

Deportations on Trial: Mexican Americans During the Great Depression

By *URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA*

LOOKING BACK ON the fire hose of outrages of the Trump presidency can make it hard to remember that though his actions were often called “unprecedented,” they were not always out of sync with past policy or an aberration from the consensus of political elites in both parties. For example, Trump’s rhetoric about migrants (and the countries from which they traveled) may have been uniquely bombastic and barefaced, but when it comes to the policies controlling U.S. borders, his were not so different from his Democratic predecessors or from his successor. It was under President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, that the U.S. border patrol tripled in size, and border deaths from hypothermia, dehydration, and drowning skyrocketed. And more recently, it was President Obama’s Homeland Security that deported 2.7

million people — an average of about a thousand immigrants a day, for eight years — earning him the title from immigration activists of “Deporter in Chief.” President Biden’s rhetoric has been kinder, but deportations continue while tens of thousands of asylum seekers are detained each year and languish behind bars for months.

So what drives this political consensus about migration, immigration, and the border that leads to so much misery for so many people fleeing war, climate catastrophe, and poverty? This is a question for which it is helpful to look to history.

From the late 1920s to the late 1930s, men, women, and children, immigrant and U.S.-born, citizen and noncitizen, longtime residents and temporary workers, all became targets of



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Some families relocated “voluntarily,” driven out by joblessness, harassment, and nativist fearmongering, rather than the Immigration Service.

a campaign of forced relocation, based solely on their perceived status as “Mexican.” Started under a Republican administration, but continued throughout the presidency of celebrated liberal, Franklin D. Roosevelt, people were rounded up in parks, at work sites, and in hospitals; they were betrayed by local relief agencies who reported anyone with a “Mexican sounding” name to what was then called the Immigration Service; they were tricked and terrorized into “voluntary” deportation by municipal and state officials; and they were forcibly deported in trains and buses, to a country some hadn’t lived in for decades and others never at all.

Historian Mae M. Ngai argues that this 1930s campaign of mass deportations had little to do with law; it was a program of “racial expulsion.” But unlike other racist and nativist efforts of the era, these deportations were not symbolized or driven by any signature piece of legislation like the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#) or the Immigration

Act of 1924. Rather, they were orchestrated using a patchwork of federal and local authority, existing but seldom used deportation rules, and simple mob action against a vulnerable population. It is precisely this messiness that is fruitful to surface with students. If no single law or leader — or political party — ordered these deportations, then why and how did they happen and who or what is responsible for the damage they wrought? These are the questions raised in the Deportations on Trial lesson (modeled after Bill Bigelow’s Rethinking Schools lesson [“The People v. Columbus”](#)).

The premise of the lesson is that a crime has

been committed. The indictment reads:

You are charged with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of more than 1 million Mexican immigrants, legal residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

Students are divided into six groups. The indicted groups are: The Federal Government,

Police and Immigration Agents, Business Owners Under Capitalism, the American Federation of Labor, and the Media. The sixth group is the jury, made up of the victims of the deportations. Each of the indicted groups must respond to the charges made against them, and answer the questions and challenges of the prosecutor (the teacher), other defendants, and the jury.

With this kind of trial lesson, the goal is not to lead students to see a single actor as guilty, but for them to

understand and analyze how different groups and systems are responsible in different ways. Too often we think about such matters as simple cause and effect — a law was passed, a general gave an order — with everyday human actors removed from the equation. This trial asks students to see the more complex tapestry of human complicity in any enormous injustice, like mass deportation, genocide, or global environmental destruction. This is not just an academic exercise. One “habit of mind” we want to nurture in our students is for them to think deeply and expansively about the causes of injustice. Ultimately, their sense of how



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According to photographer Dorothea Lange, this mother told her, “Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me ‘We don’t want to go, we belong here.’”

injustice should be addressed — and resisted — rests on their understanding of what is causing the injustice in the first place.

Context

This lesson can fit in a number of places in a U.S. history or government curriculum. I taught it as part of a unit on 19th and 20th century U.S. immigration policy. It would also work perfectly in a Great Depression unit.

