

**The Racial Impact of the War on Drugs:  
Mexico's Drug War and the Perception of Mexican Americans in the  
United States.**

1990-2010



MA Thesis

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“Being Mexican American is Hard.” < <http://zocalopoets.com/category/images/>>

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## **Introduction**

For over five decades, the United States has been entangled in its longest “war”: the drug war along the U.S.-Mexico border. The increasing number of Mexican immigrants since the 1990s and drug-related violence are often connected with one another, largely as a result of growing awareness and media coverage of the drug war. Criminal activity and competitive cartel struggles have raised concerns that “the violence might spill over to the United States.”<sup>1</sup> Mexico’s drug war has influenced the perception of Mexican immigrants in a negative way, as Americans’ ideas about Mexican immigration and the drug trade across the U.S.-Mexican border have become inextricably intertwined. The U.S. media and politicians have exacerbated this development: on the one hand they have spread fear of Mexican immigrants in general among white Americans, mainly by portraying them as an “invasion”; Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal, have often openly been referred to as a threat to U.S. society. On the other hand, the media and politicians have stigmatized Mexican immigrants by portraying them as criminals and drug-dealers, thus connecting the drug-related crime in the border region to Mexican immigration issues. The growing fear among white Americans that Mexican immigrants are contributing to the increase in crime in the United States, are considered as realistic threats (Oskamp 28). White Americans now believe they are “in the minority in the United States and they feel that their way of life is under assault” (Oskamp 24).

This thesis will examine how the rising drug violence in the borderlands of the United States and the presence of Mexican cartels in the Southwestern states, have influenced the image of Mexican immigrants in the United States in a negative way. The research question that will guide this thesis is: To what extent has Mexico’s drug war influenced the perception of Mexican immigrants by white Americans in the United States?

In order to answer this question, it is important to look at different aspects that fueled this negative perception. How are Mexican Americans affected by negative portrayals in the media and in national discussions? What have been the consequences for the race relations between white Americans and Mexican Americans?

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<sup>1</sup> “U.S. Efforts to Prevent Mexico Drug Trafficking.” *International Debates*, vol.8, issue 2 (2010): 4-8. (accessed February 15, 2012) <<http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/ehost/delivery?sid=492b9911-c3e6-43cb>>

Little research has been published on the effects of Mexico's drug war on the Mexican-American community. Multiple intersecting debates relate to several different aspects that can be traced back to the drug war, including international relations between Mexico and the United States, ethnicity, the question of whiteness, and assimilation. The relevance of this thesis lies in the fact that the connection between the existing debates about Mexico's drug war and their effect on the Mexican American community has not been investigated within academic literature. Probably because the drug war developed to be a more controlling factor in Mexican society over the past couple of years, and therefore most politicians and journalists share the perspective that the drug war is uncontrollable. Most scholars focus on theories about the existing negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans in relation to the question of whiteness and all Mexicans being labeled as Latinos or Hispanics. Negative stereotypes of Mexican immigrants developed as a result of contacts between Americans and Mexicans in the Southwest in the nineteenth century. "Anglo Americans formed a mistaken notion of what *all* Mexicans were like on the basis of contact with relatively few Mexicans on the far northern frontier" (Servín 19). Most Anglo Americans despised Mexicans because of their racial mixture. The basis for anti-Mexican sentiment has been present in American society from its beginning (19). Many scholars argue that Mexican Americans are considered to be a "non-achieving minority" because they are often seen as quiet and invisible (19). However, Cynthia Lee argues that stereotypes about Mexican Americans and Latinos "have received little attention in legal scholarship. Very little social science research has been conducted on Latino stereotypes" (155). In her analysis of racism in the criminal courtroom, she concludes that white Americans still are treated better in American society. She states: "Mexican Americans are often stereotyped as drug users and drug dealers, even though drug use is lower among Latinos than it is among whites or blacks" (Lee 156).

Lee's conclusion fuels the existing academic debate about the recurring question in the war on drugs: Who is to blame? Although Mexican immigrants are often blamed for the drug war in the United States, some scholars have suggested that Americans themselves are to blame, making the stigmatization of Mexican immigrants as unwanted drug pushers even more curious. Many scholars, such as Eva Bertram and Sylvia Longmire argue that America's drug problem is never part of the discussion. U.S. politicians and journalists only deal with the increasing violence along the U.S.-Mexico border and never analyze the cause of the increase in drug trafficking. The United States is the number one consumer of illegal drugs in the world, and it fuels the drug war with its high demand for

cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine.

Besides, many scholars share the same fears for the increasing violence in the Southwestern states of the United States. Guy Lawson argues in his essay “How the Cartels work” that Mexican cartels have transformed the drug business in the United States and have become “the most successful criminal enterprises in human history” (53); he warns the U.S. that it must arm itself against an “army of illegal immigrants” who are related to the drug business (57). Lawson claims that fear and anxiety about Mexican immigrants is necessary because in a way they can all be traced back to Mexico’s drug war (57). On the other hand, Stuart Oskamp argues that “all members of all racial and ethnic groups in America feel that their group is under siege” (23). Mexico’s drug war has negative consequences for both white Americans and Mexican Americans in American society. Racial prejudices and the perception of Mexican immigrants as a threat to the American nation are contributing to the stigmatization of Mexican Americans.

This thesis will examine the time period of 1990-2010; since 1990 the presence of Mexican drug cartels in U.S. society had grown extensively. Even though Miguel Félix Gallardo, leader of the Gallardo cartel, was arrested in 1989, his imprisonment led to the establishment of four separate competitive cartels, each of which wanted to regain the monopoly of the U.S. drug market. Drug-related violence increased, and combined with the fact that the 1990s were the decade of the highest immigration in U.S. history, Mexican immigrants were blamed for the increase of violence. During the period of 2000-2010, anti-Mexican sentiment increased and the stigmatization of Mexican Americans continued to be present in American society. For instance, in 2005 the Minutemen Project fueled anti-Mexican sentiment. The Minutemen’s ostensible goal was “to monitor the Arizona-Mexico border in the hopes of locating clandestine border crossers” (Chavez 132). Furthermore, Mexico’s drug war caused more than 50,000 deaths in 2010, which shows that the situation is still not under control. For this reason, this thesis will examine the consequences of Mexico’s drug war for the Mexican Americans in the time period of 1990-2010.

For this thesis, different sources have been consulted. Leo Chavez wrote an interesting book called *The Latino Threat*, which argues that all Mexican immigrants are perceived as “intruders, drug-related criminals, and illegal aliens”, who have no good intentions. Joseph Nevins argues in his book *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War on “Illegals” and the Remaking of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* that official and popular opinion associates ‘dope’ with Mexico and the boundary; because of the “immigrant threat”, drugs and Mexicans are unconsciously connected with one another (73). Besides

secondary sources, primary sources are used as well. In the second chapter of this thesis, articles from the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* are used to analyze the connection between illegal immigrants and drug-related violence in the U.S. The third chapter examines political campaigns and speeches to analyze the portrayal of Mexican immigrants in U.S. politics. In their book, *Race Appeal: How Candidates invoke Race in U.S. Political Campaigns*, McIlwain and Caliendo analyze the language of immigration and show how negative portrayals of Mexican immigrants in U.S. politics contribute to the existing negative perception of this group.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter discusses the historical background of Mexico's drug war. America's drug problem can be seen as the cause of the drug war; its high demand for cocaine is one of the main reasons that Mexican cartels remain in business. Drug trafficking is difficult to control, but many attempts have been made to regain control in the war on drugs.

The second chapter analyzes different articles in three U.S. newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. The analysis addresses the question: How are Mexicans perceived in the eyes of white Americans and to what extent has the U.S. media stimulated the perception of Mexican immigrants as a group of illegal, criminal aliens? The question of responsibility is also an important element in U.S. newspapers because Mexico is mostly presented as a "lawless, criminal country" that does not effectively take control of the threatening drug cartels. Thousands of innocent Mexicans are being killed every year; the numbers are still increasing and the situation is not expected to improve.

