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# **The Latino Threat**

## **Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation**

Leo R. Chavez  
(Stanford University Press, August 2008)

"Leo R. Chavez makes a forceful case for the proposition that Latino immigration to the United States is everything its supporters and opponents say it is – and much more. His title, *The Latino Threat*, sets the target for a multifaceted examination of the phenomenon. He points out that there is no secret reconquest conspiracy among Mexican immigrants – but he also highlights the more subtle effect: Latino immigrants are changing the culture of the United States in much the same way as did every previous surge of new residents. This is a book with rich rewards for the serious student of the entire phenomenon of Latino immigration into the United States."

– Bill Richardson, Governor of New Mexico

From volunteers ready to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border to the hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who have marched in support of immigrant rights, the United States has witnessed a surge of involvement in immigration activism. Just recently (on June 9<sup>th</sup>) Damien Cave penned a piece for the New York Times that "explores efforts by government and others to compel illegal immigrants to leave the United States."

In *The Latino Threat*, Leo R. Chavez critically investigates how the media at large has created what he calls a "Latino Threat Narrative" that portrays Latinos as the ultimate illegitimate members of society. The Latino Threat Narrative, according to Chavez, is extreme in its portrayal of Latinos and has created a culture of exclusion towards this immigrant group:

"I extend this thinking to the image-producing industries in order to explore how the media help construct the imagined community through representatives of both inclusion and exclusion. How newcomers imagine themselves and are imagined by the larger society in relation to the nation is mediated through the representations of immigrants' lives in media coverage."

Pundits – and the media at large – nurture and perpetuate the notion that Latinos, particularly Mexicans, are a group wholly different from the countless other immigrant groups that have flooded the US over the centuries. Latinos are portrayed as an invading force that is unwilling to assimilate, learn English, and adopt an "American" way of life. Furthermore, they are often stereotyped as a threat to domestic security with a secret desire to reconquer land that was once considered theirs:

“The Latino Threat Narrative posits that Latinos are not like previous immigrant groups, who ultimately became part of the nation. According to the assumptions and taken-for-granted “truths” inherent in this narrative, Latinos are unwilling or incapable of integrating, of becoming part of the national community.”

After defining what the Latino Threat Narrative means, Chavez goes on to contest its basic tenets. He offers facts to counter the myth that Latinos are a threat to the security and prosperity of our nation. He also claims that Latinos are doing a service to the US by making lawmakers rethink what it means to be a citizen. Citizenship, according to Chavez, is not just about legal definitions, but about rights, political activity, national identity, and participation in society.

As Chavez puts it: “If the decibel levels in the debate are sometimes high, it is because the stakes are high too. Who we let into the nation as immigrants and allow to become citizens defines who we are as a people.” But Chavez expresses hope that immigrant populations will soon be seen as an indispensable part of our nation and provides thoughtful insights on how to lessen the climate of exclusion present in society today.

*Leo R. Chavez is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. His publications include Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society (1998) and Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation (2001).*

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