Pre-Teaching

The class period prior to the trial, I helped students establish a sense of the magnitude of the “crime” by listening to the moving StoryCorps oral history of Ruben Aguilar, [“Drafted to Fight for the Country that Hurt Him:”](#) Aguilar tells the harrowing story of being deported with his parents at 6 years old. He remembers the agents storming the house, the train ride to Mexico, and finding himself in a Spanish-speaking country where he neither spoke nor understood the language. He lived in Mexico until, as a young man, he received a draft notice from the U.S. Army.

Students also read a 2017 article from The Atlantic, [“America’s Forgotten History of Illegal Deportations,”](#) which includes more stories of deportees and their families. As they listened and read, I asked students to take notes using the following questions: What is the crime? Why did it happen? Who is responsible?

Materials

- Enough copies of the six group roles so that each student in a group gets their own role sheet, plus enough extras so that every group can have at least one copy of every other role.

Suggested Procedure

1. List the names of the five groups being accused of the “crime” on the board: the Federal Government, Police and Immigration Agents, Businesses Under Capitalism, the Media, and the American Federation of Labor.

2. Provide a basic overview of the activity to students. Explain that each indicted group is accused of the same crime: *the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939*. Students in these groups will prepare a defense to deliver during the trial. The teacher will play the prosecutor, asking challenging questions and offering counterarguments. A jury made up of people who were deported during this era will help the prosecutor with questioning and make the final determination of guilt.
3. Count off students by six and have each number create a table group. Hand out the role sheets. Each student should get a copy of their own role, and each *group* should have at least one copy of all the roles, since they will need to craft a defense that not only explains their own behavior but also points the finger at other groups’ complicity. The jurors will need access to multiple copies of all the roles to develop challenging questions for each indicted group.
4. Tell students to start by reading their role. The defendants should brainstorm some possible lines of defense. The jurors should discuss their initial thoughts about who is to blame for what happened to them. Next, encourage students to read *all* the roles. For the indicted groups, they should look for information that may help their case and that they can use to better pin the guilt on another group. The juror role includes instructions for developing questions that will be used in the trial.
5. As students read and talk, I circulate, sometimes hopping into my prosecutorial character to offer a challenge and move their thinking along, sometimes helping groups brainstorm ways other indicted groups were equally or more guilty than they. For example, when I heard the federal government get stumped — “But we are *totally* guilty. We’re the government!” — I encouraged them to

UN INTENSO MOVIMIENTO DE REPATRIACION SE EFECTUA ENTRE LOS MEXICANOS

Por Laredo pasan miles de compatriotas, algunos de los cuales permanecieron veinte o más años en los Estados Unidos y vuelven a la Patria con hijos grandes

Telegrama Especial para LA PRENSA

LAREDO, Texas, octubre 31.— Un intenso movimiento de repatriación entre los mexicanos residentes en los Estados Unidos, el más importante de los últimos años, se está efectuando en estos momentos por el puerto fronterizo de Laredo, Texas.

El número de mexicanos que voluntariamente regresaron al país por dicho puerto durante el mes de septiembre último, según datos proporcionados por el Consulado de México en Laredo, Texas; y las oficinas de Inmigración en Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, ascendió a 3,383, que es la cifra más alta registrada hasta hoy.

Esta cifra se refiere únicamente a los elementos que han tomado a la patria voluntariamente, pues en el propio mes de septiembre las autoridades de Inmigración de los Estados Unidos deportaron a 138 mexicanos, entre los cuales se cuentan algunos que cumplieron condenas en las cárceles de este país, y otros que entraron a territorio americano sin llenar los

requisitos exigidos por las leyes de Inmigración.

Entre los millares de compatriotas que espontáneamente volvieron a la patria el mes de septiembre, se encontraban 183 familias que llevaron consigo sus menajes de casa, automóviles, radios, camiones, así como algunos implementos de agricultura, pues muchos de nuestros paisanos se proponen dedicarse a esa labor en sus respectivas localidades.