The third chapter argues that political ads and campaigns used during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations constantly portray illegal immigrants as criminals. Overt racial hostility is generally not displaced by politicians. Politicians are stigmatizing the Mexican-American community and their tactics are making the division between white Americans and ethnic minorities, such as Mexican Americans, even bigger.

The last chapter investigates the effects that stereotyping and stigmatization of Mexicans have on the Mexican-American community. Racialization, the question of whiteness and racism created an anti-Mexican sentiment over the years, which led to conflicting situations between white Americans and Mexican migrants, and a growing awareness among Mexican Americans that they must react to this situation. This in turn led to the awareness that being labeled a Latino can have positive effects as well.



## **Chapter 1: Historical Background of Mexico's Drug War and the United States**

The United States has a long history when it comes to drugs. Current US federal policies aimed at thwarting drug smuggling from Mexican cartels can be traced back to President Nixon's declaration of war on illegal drugs in 1969. As historian Tony Payan has argued, the introduction of Nixon's Operation Intercept "inaugurated an era of illegal drug policy that resulted in the creation and consolidation of a few large drug cartels and the increasing effectiveness of their operations" (863). The increased consumption of drugs in the United States in the 1970s led to the flourishing of the Mexican heroin and marijuana trade. With the arrival of Colombian cocaine in the United States during the 1980s, illegal drug smuggling increased markedly along the border, as Columbian cartels began to search for different routes to smuggle their cocaine into the United States (Payan 864). Mexico's location and relatively open border with the United States were seen "as remarkable assets" (865) and Mexico became a major transfer point for cocaine destined for the United States (Toro 31). In the 1990s and 2000s, law enforcement efforts and restrictions north of the border led Mexican drug cartels to create different smuggling methods to transport illegal drugs into the U.S (Longmire 51). The Mexican drug cartels have become "increasingly efficient and flexible hierarchies, ready to respond to changes and innovations at the border" (864).

The imbalance of power between the four major cartels has led to inter cartel violence; each cartel aims to eliminate competition and become the largest supplier in the border area (867). Tony Payan states that, because the cartels are constantly responding to the moves of the United States, "it can be argued that the drug war only makes the cartels even more flexible and adaptable" (869). Cartels become more flexible, more efficient and well-consolidated smuggling units (870). Some critics indeed blame U.S. policy for this development.

The majority of the profits made by drug cartels are earned in the drug trafficking process. Finding people to smuggle drugs into the United States does not seem to be difficult. The high number of kidnappings, homicides, and violence that come along with the drug war in the border towns are the reason that many Mexicans live in fear and are looking for a way out and a new beginning (Longmire 43). According to Sylvia Longmire, the situation of fear and anxiety on the Mexican side of the border is one of the many reasons for Mexican immigrants to cross the border and start a new life in the United States (Longmire 55).

The power and corruption that drug cartels use along the U.S.- Mexico border are making it easier to smuggle drugs through the twenty-five Ports of Entry along the border. Because of the simultaneous steady rise in the number of Mexican immigrants coming to the U.S. during the 1990s and 2000s, “battles over illegal immigration will profoundly alter the way Americans look at immigrants” (Hutchinson 161). To what extent are these two phenomena, illegal immigration and the increase of drug-related violence related to one another?

This chapter will examine the historical background of Mexico’s drug war and therefore it is important to raise the following question: How did the war on drugs develop in the 1990s and to what extent are illegal drugs and illegal immigration connected in the struggle along the U.S.-Mexico border? To answer this question it is important to look at the rise in the demand for drugs that occurred in the United States in the 1990s, the growing power of drug cartels on the Mexican supply side and the consequences for the Mexican immigrants crossing the border.

### 1.1 America’s Drug Problem and the Struggle of the Cartels

Since the 1960s and 1970s, the United States has increased its drug consumption. Heroin and marijuana were popular drugs in the United States, and marijuana and poppy cultivation in the northern states of Mexico were established to fulfill the rising U.S. drug demand. In the 1980s, cocaine became the “all-American” drug, with millions of users each year. All levels of society showed an increase in drug consumption, from lawyers to prisoners (Inciardi 90). Even though the media portrayed cocaine as “the most dangerous substance on earth” (81), the popularity of cocaine among young Americans remained high.

With both competing to fulfill the cocaine demand from the United States, tensions between Colombian cartels and Mexican cartels started to rise. During the 1980s, cocaine production and trafficking were controlled by the powerful Medellín and Cali cartels from Colombia. In the 1990s a change occurred when Mexican drug organizations intensified their position as the number one supplier of drugs to the United States. Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, leader of his own cartel and a well-known drug smuggler, became “the drug lord of the border” (Payan 865). When Gallardo was arrested in Mexico, in 1989, he continued to run his cartel from inside his prison cell. Gallardo’s lieutenants were ordered to divide the border into territories, because the cartel’s largest enemy, the U.S. government, “was stepping up its effort to destroy his organization” (865). Gallardo intended to ‘rationalize’

and ‘maximize’ his monopoly along the border; however, competition from the Mexican drug cartels emerged and the Gallardo Cartel had to be divided into four cartels: the Tijuana Cartel, the Sinaloa-Sonora Cartel, the Juárez Cartel and the Gulf Cartel (865). Since then, “drug-war related violence became an integral part of the border landscape” (866). With the death of Pablo Escobar in 1993, the Medellín and Cali cartel collapsed and Mexican cartels became the most powerful organizations fulfilling the drug needs of the United States (Toro 31).

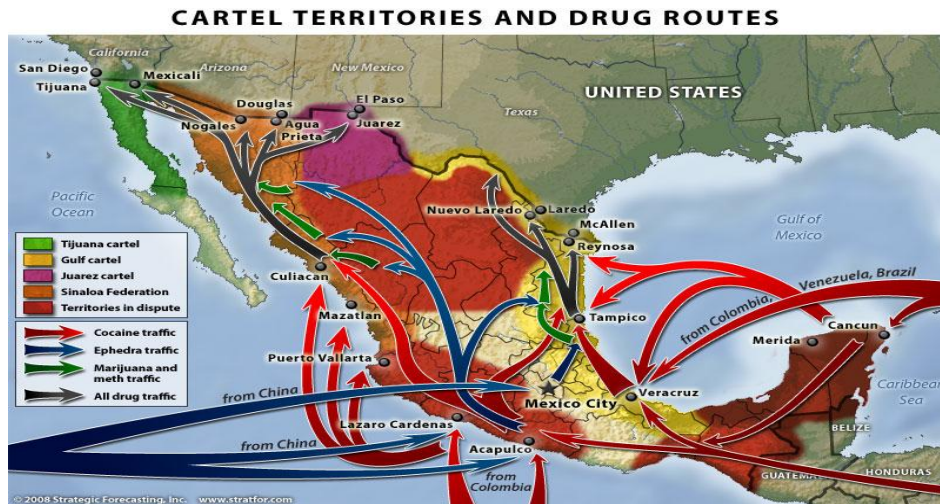
The growing demand for cocaine from the United States meant larger organizations and more money. Mexican cartels became more professional and adopted a more sophisticated operational structure to fill the growing demand from American drug users. In the 1990s, an increase and spread of violence along the border became part of the U.S.-Mexico landscape. Although violence along the border was a consequence of the competitive Mexican drug cartels, the United States did not address their own demand for illegal drugs. American drug consumers never considered themselves as the cause of the increasing violence of Mexico’s drug war. Moreover, the media and politicians did not focus on U.S. drug consumption but instead the attention was on the issues with illegal immigrants connected to the drug-related crimes along the border.

