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At a recent ceremony honoring U.S. immigration officials at the White House, Donald Trump introduced two Latino officers and cajoled one up to the podium to say a few words. In doing so, Trump stated that the officer "speaks perfect English."

What planet does Trump live in? He was not introducing an immigration officer from Mexico, but instead a Latino American who is a U.S. citizen. Do Trump and his followers believe that no Latino Americans speak English well because their primary language is Spanish and because they are all immigrants?

Trump insulted the Latino American officer by suggesting that somehow he was an anomaly. This reminds me of a backhanded compliment I received many years ago when I was a graduate teaching assistant in the history department at the University of Texas at El Paso. The professor whose class I was assisting in came to my discussion section and afterward as we walked down the corridor, the only thing he said to me was "You don't have an accent."

"You don't have an accent!" This is all he could say? Not "You did a good job." But why did he think I would have an accent? Because I was of Mexican descent?

These examples are only part of a general stereotype concerning Latinos in the United States. Many ignorant Americans have no idea that 65 percent of all Latinos are U.S.-born and that the majority are proficient in English. Some are children of immigrants but some are several generations of U.S.-born Latinos.

The stereotype that Latinos primarily speak Spanish is linked to another stereotype that most Latinos are "fresh off the boat." First of all, for many Latinos such as Mexicans and Central Americans and South Americans, there is no "boat" because they don't migrate across oceans, but instead over land. For Trump and others, Latinos are primarily recent immigrants and more than immigrants, they are "illegal aliens."

This is all nonsense! Yes, it's true that many Latinos are recent immigrants or refugees, but again the overwhelming majority of Latinos are not immigrants or refugees. They are U.S.-born. The continuation of these stereotypes is based, in part, on a lack of historical knowledge, but also, to be honest, on racist views about Latinos by those like Trump and his people who believe that Latinos don't make "good Americans."



A U.S. government poster during World War II makes an appeal to Latino Americans. (Wikimedia Commons/U.S. National Archives and Records Administration)

The fact is that Latinos have been part of this country for many years and for some centuries. They are part of the Hispanic contributions to American history, beginning with those Spanish colonial settlements established from Texas to California from the 16th to 18th centuries. As I tell my students, where do you think the names of such cities as El Paso, San Antonio, Santa Fe, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara are

from? These names didn't come with the Mayflower!

These settlements were later conquered by the United States in the U.S.-Mexico War from 1846 to 1848. This conquest and annexation created the first generation of Mexican-Americans, many who became U.S. citizens.

The later U.S. conquest of Puerto Rico in the Spanish-American War of 1898 created the first generation of Puerto Ricans as U.S. citizens, since the island was annexed as part of the United States.

Beginning in the early 20th century, thousands of Mexican immigrants crossed the border to give their labor to help built the economy of the Southwest, including California but in other regions as well. Their children — what I call the Mexican-American Generation — were predominantly born in the United States and they became bilingual and in many cases English-dominant.

This was the generation that was part of the Greatest Generation of World War II, when perhaps as many as half a million Latinos, mostly Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans participated in the military and many gave their lives to their country — not Mexico but the United States. Seventeen Latinos who served in World War II received the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest award for valor in battle.

Later generations of U.S.-born Latinos have not only fought for this country, but through their work and community struggles such as on civil rights have been very much part of the history of the United States. They are Americans and they are American history.

Today, Latinos represent close to 60 million people in the country and close to 20 percent of all Americans. It is estimated that by 2050 one out of three Americans will be Latino.

How much of this history and facts — real facts — do Trump and his followers know? Yes, Mr. Trump, Latinos speak English and they speak it well, even better than you!

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