A pesar de que gran número de ellos permanecieron en los Estados Unidos veinte años o más, merece especial mención la circunstancia de que conservaron inocente su nacionalidad, pues siempre se mostraron resacios a adoptar la ciudadanía americana, no obstante que la mayoría de sus hijos nacieron en los Estados Unidos.

Como consecuencia de la intensa repatriación que se está efectuando, el éxodo de mexicanos hacia los Estados Unidos ha llegado a su mínimo en los últimos meses, pues la repatriación de nuestros compatriotas es cinco veces mayor que la emigración.

Casaday Sees 1,500 Mexicans Loaded On Trains

Shipped From Denver to Their Old Homes in Mexico Due to The Lack of Work in Sugar Beet Fields.

Harry Casaday was in the Denver Union depot yesterday when 1,700 Mexicans were being loaded on trains for deportation to their native land. It was an interesting and at the same time an affecting sight, according to Mr. Casaday. Families including numerous children were being loaded on the trains, many of them not understanding what it was all about.

Practically all of the 1,700 came from Weld and Larimer counties. They had come to Colorado to work in the beet field, ignorant of the fact that the state has more laborers than it needs. The deportation was being supervised by state authorities and is being conducted in a humane manner.

College Men

Myron E. Wilcox, who led the 1920 thru 1931 president of the Concorde Club in Colorado. The Concorde Club here today, a story concerning association with



MYRON

Spanish-language journalists on both sides of the border often challenged inaccuracies of the English-language media's coverage of the deportations.

A Boulder, Colorado, newspaper reports on the deportations of unemployed sugar beet workers.

- consider that in a democratic society, theoretically, the people are the *government*. I suggested they might use that reasoning to show how groups representing “the people” — the AFL, the Media — were also responsible.
- 6. Once students have thoroughly read and discussed all the indictments, ask the accused groups to write up their defense. They should write this collaboratively, making sure to include a combination of reasons they are not guilty and reasons other groups are. (Some groups decided to admit partial guilt but still placed the bulk of the responsibility elsewhere.) Reading and discussing the indictments, plus writing a defense, can take a good while, so for those teachers not on block schedule, this will probably take at least a whole period.
- 7. While the indicted groups are working on their defenses, meet with the jurors to confer

about questions to ask during trial. You can decide (or decide with the students) whether to have the jurors ask their own questions exclusively, or to share the task with them.

8. To begin the trial, indict the first group. (I started each trial by charging the Federal Government group, but really any group will work). Pull key ideas from the written indictment to deliver a pithy accusation and explanation of the group’s guilt. I ended each short speech with “How do you answer these charges?” which cued the students to deliver their prepared defense to the jury. Next came questions. The jury should get the first crack at asking questions; after they grill the defendants, other groups, as well as you as the prosecutor, can pose additional clarifying and challenging questions. The goal is to get lots of kids talking about who played what role in the deportations and why, illustrating the thick web of responsibility.

9. After all groups have been indicted and defended themselves, it is time to send the jury out to deliberate. I instructed that they could find one, some, or all groups guilty. I also told them they could place blame on an unindicted co-conspirator — that is, someone or something not in the trial that was also to blame. (In one class, a student brilliantly placed blame on money; in another class, a student said immigration restrictions were to blame.)
10. While the jury deliberates in the hallway (or similar appropriate location), have the remaining students leave their roles behind to write about the trial. I asked my students to make the same determination as the jury: Who is to blame? (To encourage a good depth of analysis, I asked them to be sure to address all groups, in their answers, even if they're not guilty: If they're innocent, why?)
11. When the jury returns, ask them to stand and deliver their verdict. (In one class, the jury found both the Federal Government and Police and Immigration Agents guilty, but “exonerated” everyone else. In another class, the jury portioned out guilt [40 percent, 40 percent, 10 percent, 5 percent, 5 percent] to all groups.) While I did not do this, it might be interesting to ask the jurors, as part of the verdict, to include some thoughts about what justice for the guilty parties and victims would look like. From the perspective of the deportees, beyond just assigning guilt, what should happen? In the short term? Long term?
12. Next, invite students to have a discussion about the jury's verdict. Since everyone in the class has by now come up with their own verdict, students are usually eager to share the reasoning behind their determination. This discussion helps students further tease out the individual strands of complicity, hopefully making them more alert to the ingredients of injustice. After giving the students a chance to fully discuss the question of guilt, I close the discussion by focusing