When did Mexico’s drug war become a problem for the United States? Many people who work for the U.S. government and law enforcement agencies believe that the drug war is not a big problem for the United States (Longmire 191). The rise of violence and ‘spill over violence’ is one of the main reasons the United States increased their border security as it considers this violence coming from Mexico as a serious threat to American security. Longmire defines the term ‘spill over violence’ as “deliberate, planned attacks by the cartels on U.S. assets, including civilian military, or law enforcement officials, innocent U.S. citizens, or physical institutions such as government buildings, consulates or businesses” (192). The United States wants to come up with a solution for the war on drugs, but Mexico is also hold responsible for their own situation. Most politicians argue that illegal immigration is more a threat to U.S. society than the situation in Mexico. However, the cause of illegal immigration is not seriously considered to be a consequence of Mexico’s drug war.

## 1.2 Mexico’s Drug Supply to the United States

Mexico’s location and porous border with the United States were seen “as remarkable assets” by drug cartels (Payan 865). Once the power that came with supplying the United

States with illegal drugs had come into the hands of the Mexican cartels, Mexico became the transfer point between Colombia and the United States. Courtney Farrell argues in her book *The Mexican Drug War* that seventy percent of the illegal drugs that enter the United States come through Mexico and are making the drug trade “one of the nation’s biggest industries” (10).



The map above shows the important position of Mexico in fulfilling the demand for illegal drugs of American drug consumers.<sup>2</sup>

Finding people to smuggle drugs into the United States is the easy part because money can be earned quickly. Moreover, many poor Mexicans have a perception of the ‘glamorous’ lifestyle of drug dealers, partly because of the popularity of narcocorridos. In the poor areas of Mexico, drug lords such as Félix Gallardo and Joaquin Guzmán Loera are admired because of their luxurious lifestyles and the community services they provide (Farrell 12). They are perceived as powerful men that give something back to Mexican society. However, the real reason they contribute to these poor communities is to strategically sustain their power in there. The narcocorridos, popular songs/ballads that idolize Mexican drug lords, portray drug traffickers as macho and heroic (55). According to Longmire, the lure of easy money is “too tempting to ignore” (42). The risk that drug traffickers take is the main reason why illegal drugs are so expensive and valuable, which also explains why traffickers “are willing to kill over its profits” (68).

In her book *Cartel: the Coming Invasion of Mexico’s Drug Wars*, Longmire discusses different cross-border drug smuggling methods that are used by Mexican cartels. She argues that drug trafficking will continue in the future unless the demand for illegal

<sup>2</sup> “Cartel Territories and Drug Routes.” < <http://geo-mexico.com/?p=1166>>

drugs in the United States changes (55). Money is not a problem for the cartels and because they make the majority of their profits mostly in drug trafficking across the border, it is hard to fight it (65). Most of the drugs enter the United States by trucks or private vehicles. Nearly five million trucks cross the U.S.-Mexico border every year; hence the NAFTA agreement<sup>3</sup>, which turned out to be “a heaven-sent blessing to the drug cartels” (Payan 872). Additionally, in 2009 alone 41.3 million pedestrians crossed the border (Longmire 44), many of whom were taking a chance to smuggle drugs into the United States in the hope that they would not be detected. Longmire argues that the United States and Mexico share a certain business arrangement: U.S. customers demand drugs, Mexican cartels supply them. In exchange for drugs, Mexican cartels demand firearms, which the U.S. gun sales supply them with. Longmire concludes that the United States shares some involvement and is partly to blame for the Mexican drug war, because the U.S. demand for drugs keeps drugs cartels in business (64).

The power of drug cartels and the corruption among Mexican and U.S. law enforcement officials make the border less secure. Stricter security laws after 9/11, such as, the Homeland Security Act (2002) have kept the cartels on constant alert. They have had to learn to react and improve their skills in trafficking drugs into the United States. Similarly, during the 1990s, drug cartels had to respond to anti-trafficking actions taken by the U.S. government. The cartels had to change and improve their methods of supplying the United States with drugs just to keep their business running. “The illegal drug trade relies on access to transportation avenues such as highways, ports, and tunnels, as well as the allegiance of officials who are ‘bought’ through bribes to favor one cartel over another” (Farrell 11).

Many critics argue about the question who is responsible for the situation in Mexico? Even though the situation worsened during the 2000s, Felipe Calderón, president of Mexico since 2006, claimed to make the combat of Mexico’s drug trafficking organizations the center piece of his policy. But with the high number of drug related killings, during the period of 2006-2010, he was held responsible for the increasing number of killings in his country. Since his presidency in 2006, the total number of drug-related killings reached the number of 34,612 at the end of 2010.<sup>4</sup>

Even though 2010 was the year of extreme violence in Mexico, the United States

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<sup>3</sup>The North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, the U.S., and Mexico made it easier to cross the border with illegal drugs.

<sup>4</sup>BBC News, January 13, 2011. “Mexico updates four years of drug war deaths to 34,612”, (accessed May 24, 2012). <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-12177875>>.

did not experience much of drug-related crimes in U.S. border cities. In January 2010, an article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* stated that the U.S. border city's overall crime rate had plunged to 18% (Longmire 38). A decrease in homicides and rapes, according to a statement by the Department of Homeland Security, was due to the fact, that the border had never been more secure. Moreover, as the issue of illegal immigration was one of the leading topics in the debates between the Democrats and the Republicans, the media saw their opportunity to connect Mexico's drug-related violence in America to the invasion of "illegal immigrants" and presented this combination as a threat to American security.

### 1.3 The Perception of Mexico's Drug War and Illegal Immigrants in the Media

In Mexico people are living in fear and anxiety because of frequent kidnappings, homicides, and violence within the border states. The amount of violence was considered 'normal', because many Mexicans became used to live with the rising number in drug-related killings, kidnappings, and extortion in their society. On the other hand, many Mexicans leave their country with the hope of a better life north of the border. In a way, Mexico's drug war motivates Mexicans to cross the border. However, once Mexican immigrants cross the border, legally or illegally, they are accused of the 'spill over' crime from drug cartels. The negative public perception of Mexican immigrants has been created by the U.S. media, and illegal immigration is easily connected to drug-related crime. Unfortunately, in the U.S. the Mexican immigrants who have fled the violence in their homeland are often blamed for that violence in their new land.

Since the 1920s, the immigration of Mexicans to the United States has been perceived as problematic. The same increase in nativist sentiment against all immigrants experienced during the 1920s seems to have occurred again during the 1990s, when illegal immigration in the Southwestern states of the United States were blamed for the problems with drugs. In California, politicians advocated a crackdown on immigration and increased border security to "an increasingly anxious public" (Nevins 5). During Clinton's presidency, Proposition 187 was introduced in 1994: "which sought to deny public education, public social services, and public health care services to unauthorized immigrants" (5). The anti-immigrant sentiments of the 1990s shared by many white Americans were strengthened by their belief that Mexican immigrants were taking over their country. Immigrants were seen as "convenient scapegoats" (Tichenor 242) and therefore they were often linked to drug-related crime. Mexican immigrants were stereotyped in the media as criminals, 'bandidos', and drug lords. The media and even

politicians in the White House blamed Mexican immigrants for a rise in violence in the Southwest region.

In her book *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse*, Anna de Fina claims that during the debate over Proposition 187 many metaphors used by leading Californian newspapers to describe immigrants had negative connotations (De Fina 43). She continues that “the absence of positive dominant metaphors for immigrants supports the thesis that the public discourse on immigrants is racist” (43). The growing number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants strengthens many Americans’ fears of internal colonization by the Mexican culture (44). Mexican illegal immigrants are classified as “parasites; people who exploit services that are financed through ‘tax dollars’ paid by the legitimate citizens, and as individuals who break the law” (44). De Fina concludes that Americans share an “all pay for one” mentality; just because some Mexican immigrants are uneducated or do drugs, Americans extend negative judgments to all of them (De Fina 161). On the other hand, based on their research, Lesley Williams Reid and Harald E. Weiss conclude that immigration does not affect crime. Reid and Weiss argue that “immigration has no effect on patterns of violent crime at the community level; if such findings were replicated, the way the immigrant-crime story is told would be substantially altered” (Reid and Weiss 776).

