ferocious defense at a monastery in Mexico City.

The monastery is now Mexico City's National Museum of Interventions, and the scars on its walls from American guns fired 159 years ago are carefully tended.

Yet after visitors tour exhibits decrying the aggression that "mutilated" the nation, they can stop by the museum souvenir shop to find Mickey Mouse computer games and a Movie Talk course in learning English.

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