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No one has a monopoly on what defines an American

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I hosted a conference Feb. 17 and 18 titled "Chicano! A Conference on the Emerging Historiography of the Chicano Movement" at the University of California in Santa Barbara. I did so because, as the conference title suggests, there is a growing historical literature on the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s that represented the largest and most widespread civil rights and community empowerment movement by Mexican-Americans in the United States.

The movement made Chicanos and other Latinos into national political actors. The significant political influence that Latinos have today is a product of the movement. The conference showcased the variety of themes and subjects that historians, many of them recently having completed their doctoral degrees, are pursuing. I was very pleased with the conference and I hope to publish the papers.

The reason I choose to mention my conference in this blog is because of the recent attack on Chicano studies in the Tucson educational system, where Chicano studies has been banned under the false claim that it is a form of reverse racism and that it is nothing but political rhetoric.

As I mentioned in a previous blog, such accusations are baseless, and my conference was testimony to this. There is nothing wrong for Americans of any ethnic background to study and learn about the Chicano and the wider Latino experience in the country. After all, it is the largest minority, and we better know something about it, since Latinos will and already are impacting many facets of American life, not only in the Southwest but throughout the nation.

The conference noted the historic struggle by Mexican-Americans, for example, to obtain civil rights. This is not a separatist movement; it is one to be accepted, but accepted with an appreciation for the particular history and cultural experiences of Chicanos. The conference papers related to the intersection in these struggles with other U.S. ethnic groups, such as African-Americans and liberal whites. I wish the

detractors of Chicano studies in Tucson could have been at the conference to witness the scholarly nature of the presentations based on solid research.

Chicano studies and Latino studies is now an important part of American studies, and it is a shame that educators in Tucson have no sense of this. But what is really going on in Tucson, Arizona and in other parts of the country where the ugly head of nativism or anti-immigrant racism is raising its ugly head is a struggle for power.

As Latinos grow in numbers and political influence, they will, in time, become the key political group in many states. Many whites are reacting to this and resenting it and trying to discredit it. They are exhibiting the same racism that they are in a more subtle way displaying against President Barack Obama. They cannot accept that a black man is president of the United States. They are scared that people of color are circling white people and that this is a threat to the "American way of life." These fears are frivolous. But what is not frivolous is the racist actions being taken by such nativists. They are pursuing fear and scare tactics intended to divide Americans and to attempt to establish some kind of firewall such as in Arizona to deter the rise of Latino political power.

We need to see what is happening in Tucson and other locations where recent anti-Latino sentiment and actions have arisen. Americans of better will need to oppose such racist views and stand up for the importance of accepting all Americans of whatever ethnic background and culture as part of what we mean by America. No one should have a monopoly on defining Americanism.

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