Ultimately, Thomas Torrans concludes that the U.S.-Mexico border can no longer function as an instrument of protectionism for special interest, it can only continue to be considered as a “protective measure of a sort of fundamental notion” (336). Torrans concludes that the U.S. government should not forget that “this land belongs to everyone” and that frontiers are never “hard and fast fixtures, but rather movable fictions of time and place. Boundaries and borders are not purveyors of equalities but of disparities” (Torrans 336). And in the context of illegal immigration, it is important to consider the frontier as “a way of hope – dreams, ideals, wealth, a better life, and above all the notion that freedom should stand upfront” (348). Because of Mexico’s drug war, a negative discourse concerning Mexican immigrants in the United States and the violence and crime related to drugs have become associated with one another.

#### 1.4 The War on Drugs Policy

Due to the large and steady number of Mexican immigrants entering the United States and the negative image of those immigrants propagated in the media, the United States focusses its attention on protecting its borders. In the 1990s, the United States considered

the U.S.-Mexico boundary as ‘more real’; the border between the two countries became not only “the physical line separating Mexico from the United States, but a social and legal boundary that empowered U.S. authorities to carry out all sorts of acts under the rubric of the law” (Nevins 45). The media and presidents such as Bill Clinton and George W. Bush helped to associate boundary enforcement with criminal activity, which also created a negative public discourse. In the 1990s, official and popular opinion connected illegal immigration to drug-related crime, even though statistics proved that crime in America had dropped in the period of 1993-2000.<sup>5</sup> Even though the statistics showed otherwise, Americans became more aware of the need to protect themselves from Mexico, “especially in terms of drugs, through enhanced boundary policing” (Nevins 72). Because the media linked illegal immigration to the drug violence along the border and U.S. law enforcement had its new priority: fighting illegal immigration. In 1994, the U.S. government’s ability to control the U.S.-Mexico boundary was questioned. The Clinton Administration introduced Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, which focused on controlling the border. During that period, Clinton argued that “a well-managed border will enhance national security and safeguard our immigration heritage” (Nevins 4). The rising number of illegal immigrants in the Southwestern states was perceived as an upcoming threat by the Republican Party, and they saw it as a trend that must be reversed.

In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act was introduced sparking widespread debate. It was intended to “guard national borders, tightened asylum procedures, limited immigration access to public benefits and established stringent provisions to criminal and undocumented aliens” (Tichenor 283-284). The image of large-scale immigration was widely used in American politics. Republican politicians promised their voters that “those who arrived would not get the same opportunities and rights” (287). As much as the U.S. government wanted to obtain control over their borders to stop illegal drug smuggling, it now wanted control over immigration.

Because the United States is the world’s number one customer of illegal drugs, critics question how much the United States itself is to blame for the ongoing situation with Mexico. Eva Bertram argues in her book *Drug War Politics: The Price of Denial* that many Americans fail to see “the ways in which the drug wars help create and exacerbate problems of abuse, addiction, and crime” (6). “The problem is our inability or unwillingness to see three fatal flaws at the heart of the drug war strategy: two undermine

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<sup>5</sup> State of the Union Address, January 27, 2000. *Washington Post*. (accessed June 20, 2012) <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/docs/sou00.htm>>



the war on the drug supply, and a third undercuts the war on drug users” (Bertram 11). The United States seems to focus only on the responses and actions of the Mexican drug cartels in the border region and is not coming up with solutions to change the demand of its own citizens.

Miriam Davidson argues in her book *Lives on the Line: Dispatches from the U.S. - Mexico Border* that drug use should be approached more as “a social and moral failure than as a crime” (182). Bertram and Davidson both agree that the problem of drug use should be addressed more often, instead of only looking at the supply side. “Binational problems could be solved by reaching across boundaries and working together” (185), a new relationship between the United States and Mexico has to be established and then change is possible. The United States has to overcome the politics of denial struggling with the drug war along the border. Change in public thinking and public policy will give a clearer focus and allow policymakers to create strategies that are more effective than those developed in the 1990s. America’s drug users and dealers are not the only people suffering the consequences of the present strategy. Politicians and the media unfairly present Mexican immigrants as a threat to the United States, claiming they will overwhelm the country with their culture.

Since the 1990s, the war on drugs has developed into a battle between U.S. law enforcement efforts and Mexican drug cartels. Constantly responding to each other’s actions makes living along the border difficult. However, the goal of the war on drugs is unclear and critics argue that the U.S. government is not looking in the right direction. Instead of reevaluating their strategy of how to fight against drug trafficking and the demand for drugs, policymakers and the media turn their attention to illegal immigration and legal Mexican immigrants, negatively and unfairly associating them with drugs and crime within the United States.

To conclude, the complex problem of the increasing violence and drug-related crime in Mexico’s drug war in the borderlands of the United States has proved difficult to solve. The Mexican drug cartels are becoming stronger every year and violence is coming further north, “threatening the security of the United States” (Longmire 39). The current methods used by the U.S. government to fight these cartels only make them more flexible and adaptable. Since the 1990s, drug cartels have become technically more specialized in drug trafficking, thereby earning more money, reducing competition and spreading fear in the border area. “The methods used by Mexican cartels to smuggle illegal drugs into the

United States have had to adapt over the years, because of law enforcement efforts north of the border” (51). Over time Mexican drug cartels have improved their methods and grown more powerful. The war on drugs seems to be a never-ending story. However, the United States needs to stop focusing its attention on the association between drugs, violence and (legal/illegal) Mexican immigrants so that the situation does not become worse.

Politicians and the media have made illegal immigration and drug-related violence in the United States the new targets of the war on drugs. A different perspective of the boundary with Mexico does not prevent illegal drugs from crossing the border. Anxiety and anti-immigrant rhetoric are creating a negative perception of Mexican Americans living in the United States. Official and popular opinion now associates drugs with Mexico, the U.S.-Mexico border and illegal immigrants. The border has become more ‘real’ but this “fatally flawed strategy” of the U.S. government does not take into account how it affects people other than the users and suppliers of illegal drugs. The relationship between ‘white’ Americans and Mexican Americans is also negatively affected by the drug war. Sylvia Longmire argues that “the one thing that will always remain constant in the evolution of Mexican drug cartels is change” (19). Moreover, change is an important element that the border needs to manage Mexico’s drug war. Illegal immigration has become an ‘innocent’ victim of the war on drugs; therefore, public thinking and public policy need to change in order to improve the ongoing situation along the U.S.-Mexico border. The Mexican drug war is a war that perhaps cannot be won, but it still has to be managed in the right way.

## **Chapter 2: Mexico's Drug War and the U.S. Press**

The relationship between Mexico and the United States has always been complicated. Since the early 1900s, the term 'Mexican' came to mean "poor, ignorant and degraded" (Nevins 129). According to Nevins, the mass media clearly helped to construct the image of an immigrant and boundary-enforcement crisis. Furthermore, media presentations of Mexico as a dangerous neighbor are far from a new phenomenon. In 1977, *Time* magazine described the coming 'Mexican' invasion: "the United States is being invaded so silently and surreptitiously that most Americans are not even aware of it. The invaders come by land, sea and air" (Nevins 142). At that time, 80% of the illegal aliens living in the United States came from Mexico. White Americans feared that Mexican immigrants would take all the jobs and burden U.S. social services. Such negative thinking continued to influence official perceptions and representations of unauthorized immigration through the mid-1990s (143). During this time, the negative presentations of the 'Other' reemerged in the media. The dominant image of the illegal alien is an unauthorized immigrant coming from Mexico (147). Unflattering metaphors were attached to Mexicans in the media, mainly because racialized fears of immigration, crime, and potential cultural and even political conquest by immigrants were important elements of the discourse (144).