on what one wishes there had been more of in the 1930s, and what I hope my students will enact in their own historical moment: resistance. I asked “So who could have stopped this? What could members of each group have done to interrupt the injustice?” Some students said media could have written stories about Mexican Americans that humanized rather than demonized them. Others said the AFL could have worked with rather than against Mexican laborers and that local police could have refused to carry out the raids. The idea of this final question is to emphasize that humans are historical actors with agency and choice — with the ability to act in one direction or another, on behalf of justice or against it.

13. After the trial, there are a number of different follow-up options. I had my students read and discuss the *Rethinking Schools* magazine article, [“How My 4th-Grade Class Passed a Law on Teaching Mexican ‘Repatriation.’”](#) I also asked them to write a critique of their textbook's skimpy two sentences on the deportations. You might also, of course, read about today's deportations, and the people and organizations acting to resist them, inviting students to take lessons from the past to apply to their own time.

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This lesson is for use in educational settings as part of the Zinn Education Project, a collaboration of *Rethinking Schools* and *Teaching for Change*, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials.

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Indictment: The American Federation of Labor (AFL)

YOU ARE CHARGED with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

You are the largest union federation in the United States. Like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion, you are one of the many “patriotic” organizations that believes the large population of foreign born “aliens” is bad for the country. You stirred up the feelings that led to the current raids, roundups, and deportations. How? By convincing your members to blame workers of Mexican ancestry for their own economic woes. Your racist policies have kept the working class divided and weak rather than united and strong.

Your union federation celebrates getting your workers an eight-hour day and some of the highest wages in the country. Yet these benefits have been gained at the cost of other working people. When you first formed, your union admitted nearly anyone. But that was a long time ago. Now, you are an organization of mostly white men, excluding most unskilled laborers, African Americans, Asian and Mexican Americans, women and immigrants.

Your organization does not limit its activities to contract negotiations with owners; you are a powerful political lobby, pushing racist laws and your anti-immigrant message to workers across the nation. For example, in 1901, you lobbied Congress to reauthorize the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. And you organized a boycott to discourage consumers from buying cigars made by Chinese workers. Now that Congress has ended almost all immigration from Asia,

you are turning your attention to the Mexican population. Your anti-Mexican propaganda has led your membership to support of the current roundups and deportations.

You led your members to believe that getting rid of Mexicans would open up jobs for “deserving” Americans. Recently your magazine, the *Advocate*, spread these racist ideas to its readers: “Is it a pretty sight to see men, brawny American men with callouses on their hands and empty stomachs — sitting idly on benches in the plaza, while slim-legged peons with tortillas in their stomachs work in the tall building across the way? Do you prefer the name Fernandez, alien, to the name, James, citizen, on your payroll?” Words have consequences. Your members read this dehumanizing language, and took it to heart. Next came the deportations and racist attacks against Mexicans and Mexican Americans. You are responsible for this increased violence.

You have demonized immigrant workers — and U.S. workers of Mexican ancestry — by saying that they are the ones responsible for low wages. As if Mexican workers don’t also want higher wages. If your union had been more open to *all* workers, not just those who are white, skilled, and men, all working people could have united to demand higher wages and better conditions. How sadly ironic that you (a union!) point the finger for the nation’s economic disaster at fellow workers. Where is your outrage at the corporate profiteers who build their fortunes on the backs of the most vulnerable members of society? Where is your outrage at the government and its pro-business policies that allowed corporations to get so powerful and greedy in the first place?

Indictment: Business Owners Under Capitalism

YOU ARE CHARGED with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

You benefit from the capitalist system. But it is a system that pits people against each other. Your effort to protect your own wealth and status, no matter who gets hurt, is to blame for this crisis.

