

Second Place – Senior Division

Operation Wetback and the *Bracero* Program

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Immigration policy is a highly controversial topic in the United States of America today. Politicians and many voters, who even a few years ago seemed rarely to speak about or share an opinion on immigration issues, now express themselves very strongly on what should be done with the millions of undocumented persons living in the U.S. Mass deportation and guest worker programs are among the possible solutions suggested.

This is not the first time that the so called “illegal alien” issue has been a concern in America. A little-known episode in our national debate over immigrant rights and the issue of illegal immigration took place in 1954 in the form of a campaign to deport or legalize over one million undocumented workers. Observers at the time declared that the issue of undocumented workers in the U.S. was resolved.

This transient success in the 1950s occurred because, as the U.S. Border Patrol pressured undocumented workers to leave, there was an existing agricultural guest worker program which dramatically increased in numbers to address and attempt to meet the needs of farmers who required cheap labor to work their fields, and poor Mexicans who needed jobs. An understanding what happened during this campaign of deportation and labor importation seems relevant in our current national discussion on immigration policy. Operation Wetback, as the “stick,” and the *Bracero* Program as the “carrot,” established that the U.S. could reach a compromise on the conflicts involved in illegal immigration.

By the beginning of 1942, soon after the U.S. entered into World War II, demand for

more farm workers by growers of labor intensive crops increased dramatically. U.S. farmers needed to produce food not only for the nation, but also for America's armed forces and desperate Allies. Many of the strong, able young men on farms were taken away from the country to fight, while others found better-paying jobs in war industries, creating a need for agricultural laborers. The labor shortage quickly began to threaten food production needs within the U.S.¹

In the Pacific Northwest, farmers experimented by hiring Japanese-American laborers, who were given the chance to prove their loyalty to the U.S. This trial did not work out because of resentment and distrust between the Japanese-Americans and the farmers and local residents.² Growers and processors began to seek permission from the government to import Mexican laborers.

The government of Mexico did not initially want to export laborers to the U.S. A temporary guest-worker program was instituted in 1917 during World War I, but it had outraged many Mexicans after U.S. growers were given too much freedom under the agreement to pay low wages and otherwise seemingly to exploit imported workers.³ Also, many Mexicans still resented that, during the Great Depression, there had been a mass, government-sponsored, coerced repatriation of Mexican workers and their U.S.-born children.⁴

In the early 1930s, many American citizens were deep in poverty, including the "Okies" survivors of the Dust Bowl that plagued the Plains States as added misery to the Great Depression. Okies sought work primarily in California. They did not want to compete with Mexicans for scarce, precious jobs.⁵ Local governments feared that Mexican nationals would overwhelm already swollen welfare centers.⁶ Some local governments and social groups, such as those in the city of Los Angeles, paid the train fare for a mass exodus of the Mexicans.⁷

Between 1929 and 1935, about a half-million Mexicans left the U.S. due to deportation, or the fear of deportation.⁸ The Mexican government considered this action discrimination against its people.⁹

Despite the historical objections, the Mexican government began negotiations with the U.S. for a new guest worker agreement in 1942, even though such a program would take away many skilled and more ambitious laborers whom Mexico needed. However, these workers would bring needed money into the Mexican economy, in the form of remittances to their families left behind. They might also learn new agricultural skills and methods to bring back to Mexican farms. Furthermore, Mexico wanted to support the war effort, and assumed that such a guest-worker program would last only until the end of the war.¹⁰

A Mexican contract labor program was introduced in the summer of 1942 under Public Law 77-45 (PL 77-45), popularly known as the *Bracero* Program, which allowed migrant workers from Mexico to enter into seasonal contracts as laborers in American fields.¹¹ The U.S. government and the general public supported this program because of the overwhelming need for agricultural labor to support the war effort.¹²

Under the *Bracero* Program agreement between Mexico and the U.S., Mexican contract laborers could only work in certain parts of the country. According to the contracts, a person agreed to work for usually one season and to return to Mexico immediately afterward. The U.S. government would provide and pay for transportation to and from Mexico. Employers had to provide the “prevailing wage.”¹³

The Mexican government made sure that no one would work in certain areas, particularly Texas, where there had been many allegations of discrimination against Mexicans.¹⁴ This was an embarrassment to U.S. officials. Eventually Mexico lifted the ban against allowing the *Bracero*

Program in Texas, but reinstated it many times, only to take it away again. Mexico tried to negotiate more favorable worker conditions for its *braceros*, and even, on two occasions, prohibited workers from leaving Mexico as a negotiation tactic. On both occasions, U. S. authorities began unilateral recruitment of labor, and Mexico could not stop its nationals from crossing over.