Critics argue that the U.S. press is responsible for the fact that Americans are "poorly informed" because the opinions of journalists and politicians are "important determinants of support or opposition to immigration issues" (Brader and Valentino 959). Other critics like Payan and Longmire argue that the media is responsible for creating a partial understanding of illegal drugs and the drug war because the U.S. press only covers this topic in a "sporadic, incomplete, and largely scandal-driven way" (Payan 869). According to Mercedes Lynn de Uriarte, Mexico's relationship with the U.S. press was "born in crisis and, for the most part, its image continues to be shaped in times of international stress" (245). Mexico's leaders were perceived as law breakers or as "ineffective, impractical, and inept" (De Uriarte 254). Representations of Mexico as a 'bloody war ground' and a lawless country have strengthened this negative image, with lasting effects on Americans' opinions of Mexico.

During the 1990s, with the rise of drug war related violence in the border states, the U.S. press presented Mexico as a land of bloodshed, turmoil, and disorder (De Uriarte 254). This negative image of Mexico still dominates the media imagery and fuels the debate on immigrants in public discourse. Two major themes that continuously recur in

articles in U.S. newspapers are the violent struggle of the United States with the rising presence of drug traffickers along the border and the high number of Mexican immigrants coming to the United States.

This chapter will examine the portrayal of Mexican immigrants in three well known U.S. newspapers: the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*, during the period of 1990-2010. Sixty-two articles were used from these different newspapers to see how illegal immigrants were linked to the drug war during the 1990s and 2000s. The *LexisNexis* database of the University of Utrecht contains a search application to analyze how frequently specific words occur in the three different newspapers. Because the *Los Angeles Times* only has articles from 2009-2012 available online, the analysis is mostly based on 26 articles from the *Washington Post* and 27 articles from the *New York Times*. This analysis is just covering a small part of the U.S. media portrayal of Mexican immigrants and it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this analysis. The used articles cannot give a complete image of the portrayal of Mexican immigrants, therefore further research is necessary. However, changes in perception can be noticed in the time period of 1990-2010. First, the negative perception of Mexicans in general will be examined, then the negative perception of the “illegal” immigrants who are mostly constructed as the Mexican “illegal” immigrant. Ultimately, the results of the analysis of the articles from the three researched newspapers will answer the question: To what extent is the drug war harming the image of the Mexican-American community in the United States. And to what extent are Mexican immigrants, legal and illegal, negatively perceived in the U.S. media, as a result of the drug war?

### 2.1 Mexicans in the Eyes of White Americans

The first encounters between Mexicans and Americans occurred when the Southwest still belonged to Mexico in the early nineteenth century. These first encounters created the first image of Mexicans that Americans had (Moore and Cuéllar 2). Differences in attitudes, temperament, and behavior led to the establishment of certain elements of the Mexican stereotype (5). First, Mexicans were seen as cowards because of the “bloodless conquest of New Mexico” and second, white Americans saw Mexicans as a people who are by nature corrupt (4). Early on, since the nineteenth century, Mexicans became mythically lazy and corrupt; white Americans argued that Mexicans were poor because they were unwilling to suffer hard work and boredom. Thereby, “poverty becomes a just return for laziness rather than a reminder of social injustices” (5).

Many white Americans experienced the “clannishness” of Mexican Americans as something obscure. The image white Americans had and still have is that Mexican Americans stick together, and “they do not want anything to do with other Americans” (Moore and Cuéllar 132). The “us versus them” theory of white Americans allowed them to believe the negative stereotypes of Mexicans presented in the media during the 1990s and 2000s. Sergio Aguayo, a Mexican human rights activist blames the U.S. media for the negative portrayal of Mexicans, which even has a negative effect on Mexican society. Aguayo argues:

During an extended stay in Mexico, a few years ago, I lived with a well-to-do Mexican family. Family members routinely asked if my son was into gang and drugs (he was a college student at the time). I did not regard this as insensitive or even racist. I chalked it up in part to the one-dimensional depiction of blacks (and Mexicans) on many TV shows, in movies, and in newscasts out of America that are beamed worldwide. (Hutchinson 28)

According to Leti Volpp, the distinction between white people and people of color is that Mexicans are always considered as members of a group. White people are individual actors. Volpp explains:

Behavior that we might find troubling is more often causally attributed to a group-definition culture where the actor is perceived to “have” culture. Because we tend to perceive white Americans as “people without culture”, when white people engage in certain practices we do not associate their behavior with a racialized conception of culture, but rather construct other non-cultural explanations [...] Thus, we consider early marriage by a Mexican immigrant to reflect “Mexican culture”. In contrast, when a white person commits a similar act, we view it as an isolated instance of aberrant behavior, and not as reflective of a racialized culture. (Lee 98)

The influence of the U.S. media is extensive, even in Mexico and the rest of the world. The fact that U.S. newspapers ‘frame’ Mexicans as being criminals and inherently corrupt is one of the main reasons that Mexican Americans are being stigmatized. Angharad N. Valdivia concludes that “the mainstream media help to naturalize the superiority of white people and justify a system of racial inequalities while denying that racism exists” (6).

## 2.2 The Perception of Mexican Immigrants: “Illegal, Criminal, Aliens.”

The levels of illegal immigration and increased criminality in the United States are connected by newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. From 2000 to the end of 2004, immigration was cited in the headline or lead paragraph of 2,423 stories in U.S. newspapers (McIlwain and Caliendo 130). In the U.S. media Mexican immigrants are cast as non-citizens, non-American, aliens.

McIlwain and Caliendo argue that the media fundamentally define Mexicans by their criminal nature:

Thus, when they receive taxpayer-funded benefits such as free medical care, it further underscores their criminal character. They are not lazy like Black welfare moms with three (or more) children who refuse to look for a job. They are quite the opposite in that respect – that is, they are quite willing to work. But being hardworking, ironically, makes them worse in this context. They are hardworking, industrious thieves. Though the benefits are freely given, the immigrants are literally taking things that do not belong to them. (141-142)

Mexican immigrants are unjustly portrayed to be illegal, drug-related immigrants, who form a threat to American society. The debate about who is responsible for the ongoing drug war in Mexico spreads fear among white Americans. When newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, report about drug-related violence in the United States, it becomes clear that the main characters in the articles are the Mexican immigrants, who are blamed for the increasing violence along the border.

The debate about immigration issues became more heated and by the end of 2005, 40-80 percent of American citizens that were surveyed reported that immigration was on the list of issues that most concerned them (McIlwain and Caliendo 130). In an article of the *New York Times*, the increased heroin use in a rural Ohio town is described with the focus on “the illegal immigrant” identity of the two dealers charged with manslaughter for one man’s drug-related death.<sup>6</sup> Because the term ‘Mexican’ is not mentioned in the text, the reader knows that ‘illegal immigrant’ means Mexican. The main message of the article is that illegal immigrants spread criminality in the United States, even though crime rates in the United States declined in 2009.