The rules of capitalism require businesses to compete against each other to see who can make the most profit. That's why business owners stop at nothing to save as much money on workers as possible and one reason why people like you went to Mexico: cheap labor. *Enganchistas*, contractors working for your big U.S. companies, crossed the border, sometimes going deep into Mexico, to search for Mexican workers. Your agents promised Mexicans steady jobs and good wages. You hired workers to harvest melons, citrus, and cotton in California and the Southwest, to build railroad tracks in the Pacific Northwest, the Midwest, and the Northeast, to work in meat-packing plants, machine shops, steel mills, and on assembly lines in Chicago, Detroit, and other big cities. Many laborers of Mexican ancestry are here now because you brought them.

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and more recently with the Immigration Act of 1924, Congress has decreased your access to immigrant labor. With those acts, Congress was more concerned about restricting the immigration of Asians and certain "undesirable" Europeans than with people from south of the United

States, like Mexico. But now that the United States is in such hard economic times, the government is suddenly targeting Mexican workers too. You say that you oppose these new policies because Mexican Americans are more loyal, work harder, and do better work than white workers. But those are lies. The real story is that white workers are much more likely to be part of a labor union. Labor unions mean higher wages. And that means lower profits and less control for you. You don't really care about the lives or well-being of the workers being rounded up and deported; you care only about your profits.

In fact, your obsession with getting the most labor for the lowest wages is to blame for the Great Depression, which has caused the deportation crisis. Your decades of attacks on unions, your fight against minimum wage and maximum hour laws left too many workers with too little. If people don't earn enough money to spend, businesses fail, and unemployment soars. High levels of unemployment create fierce competition between workers for scarce jobs. Sometimes this competition results in violence. In Terre Haute, Indiana, a mob of more than 100 men and women attacked Mexican railroad workers and demanded they quit. In Malakoff, Texas, the office of the Society of Mexican Laborers was bombed. The raids and deportations are just the next step in this struggle for scarce resources created by your greed. You will say you have broken no law and point out that you have spoken out against these deportations. But you created this vicious economy and it is turning the government and white workers against the nation's most vulnerable members.

Indictment: The Media

YOU ARE CHARGED with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

From 1930 to 1939, Mexicans made up 46.3 percent of all the people deported from the United States, although they made up only a fraction of the immigrant population. The legal basis for these removals applied to all “aliens,” but no group is being targeted like Mexicans. “Aliens” of Canadian or European descent are not targeted by raids, roundups, and mass deportations. Why? Racism. You in the corporate media are the ones whipping up the nation’s fears and prejudices, exploiting your readers’ real economic anxieties, and blaming a convenient and vulnerable target.

Your papers and magazines are read all across the country, spreading the racist belief that people of Mexican descent are “alien” to this country and its ideals. For example, in *The Saturday Evening Post*, a hugely popular weekly magazine, you regularly turn Mexican immigrants into villains. One recent story said that visitors to immigrant neighborhoods would “see endless streets crowded with the shacks of illiterate, diseased, pauperized [poor] Mexicans, taking no interest whatever in the community, living constantly on the ragged edge of starvation, bringing countless numbers of American citizens into the world with the reckless prodigality [abundance] of rabbits.” In the famous *New York Times*, you wrote, “It is folly to pretend that the more recently arrived Mexicans, who are largely of Indian blood, can be absorbed and incorporated into the American race.”

The media spread these racist stereotypes. People read this garbage and many people believe it. Your words drive people’s actions. Even before

the deportations began, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants were denied basic services. They could not drink a soda at a lunch counter, and they were forced to sit in the run-down balconies of movie theaters. Mexican American students walked long distances to school, since they were not allowed to ride the school bus with white students; at school they were segregated into overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms where they could not talk freely; teachers and administrators severely punished anyone caught speaking Spanish. All across the nation, shop signs read “No Dogs, Negroes, or Mexicans.”

You in the media could have exposed and denounced this racism. Instead, you were part of it. You justified and reinforced it by loudly endorsing the terrorizing raids and deportations. You are guilty of creating a cultural climate in which many white Americans have come to believe that the removal of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans is justified and necessary.