The U.S. and Mexico renewed the *Bracero* Program each year through the 1940s and early 1950s, with various modifications, such as requiring employers to pay the recruitment and transportation costs of the Mexican workers. When World War II ended in 1945, the U.S. economy did not fall back into a depression as economists predicted, but continued to prosper. New factory jobs, as well as pent-up demand for a return to abundant food supplies after wartime rationing left a continuing need for agricultural labor. That demand, in turn, supported demand for foreign workers on America's farms.

During this period, there were a massive number of illegal Mexican immigrants in the U.S., and many more crossed the border every day.¹⁵ With lax enforcement of immigration rules, growers, especially those closer to the Mexican border, ignored the *Bracero* Program because of what the growers considered to be too much red tape and unnecessary costs and delays. Instead, they hired the readily-available, undocumented workers.¹⁶ In 1947, it was estimated that less than ten percent of the agricultural labor force in the Rio Grande Valley were *bracero* workers and, therefore, legal, due to few Border Patrol raids on farms.¹⁷ By 1954, U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. stated that illegal immigration was "averaging 75,000 a month and steadily increasing."¹⁸

Operation Wetback started on 17 June 1954.* The first crackdowns of Operation Wetback, involving 1,075 Border Patrol agents and state and local police, took place in California and Arizona. In advance of the raids, farmers were warned to hire legal Mexicans through the *Bracero* Program.¹⁹ A large detention camp was built in Southern California. The head of the Border Patrol called it “The biggest drive against illegal aliens in history.”²⁰ This force searched Mexican-American neighborhoods, made random stops of likely-looking illegal immigrants and conducted ID checks of Mexicans in certain regions of the Southwest. Border Patrol agents searched many agricultural areas for farm workers, and ended up catching about 1,000 illegal Mexican immigrants each day.²¹

Because of Operation Wetback, growers facing the loss of their work force suddenly found the motivation to enter the *Bracero* Program. The program’s procedures were flexible enough that a farmer’s work force could be transformed within one day from illegals into *braceros*. Mynatt Smith, writing in *The Dallas Morning News* on 15 June 1947, detailed the “drying out” process:

Under terms of the international agreement, all employers with alien workers in this area must apply for permission to have the laborers processed. Employers are notified by United States immigration authorities whether they will be allowed to sign contracts with the laborers who are working for them now.

When employers receive such notifications, they make a date with immigration officials at Hidalgo and appear there on that date with their workers. In less than a day’s time, the alien workers are “deported” to Mexico, where the Reynosa labor office of the Mexican government passes on them as eligible workers.

If the workers pass – and turndowns have been almost nonexistent – they are given identification data and carried back to the United States, where a physical examination awaits them. Past this, they return with the employer to his fields.²²

Operation Wetback could cripple agricultural employers of illegal Mexican workers during harvest periods, yet provided the opportunity to enroll these same employees in the

* The derogatory term “wetback” refers to illegal Mexican immigrants who had presumably swum across the Rio Grande upon entering the U.S., getting their backs wet in the process.

Bracero Program. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officials provided ample warning to agricultural employers before massive raids began, and cooperated with grower organizations to advertise the *Bracero* Program as an alternative solution to growers' labor needs.²³ The Labor Department reported that in the lower Rio Grande Valley, where the *Bracero* Program had previously been little used, 3,500 applications were processed each day.²⁴ Particularly in Texas, the INS and Labor Department strove to streamline their procedures and to reduce the costs for the *Bracero* Program to make it more tolerable to reluctant growers, especially in "drying out" a farmer's undocumented workers.²⁵ INS officials made considerable effort to explain Operation Wetback to the Mexican-American community in advance, especially in Texas, to lessen the perception of discrimination.²⁶ The combined efforts of enforcement and attention to the needs and sensitivities of both growers and Hispanics seemed to make a difference.