Some journalists realize the impact it would have if all illegal immigrants were deported. Mexican immigrants are doing the jobs in U.S. society that nobody else wants to do. On the other hand, Mexican immigrants are looking for better work opportunities. Even though the connection between Mexico’s drug war and illegal immigration has not yet been properly investigated, some journalists are now looking at the effect it would have if all Mexican immigrants would return to Mexico. For instance two articles, one in the *Los Angeles Times* and the other in the *New York Times*, show the opposite story of Mexican immigrants. In “Better Lives for Mexicans Cut the Allure of Going North” the author

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<sup>6</sup> Archibold, Randall C. “In Heartland Death, Traces of Heroin’s Spread.” *New York Times*, May 30, 2009. (accessed May 1, 2012) <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/31/us/31border.html?pagewanted=all>>

argues that job opportunities in Mexico are improving much faster than in the United States and that fact could cause another type of threat.<sup>7</sup> Mexican immigrants are now more willing to go back to Mexico for better work opportunities. In 2011, more than 70% of U.S. farm workers were estimated to be illegal immigrants. If the number of Mexican immigrants were drastically reduced, the American economy would be negatively affected. Tamar Jacoby from the *Los Angeles Times* agrees that ‘deporting’ large numbers of Mexican Americans would be a disaster for the United States, because not even the least-skilled, least-educated Americans want to work in agriculture these days. “Millions of Americans who think we do not need immigrant workers might wise up if they see what the consequences for the American economy are.”<sup>8</sup>

According to the research of Otto Santa Ana, after Proposition 187, which was a ballot initiative in 1994 to prohibit illegal immigrants from using health care, public education and other social services in California, the U.S. media depicted Mexican immigrants as animals who were ‘preyed upon’ and used words like ‘herded’, ‘targeted’, ‘devoured’ and ‘hunted out’ to describe them (199). In his book *The Latino Threat* Leo R. Chavez defines the narrative of the Mexican invader as a “set of assumptions and taken-for-granted truths which posit that Latinos are unwilling or incapable of integrating, of becoming part of the national community. Rather, they are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering land that was formerly theirs and destroying the American way of life” (2). Chavez concludes that press coverage about immigration consists of “the generalized nature of negative attitudes towards Mexicans” (De Fina 44). Mexican Americans are not considered real ‘white Americans’, but are a group on their own, who find it is difficult to integrate into American society because “Mexican Americans are either changing America, or they are affecting an entirely ‘new world’ as in an alien invasion” (Mayer 7).

These public fears of the presence of (illegal) Mexican immigrants are also returning in newspaper articles. The media tends to spread the message that Mexican immigrants will create a burden on government services, become a threat to American jobs, and bring

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<sup>7</sup> Cave, Damien. “Better Lives for Mexicans Cut the Allure of Going North.” *New York Times*, July 6, 2011. (accessed April 30, 2012)

<<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/06/world/americas/immigration.html>>

<sup>8</sup> Jacoby, Tamar. “California without a Mexican.” *Los Angeles Times*. August 25, 2007. (accessed April 29, 2012) <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-jacoby25aug25.0.1578659.story>

crime with them from Mexico. The main objective of the media is to fuel public debate about the presence of Mexican immigrants and spread anxiety among the readers.

### 2.3 The Question of Responsibility

In the debate about Mexico's drug war, many critics argue about who is to blame for the violence that has characterized the border region for the past few decades. Some place the blame with the U.S. itself, arguing that if the United States would have checked its high demand for illegal drugs, then Mexican drug cartels would not have been so successful in expanding their organizations and improving their trafficking skills (Payan 878). The way the U.S. media blames Mexico for being responsible for the drug war itself is important because it stimulates the negative public discourse about Mexicans in the United States. The media's portrayal of the drug war confirms the stereotypes white Americans already had. On the other hand, U.S. officials claim that corruption has infiltrated the Mexican government so extensively that it is virtually impossible to fight the war on drugs. Because most Mexican officials are corrupt, the image that white Americans have about Mexico being a lawless country, is confirmed. In the 1990s, multiple newspaper articles focused on the failure of Mexico to control the drug war; the demand and consumption of the United States received very little attention. In the 1990s, 11 articles of the *New York Times* and 15 articles of the *Washington Post* argued about the responsibility of the war on drugs and portrayed Mexico as a "lawless country", where crime is the order of the day.

Most of the researched articles published in the early 1990s explain the growing threat of drug traffickers finding new ways into the United States. Drug runners are presented as "criminals taking advantage of poverty and unemployment in Mexico."<sup>9</sup> Mexico's government is labeled as corrupt and described as a place where officials lack expertise. Therefore, Mexico is considered a weak ally in the drug war because there is no strong local institution. In 1993 the Clinton administration signed the Presidential Decision Directive no.14, which shifted U.S. anti-drug efforts away from intercepting cocaine and other illegal drugs as it passed through Mexico. The focus shifted onto the sources of supply: Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. The focus of the Clinton Administration was on control, not only at the U.S.-Mexico border, but areas in and around 'source' countries were also more controlled. The U.S. believed that financing Mexico would help to reduce and control the drug trafficking along the border. Despite the help of the U.S., Mexico

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<sup>9</sup> Farah, Douglas and Tod Robberson. "Drug Traffickers build a new central American Route to U.S." *Washington Post*, March 28, 1993. (accessed April 29,2012)



wanted to control the drug war, without aid from the U.S. The rejection of U.S. aid to control the growing cartel presence in the Mexican states near the U.S.-Mexico border was defined as Mexicanization: “Mexico took command of its war on drugs and rejected further U.S. assistance.”<sup>10</sup> The authors of the article argue that nationalistic Mexicans finally got what they wanted by regaining full control of the war on drugs because they always resented their country being perceived as “a poor, weak stepchild of the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1996 the Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act greatly affected illegal immigrants living in the U.S. If they had not been in the U.S. longer than 180 days, Mexican immigrants were deported back to Mexico, where they had to stay for 3 years before they could obtain a pardon to return and live in the United States. U.S. newspaper articles concerning the war on drugs focused on a partnership between the United States and Mexico. Barry R. McCaffrey, chief of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy argues: “It is our belief that the United States and Mexico are trapped, economically, culturally, politically and because of drug crime, on the same continent, and we’d better figure out a way to work on it together for the next 10 to 20 years.”<sup>12</sup> The opinions about responsibility have begun to change and American journalists are also turning to the blind spot of the United States when it comes to the drug war: “Criticizing Mexico achieves nothing [...] the United States consumes five billion dollars a year in illegal drugs, we should own up to our responsibility and stop trying to blame others.”<sup>13</sup>

However, the acknowledgment of the U.S.’s demand for illegal drugs is considered even more in articles that appear between 1997 and 2001. During this period, an article in the *Washington Post* points out that Americans have to realize that “there are other engines to the trafficking train. There would be no problem to speak of if the American illegal drug demand was not an immense, evil, pulsing thing. U.S. demand tempts and corrupts all the

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<sup>10</sup> Moore, Molly and John Ward Anderson. “Drugs Flow as Policing is ‘Mexicanized’; Diminished U.S. Role Below Border Plays Into Traffickers’ Hands.” *Washington Post*. September 8, 1996. (accessed April 30, 2012)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, John Ward. “U.S. Officials back Mexico as Ally; Lawmakers criticize Drug War Corruption.” *Washington Post*. February 26, 1997. (accessed April 29, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Reyes, Silvestre. “An Ally in the War on Drugs: Finding Fault with Mexico is a No-Win Strategy.” *Washington Post*. April 20, 1998. (accessed April 29, 2012)

supplier and transit countries (Rosenfeld).” After blaming one another for the rising drug problem in both countries, Mexico and the United States both agree that something has to be done to end the drug violence.