You did not invent racism and you are not the only ones calling for and supporting deportations. You may say that you merely publish ideas; you may insist that headlines do not deport people and that it is not your fault that racism sells papers. It is true that you do not control the actions of the government or the immigration authorities and police who are actually carrying out the raids, nor are you responsible for organizations like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) that actually practice, not just preach, racism.

But the press is supposed to be a check on government power in this country. You are supposed to investigate and print the facts. In this, you have failed miserably. What you have printed are not facts, but dangerous, racist misinformation that is fueling an attack on innocent communities.

Indictment: Police and Immigration Agents

YOU ARE CHARGED with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

You are the agents who have actually been carrying out raids and roundups in Mexican American and immigrant communities. You have torn parents from kids, separating children from the only home they have ever known. You are the men who have led the street sweeps of people who “looked Mexican,” arrested (with no warrants!) workers in factories and fields, and who go door to door demanding that Mexican residents produce verification of legal residency or go straight to jail. You have spread fear in parks, schools, and hospitals.

Take, for example, the terrifying raid that took place at La Placita, a park in Los Angeles. You chose La Placita to inflict the maximum psychological harm on the Mexican American community. About 400 people were taking a break on a sunny afternoon when, out of nowhere, you invaded the park dressed in military-olive uniforms. You guarded the exits. You lined up individuals, demanding to see their papers. Many, of course, did not have papers with them at the park or at all. One man in the park, Moisés González, did have his documents. But the agent interviewing him — one of you — decided to pocket them and detain him anyway. Although it is hard to say how many people were deported because of this raid, your guns and batons convinced Mexicans and Mexican Americans that they were no longer safe here. They could be targeted anywhere, at any time.

It is true that you did not write the current law listing at least 26 different “offenses” that can result in deportation. But you are responsible for

carrying out and enforcing that law. You may claim that many workers of Mexican ancestry qualify for deportation because they have been convicted of a crime or entered the country illegally. The law also allows you to deport people who are not self-supporting, of “poor moral turpitude,” or a public charge. These categories are so broad as to allow you to sweep up pretty much anyone. But your raids and sweeps have not targeted European or Canadian immigrant communities. Why not? Because you don’t target lawbreakers; you target anyone of Mexican ancestry. Your racist harassment has swept up hundreds of thousands of people who have broken no law at all.

The case of Mrs. Angela Hernández de Sánchez proves that no one of Mexican ancestry is safe. She was returning from a weeklong trip visiting her relatives in Chihuahua, Mexico, which she had done dozens of times over the prior 15 years. But this time, when she crossed back into the United States, she was arrested. You forced her to provide proof of residence and subjected her to intrusive venereal disease tests. Since Mrs. Sánchez has been a continuous resident of the United States since 1916, she was not eligible for deportation under current law. Not only that, her children are U.S. citizens. But even with her proof of residence and her negative blood test for venereal disease, you ordered Sánchez and her U.S.-born children deported.

You may argue that you are only carrying out orders, or that the federal government’s laws are vague. But every government worker takes an oath to uphold the Constitution and you broke that oath. You will also say that some of the “deportees” are not being deported at all — they are leaving voluntarily. But you are sowing confusion and terror, tricking even citizens to believe they have to leave.

Indictment: Federal Government

YOU ARE CHARGED with the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. You terrorized communities, broke up families, and denied people of Mexican ancestry their human and constitutional rights.

This is not the first time you, the government of United States of America, has restricted immigration along racial lines. Racism motivated the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and more recently in the Immigration Act of 1924, which barred most immigration from Asia, and set up a quota system favoring Northern European immigrants while tightly limiting Southern and Eastern European immigrants. At first, none of these restrictions applied to immigration from Mexico. Perhaps that is because U.S. farmers and industry demanded cheap Mexican labor.

But now, the United States is in an economic crisis, caused partly by you. You did nothing to stop businesses from setting high prices, keeping wages low, and attacking labor unions. Now, congressmen are seizing on white people's racist fears and prejudices to propose all kinds of new laws that will stop immigration from the south and deport more Mexican immigrants. Some of these laws have passed and some have failed, but the message sent by your government is clear: People of Mexican ancestry are not welcome here.