Both the U.S. and Mexican governments helped to finance the return to Mexico of those illegal Mexican immigrants not transformed into *braceros*. These deportees were taken far away from the Mexico-U.S. border to discourage them from crossing over again.

Despite the existence of a coordinated plan of action to regulate the influx of migrant farm workers, and to return to Mexico those found unfit, or unsuitable for work in the U.S., the U.S. had a significant need for laborers. The number of *bracero* contracts, which had shown a significant increase in 1954, jumped dramatically in 1955 as the effect of Operation Wetback began to be felt. By late that year, Operation Wetback was considered a success by most observers and the former "crisis" of undocumented workers had ended.²⁷

Table 1, on the next page, shows the impact of immigration law enforcement and an available guest-worker program alternative for the period 1950-59.

Table 1²⁸

Bracero Worker Contracts and Deportable
Mexican Nationals During the 1950s

Year	Contracts issued to Mexican workers by U.S. authorities	Deportable Mexicans Apprehended
1950	67,500	458,215
1951	192,000	500,000
1952	197,100	543,538
1953	201,380	865,318
1954	309,033	1,075,168
1955	398,650	242,608
1956	445,197	72,442
1957	436,049	44,451
1958	432,857	37,242
1959	437,643	30,196

For the last five years of the decade, the *Bracero* Program averaged over 400,000 contracts per year. In the 1960s the program fell victim to the more-progressive political climate of that time, and pressure from the organized labor. The U.S. Congress refused to renew the program in 1965.²⁹

The current immigration crisis is similar to, but in significant ways different from, the situation in the 1950s. The contemporary press continually focuses on immigration issues, and many people feel that the U.S./Mexican border is out of control, as was the case fifty years ago. The Mexican government is again willing to cooperate with the U.S. government on creating a much-larger and more-comprehensive guest-worker program. U.S. employers apply pressure the government due to an inadequate supply of U.S. workers in many economic sectors.

Today's estimates of undocumented persons are roughly twelve times the number they were fifty years ago. Undocumented workers are now spread all over the U.S., and no longer primarily work in agricultural jobs. Unlike the grower-oriented *Bracero* Program, present U.S.

guest-worker programs are commonly viewed as too cumbersome and expensive for employers, even by the U.S. Department of Labor, which administers half of the process.³⁰

Today's temporary worker programs fall into two categories: H-2A and H-2B, referring to the type of entry visa which the U.S. grants to an aspiring worker. The H-2A visa is for agricultural workers; the H-2B for seasonal, nonagricultural laborers. Only 50,000 foreign workers annually enter the U.S. under the H-2A³¹ program and 120,000 under the H-2B program.³² Yet there are some 12 million undocumented workers within the U.S.³³ Of these, up to 1.25 million work in agriculture.

The H-2A seasonal agricultural worker program is so unattractive to employers that undocumented farm workers are estimated to outnumber H-2A workers by a ratio of 10 to 1, despite there being no limit on how many H-2A workers can be brought into the U.S. each year.³⁴ The argument has been made that there needs to be more compromise today between fair worker conditions and more-appealing guest-worker programs for U.S. farm and non-farm employers. Along with this necessity, the lessons of the 1950s suggest the need for an effective, stricter enforcement measure against the hiring of undocumented workers, such as quicker verification of valid Social Security numbers. There is no end in sight to the strong push felt by many Mexican workers, now also shared by many Central Americans, to find a way to enter the U.S., due to the relatively dire economic conditions at home.³⁵ A new dual policy of enforcement and accommodation would duplicate the "carrot-and-stick" approach of the 1950s.

The *Bracero* Program was a compromise between, on the one side, Mexican laborers seeking job opportunities and U.S. growers needing cheap, reliable labor; and on the one side, the U.S. government and many U.S. citizens who wanted secure borders and a legal work force. In 1954, Operation Wetback forced both growers and undocumented Mexican workers to seek

security within the *Bracero* Program.

The success of Operation Wetback depended upon the existence of the relatively convenient and economical *Bracero* Program to transform an undocumented worker into a legal, seasonal, contract agricultural laborer. In 2008, the emphasis is on enforcement of immigration laws and sealing the U.S. border with Mexico, while any effort toward creating a more attractive and comprehensive guest-worker program is an afterthought. Historical experience has shown these approaches have been successful in addressing our nation's immigration issues only when they worked hand in hand.