#### 2.4 Results

The stereotypical representations of Mexican immigrants as invaders, aliens and criminals dominate the portrayals of Mexicans in the U.S. press. The link between illegal Mexican immigrants and criminality is most visible in the *New York Times*, which in twelve articles dating from 1990 to 2000 linked the word ‘illegal’ to being a ‘criminal’. In nine articles the *Washington Post* linked Mexicans to the increasing criminality in the U.S. The link between immigration and the Mexico’s drug war is interrelated with one another:

	“Mexico’s drug war” and “immigration”	“Responsibility” and “War on drugs”	TOTAL
<b>The New York Times</b>	19	8	27
<b>The Los Angeles Times</b>	-	-	9
<b>The Washington Post</b>	12	14	26
			<b>62</b>

The search of the terms “responsibility” and “war on drugs” in the *LexisNexis* database is mostly covered by the *Washington Post*, addressing the awareness that Mexico and the U.S. must work together. The attitude of Mexico concerning the war on drugs bothers the U.S. The search of the terms “Mexico’s drug war” and “immigrant” consists of the most effective results of the negative portrayal of Mexican immigrants. Most of the drug-related crime is linked to illegal and legal immigrants. Furthermore, the two newspapers showed little interest in drug-related violence in Mexico, but paid much more attention to spill over violence in the United States. The coverage in the media is limited to the interests of the United States, the U.S. press manipulates the perception of Mexican immigrants. For instance, an article in the *Washington Post* in 1997 claims that the individual actors of the

drug war can be regarded as “criminals, job seekers, and drug traffickers.”<sup>14</sup> The U.S media describes Mexican regions and towns as “blood-splattered shooting galleries<sup>15</sup>, and as a lawless no-man’s land to create an image that frightens the American public. The “spillover effect” also gets much attention in the media; this is drug violence that enters the United States and must be considered ‘a dangerous threat’. According to an article in the *New York Times*, the level of violence is described as a “web of crime”. The author of the article argues in a subtle way that, of the people who are arrested for drug-related crimes, there is “a high percentage that are immigrants from Mexico.” However, Mexican immigrants are caught up in the net of violence spreading further north in the United States. The article concludes:

Tying the street-level violence in the United States to the cartels is difficult, law enforcement experts say, because the cartels typically distribute their illicit goods through a murky network of regional and local cells made up of Mexican immigrants and United States citizens who send cash and guns to Mexico through an elaborate chain.<sup>16</sup>

The spread of ‘spill over’ violence seems to be one of the repeated themes in the three newspapers. The growing threat of Mexico’s drug war is like an invasion of the United States. However, an article in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* from January 2010 stated that the border city’s overall crime rate had plunged 18% in 2009. The number of homicides in border towns had decreased by 25.5% and officials of the Homeland Security Department claimed that “the border has never been more secure” (Longmire 38). However, it is still questionable how trustworthy the articles in the newspapers are. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* seem to lack objectivity. The exaggerated link between (illegal) immigration and criminality is one of the themes that the newspapers like to focus on, even though real evidence of a clear relationship or link between the two is not provided.

To conclude, the Mexican threat is a returning theme in public discourse. Since the early 1990s, drug violence and immigration have been linked together by the media. Even

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<sup>14</sup> Rosenfeld, Stephen S. “The Mexican Connection.” *Washington Post*, July 04, 1997. (accessed April 29, 2012)

<sup>15</sup> Marosi, Richard. “Mexico convoy thread sits Way through strange drug war in Sonora State.” *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2010. (accessed April 29, 2012). <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/16/world/la-fg-sonora-convoy-20101017>

<sup>16</sup> Archibold, Randal C. “Mexico Drug Cartel Violence Spills Over, Alarming U.S.” *New York Times*, March 22, 2009. (accessed May 01, 2012) <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/23/us/23border.html?pagewanted=all>

though official statistics show a decrease in crime in U.S. border towns, newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* still carry articles suggesting that violence is being brought by Mexican immigrants into the United States. Stereotypical appearances of Mexican immigrants are a lasting component of representations in the U.S. media. However, articles from 2010 show a shift in the discussion. These more recent articles describe the other side of the illegal immigration story, and show that a decrease in immigrants would have negative consequences for the United States. A more balanced discourse is necessary to present a clearer image of the impact of Mexico's drug war on the United States. America's own contribution to stimulating the drug war via its demand for drugs is not *yet* discussed in the U.S. media; instead the media is often critical and dishonest about the Mexican supply side.

### **Chapter 3: The Perception of Mexican Immigrants in U.S. Politics**

When George H.W. Bush initiated the war on drugs in the late 1980s with a huge media propaganda campaign, the public perception of Mexican immigrants changed drastically. Noam Chomsky argues that the domestic component of this campaign was intended “to frighten the population into obedience” (56-57). California was the national leader in the 1990s in raising anti-immigrant sentiment (Nevins 105). In 1994, the Republican Party began a national campaign to focus attention on the negative side effects of the ‘open’ border with Mexico. On the other hand, the Democratic Party did not mention extralegal immigration and boundary enforcement in their presidential campaign in 1994. Yet the Republican governor, Pete Wilson, pushed his Democrat opponent, Bill Clinton, toward a “more activist stance on boundary enforcement” (Nevins 108). Wilson wrote an open letter to Clinton “on behalf of the People of California”, which appeared in the *New York Times* in 1993:

Massive illegal immigration will continue as long as the federal government continues to reward it. Why even have a border patrol and I.N.S. if we are going to continue the insanity of providing incentives to illegal immigration to violate U.S. immigration laws? (Nevins 108).

Republicans Wilson and Hunter used the economic recession, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center by suspected unauthorized immigrants, and the assassination of two CIA employees in their campaign against illegal immigrants, which was intended to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment even further (109). Peter Kwong argues that “although such events had nothing to do with unauthorized immigrants from Mexico, they significantly contributed to a growing perception of a country under siege” (3).

During the Clinton administration, border policing played an important role in national discussions and even led to the establishment of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994. However, Republicans continued to attack Clinton’s policies as inadequate, and the debate about legal and illegal immigration intensified and changed the public perception of Mexican immigrants. Moreover, Clinton’s opinion about immigrants changed as well during these intense debates, and this contributed to a different public perception of Mexican immigrants. By the end of the Clinton administration in 2001, Latino voters had become, for both the Republicans and the Democrats, an important group that could make a difference in an election. Although President G.W. Bush realized how important the Latino community was to win upcoming elections; the situation changed drastically during the 2006 election campaigns. He connected all immigrants to criminality and “the most

feared types of violent criminality, at that” (McIlwain and Caliendo 135). Next to being described as criminals, politicians used racially-coded language to speak about Mexican immigrants, always using the term “illegal immigrants”. Bush took the link between Mexican illegal immigrants and the spillover violence across the border very seriously and signed many bills concerning the U.S.-Mexico border, which led to nativist sentiments among many white Americans. Even though Bush was more focused on the war on terrorism and the wars in Iraq and later Afghanistan, the term ‘terrorists’ had obtained a broader connotation. Even the Mexican immigrants were considered terrorists, who would invade the United States to take back their long-lost land. The immigrants were once again stigmatized of being criminals and the ones to blame for the increasing violence in the U.S. The war on drugs was linked to the war on terrorism and anti-immigration sentiment was never as high as it was in 2006. President Obama is often blamed of not taking serious action regarding the illegal immigration issues and the war on drugs, but also reduced the notion of all Mexican immigrants being criminals, as most of the Republicans stated in their campaigns. Obama realized after his meeting with Calderón in 2009 that the war on drugs must come to an end, or else the stigmatization of immigrants, especially Mexican immigrants, would end in more racial violence between different groups.

This chapter will examine political speeches, campaigns and interviews in the media to see how Mexican immigrants are linked to the stereotypes that have spread throughout American society. The main question that will guide this chapter is: To what extent did the perception of Mexican immigrants change during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations? To what extent are these two phenomena, illegal immigration and the increase of drug-related violence related to one another in U.S. politics?