Your president, Herbert Hoover, did his part by adding hundreds of new officers to the Immigration Service. It used to be a tiny government office. Hoover also appointed William Doak to oversee the Immigration Service. Using taxpayer dollars, Doak promoted the idea that the foreign-born are an "enemy in our midst," taking jobs and services away from hardworking Americans. Doak claimed there were 400,000 illegal immigrants eligible to be deported — even though

he had no evidence. And Doak launched a campaign to round up and remove people of Mexican ancestry. Doak's agents — representatives of *your* government — raided union halls, dances, social clubs, and neighborhood hangouts, any place where people of Mexican ancestry might be found. Your government agents detained and arrested people without warrants, refused to let them see a lawyer, and held people in local jails with no access to interpreters.

After getting complaints from concerned citizens as well as Mexican officials, President Hoover ordered an investigation into the Immigration Service's alleged abuses. The Wickersham Commission, which did the investigating, concluded: "The apprehension and examination of supposed aliens are often characterized by methods [that are] unconstitutional, tyrannic, and oppressive." Another government official admitted that only 20 percent of those who had fled to Mexico during this era were "deportable." That means that your government used harassment and fearmongering to drive out people who were here legally. These reports were issued in 1931 and 1932, yet you didn't stop deporting people, even when a new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, from a different political party, took office.

As the federal government, you have failed Mexican immigrants and Mexican American citizens: You have weakened the economy, passed racist laws, and used the power and resources of government agencies to deny hundreds of thousands of people their constitutionally protected rights. You can try to blame all this on the current economic crisis, local police breaking the law, or white voters' racism and anti-immigration feelings. But in our system, you — the U.S. government — are the top dog. *You* write immigration policy; you provide the resources to enforce it; and you must answer for its outcomes

The Jury: Deportees

Some of you came to the United States to escape the things that made your life in Mexico hard: not enough good farmland, sparse rainfall, a growing population, and too much power in the hands of a few rich landowners. Some of your families are not immigrants at all. You have lived in your current homes in Arizona, California, Texas, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming since before these territories were seized in the U.S. war against Mexico. Some of you were lured to the United States by *enganchistas*, recruiters working for big U.S. companies. They promised you steady work, and sometimes as much as \$5 a day — a huge amount compared to what you could earn in Mexico.

No matter how you came to find yourself in the United States, today you work all across the country, harvesting melons, citrus, and cotton; building railroads across the west; working in meatpacking plants, machine shops, steel mills, and on assembly lines. You work some of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. But your hard work does not protect you from discrimination. The corporate media accuses Mexicans of being un-American and lazy. You are denied basic services, like drinking a soda at a lunch counter, and are forced to sit in segregated balconies of movie theaters. Your children walk long distances to school, as they are not allowed to ride the school bus with white students. Schools segregate your children into overcrowded and ill-equipped classrooms. Your children cannot even talk freely; schools punish anyone caught speaking Spanish. Signs in shop windows read “No Dogs, Negroes, or Mexicans.”

And now there are the hundreds of deportations happening daily. Sixty percent of those being deported are U.S. citizens! You are targeted in your homes, your neighborhood parks, your work sites — sometimes by government agents, sometimes by local police, and sometimes by mobs of white workers. In addition to the deportations, many of you are leaving for Mexico, which some in government describe as “voluntary repatriation”; that is a lie. Officials told some of you that you had to leave, while others believe it is safer to leave now rather than wait for an official order. Some of you are leaving to escape the threats and mistreatment already well underway. But in none of these cases can your departure be seen as any kind of real choice.

As a juror in this trial, you will use your own experiences, as well as what you learn from the trial, to determine who — or what — is responsible for the illegal, immoral, and inhumane deportation of 1 million Mexican immigrants, lawful residents, and Mexican Americans from 1929 to 1939. To prepare, you will carefully read the indictments of the Federal Government, Police and Immigration Agents, Businesses Under Capitalism, the Media, and the American Federation of Labor. For each group, develop two or three challenging questions you would like to hear each group asked during the trial. These questions should not be easily answered with a “yes” or “no,” but should require the defendants to think deeply about their actions and motivations.