NOTES

¹ Juan Ramon Garcia, Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 18.

² Erasmo Gamboa, Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 30.

³ Garcia, 21.

⁴ "Campaign on Aliens Outlined: Statement Issued After Conferences Here of Immigration Officials," The Los Angeles Times, 4 February 1931.

⁵ Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 68.

⁶ Abraham Hoffman, Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression. (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1974), 86.

⁷ Hoffman, 87-90.

⁸ Hoffman, 126-127.

⁹ Garcia, 22.

¹⁰ Garcia, 23.

¹¹ Gamboa, xii. *Bracero* comes from the Spanish noun "*el brazo*," meaning arm. The English definition for the Spanish term *bracero* is an unskilled laborer who uses his hands or arms to work in the U.S. (133). The 1951 extension of the Bracero Program was known as Public Law 82-78. (Garcia, 73.)

¹² Garcia, 21.

¹³ Ernesto Galarza, Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story, An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California, 1942-1960. (Charlotte, NC: McNally & Loftin, 1964), 135-155. An extremely controversial issue, which continues to this day as a matter of vigorous debate, centers on the question of what a fair "prevailing" wage should be when a *bracero* contract required the wage to be stated in advance, and piece rate wages frequently varied during the harvest season.

¹⁴ Garcia, 24, 31, 40-41; Galarza, 50. Although the so-called "Zoot-Suit Riots" Los Angeles in 1943 targeted primarily Mexican-Americans, Mexicans felt more resentment against working and living conditions in Texas. In certain parts of Texas, the same Old South segregation practices employed against Afro-Americans, such as restrictions, or outright prohibition of Mexicans' use of public swimming pools, also applied to Mexican workers. (Garcia, 149-151.)

¹⁵ Gladwin Hill, "'Wetback' Invasion Is Broadening Despite All U.S. Counter-Moves," The New York Times, 11 February 1952.

¹⁶ Garcia, 70.

¹⁷ Mynatt Smith, "Valley Labor Supply Hinges On Legalization of Workers," The Dallas Morning News, 15 June 1947.

¹⁸ "Government Maps War on Wetbacks," The Los Angeles Times, 10 June 1954.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "Wetbacks' Detention Camp Slated," The Los Angeles Times, 12 June 1954.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Smith, *op. cit.*

²³ Garcia, 208.

²⁴ Garcia, 212-214.

²⁵ Garcia, 219-220.

²⁶ Garcia, 210.

²⁷ William B. Ruggles, "Thinking on Things," The Dallas Morning News, 16 August 1955. See also "U.S. Patrol Halts Border 'Invasion,'" The Los Angeles Times, 17 June 1955.

²⁸ Table excerpted from that found in David G. Gutiérrez, ed., Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996), 49-50. Deportation figures include individuals deported more than once a year.

²⁹ Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, Crossing the Border. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004). See also Tom Milligan, "Migrant Farm Labor Problems Intensify," The Dallas Morning News, 21 February 1961.

³⁰ United States. Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division. "Temporary Agricultural Employment of H-2A Aliens in the United States: Modernizing the Labor Certification Process and Enforcement." (Washington: Government Printing Office, n.d.), 8541.

³¹ Steven Greenhouse, "U.S. Seeks Rules to Allow Increase in Guest Workers," The New York Times, 10 October 2007.

³² "In Other Words," The New York Times, 4 November 2007. See also Nicole Cotroneo, "Visa Denial Means Unfinished Business," The New York Times, 20 May 2007.

³³ U.S. Department of Labor, *op. cit.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ I conducted interviews with the following persons in March 2008: with Luis Angel Gutierrez Gutierrez, a resident of El Valle de la Estanzuela, Estelí, Nicaragua, by telephone; and with Rosa, from the community of El Rosario, Michoacán, Mexico, in person. A wage earner in the fields of northern Nicaragua can expect to earn about \$5.00 for a day's work, but only about \$3.00 if the employer provides a noon meal. Nicaraguans are willing to pay traffickers about \$7,000 each to enter the U.S. illegally. In the eastern mountains of Michoacán, a field hand can make about \$8.00 a day.