### 3.1 The Clinton Administration 1993-2001

During the Clinton administration, Mexican immigrants became the main focus of the Republican Party. Clinton presented three goals in his 1992 campaign, describing how he would deal with the problems of the U.S.-Mexico border:

1. Enhance the enforcement of the laws controlling our borders, and ensure that the human rights of all immigrants are respected.
2. Improve the border patrol and ensure that it is held accountable for its actions.
3. Provide new technology and training in the latest enforcement techniques. (Clinton-Gore, 117)

Clinton argued that it was important to respect the human rights of all immigrants, legal or illegal. The Democratic Party argued that it is a fundamental duty of the United States to

provide unconditional aid and comfort to the citizens of other nations. On the other hand, although the Republican Party acknowledged that the United States is enriched by immigrants seeking a better life, they argued that the lack of security along the borders had contributed to the flow of drug trafficking, gang violence as well as the deteriorating economic situation of California (Reeves and Johnson). On July 27, 1993 Clinton stated in a press conference:

The simple fact is that we must not, and we will not, surrender our borders to those who wish to exploit our history of compassion and justice. We cannot tolerate those who traffic in human cargo, nor can we allow our people to be endangered by those who would enter our country to terrorize Americans. Today we send a strong and clear message. We will make it tougher for illegal aliens to get into our country.<sup>17</sup>

Clinton made a remark that illegal aliens could ‘endanger’ and ‘terrorize’ Americans. He still wanted to respect the human rights of all immigrants, but by saying that immigrants could terrorize Americans, he made the connection between illegal immigrants and actual terrorists. Clinton was forced in Republican debates to take a stand at the accusations that were being made against the invasion of criminal Mexicans. Clinton realized that if he wanted to win over the Democratic majority, he would also have to deal with the growing number of Mexican immigrants. Clinton had no choice but to react the way he did, because he did not have other options (Johnson 148). Hence, Clinton was forced more to the right, because of the Republicans; Republicans wanted Clinton gone since his first day in office. In the Republicans’ view, this new Democrat president, who advocated for communication between the American people and the U.S. government, and more tolerance and multiculturalism in U.S. society, would only harm U.S. society.

Michael Alvarez and Tara L. Butterfield argue in their essay “The Resurgence of Nativism in California? The Case of Proposition 187 and Illegal Immigration” that the poor economic conditions of California caused a nativist response to illegal immigration. Alvarez and Butterfield conclude that “the Republican Party is gaining a reputation as the anti-immigration party” (178). Other scholars argue that race played an important role in anti-immigrant attitudes, and that especially the Mexican-crime scenario is a returning phenomenon which causes prejudices against Mexican immigrants (Short and Magaña, 708). Although crime and immigration were not often linked in the media in 1994, the Republican Party still wanted to draw more attention to the U.S.-Mexico border and

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<sup>17</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton, 1993, Book I – January 20 to July 31, 1993. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994): 1194.

described Mexican immigration as an invasion of job stealers and criminals. For instance, Governor Wilson presented illegal immigrants as a significant threat to American society, claiming they would steal jobs from U.S. residents (Nevins 143). White Americans were constantly confronted with ‘the danger’ of the growing Mexican-American community in the U.S. Republicans made sure that the Clinton administration would act upon the illegal immigration issues. The Republican Party came up with Proposition 187, which denied public education, public social services, and public health care services to unauthorized immigrants. The Democratic Party opposed Proposition 187<sup>18</sup> and introduced Operation Gatekeeper as a response. Operation Gatekeeper was not only a boundary enforcement strategy, but it was also an attempt by the Democrats to take the lead “in the battle against unauthorized immigration” (113). Operation Gatekeeper was responsible for a significant change in the public’s perception of the boundary with Mexico, at least in terms of immigration (114). Joseph Nevins argues that the perception of the U.S.-Mexico border changed:

they were and are a manifestation of a shift from the divide being a border, or a zone of transition within which the peoples and places have much in common, to a boundary that represents a stark, linear demarcation between a strongly differentiated ‘us’ and ‘them’ – both territorially and socially (Nevins 114).

Clinton repeated in multiple speeches among fellow Democrats the phrase: “Let’s build, not blame”. Clinton made it clear in his speeches and during the 1994 campaign that it was unfair to blame Mexican immigrants for the economic situation in California. Negative attitudes would not change the situation with illegal immigrants. The Democratic Party was also aware of the fact that the growing Hispanic population in the United States could be valuable in the upcoming elections. After the passing of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 1996, Clinton told the press that he was offended by the legislation’s harshness toward legal immigrants, “but that he chose to sign the reform package because of his devotion to fundamentally restructure the larger welfare system” (Tichenor 284). Clinton showed that he had done what he could about the illegal immigration problem, and wanted to move on. He garnered “71 percent of the Latino vote in 1996, and immigrant voters were credited with helping Democrats reclaim control of the California House the same year” (Tichenor 286). At the same time, the Republicans, still with Pete Wilson as a Representative, used immigration as “a hot-button issue to get re-elected” (Ojito).

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<sup>18</sup> Major parts of Proposition 187 were later ruled unconstitutional (Lee 156).



In his book, *Between Hope and History*, Clinton states:

We must realize that all Americans, whatever their racial and ethnic origin, share the same old-fashioned values, work hard, care for their families, pay their taxes, and obey the law. This same commitment to tolerance and equal opportunity should govern our approach to immigration. It's important for us all to remember that we are both a nation of immigrants and a nation of laws. Legal immigration has made America what is today – a vibrant and diverse nation, all the richer for the energy, ideas, and plain hard work immigrants have contributed to our society. Immigrants who enter our country legally and begin the process of attaining citizenship today are little different from the strivers who were our own ancestors. We need to remember that, and repudiate those who argue against immigration as a thinly veiled pretext for discrimination. (133-134)

Clinton made the distinction between legal and illegal immigrants; not all immigrants can be categorized as illegal immigrants. The war on drugs and the issues with illegal immigration were interrelated with one another. Clinton had to deal with this difficult situation while the Republican opposition pushed him more to the right. In 2000, Clinton concluded that even though crime had dropped for the previous seven years, “the longest decline on record, thanks to a national consensus we helped to forge on community police, sensible gun safety laws, and effective prevention. But nobody believes America is safe enough.”<sup>19</sup> Clinton looked back at his successful seven years, where crime had dropped, but realized that the perception in America had changed drastically over the seven years. Clinton argues that it was necessary to enforce U.S. immigration laws in the 1990s, and that the anti-immigration attitude of the Republicans had created a worrisome image in U.S. society (*My Life* 756). Clinton had done the best he could, dealing with the rights of new immigrants and as well with dealing with illegal immigration.

In the period of 1998-2001, the Republicans saw the importance of the Hispanic vote and changed their tune. With the upcoming election of 2001, George W. Bush wanted to attract the Hispanic community to become Republican voters. The issue of illegal and legal immigrants became ‘silent’, and both the Republicans and the Democrats considered Mexican immigrants as ‘new citizens of the United States’. During this period, there was also an “economic boom and with low unemployment rates and significant job growth, suddenly immigrant labor was in demand” (Chavez 34).

During the Clinton administration not all public discourse on Mexican immigration was alarmist (Chavez 34); however, the Republicans and Democrats presented a different image of the seriousness of immigration as an issue. The Clinton administration wanted to respect the human rights of all immigrants, legal and illegal. However, Clinton had to

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<sup>19</sup> State of the Union Address, January 27, 2000. *Washington Post*. (accessed June 20, 2012) <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/states/docs/sou00.htm>>

respond to the demand of the Republican Party to try to solve the growing problems along the U.S.-Mexico border. On the other hand, Republican congressmen in California went national with their anti-immigrant sentiment and presented Mexican immigrants as a threat to U.S. jobs and the ones to blame for the economic recession in their state. In the elections of 2000, Bush argued that the Clinton-Gore drug policy is inconsistent and has failed: “Unfortunately, in the last seven and half years, fighting drug abuse has ceased to be a national priority”, but with a lack of funding and an inconsistent policy this only led to more problems in U.S. society.<sup>20</sup> Growing anti-immigrant sentiment in U.S. society was something that led to heated debates, and Bush saw the opportunity to present the Republican Party from a different perspective. In the Presidential Debate at Wake Forest University in 2000, Gore and Bush discussed the increasing problems of racial profiling:

Gore: Racial profiling is a serious problem. Imagine what it is like for someone to be singled out unfairly and feel the unfair force of law simply because of race and ethnicity. That runs counter to what the United States is all about. If I am entrusted with the presidency it will be the first civil rights act of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Bush: I can't imagine what it would be like to be singled out because of race and harassed. That's just flat wrong. So we ought to do everything we can to end racial profiling. One of my concerns, though, is I don't want to federalize local police. I believe in local control of governments. Most officers are dedicated citizens who are putting their lives at risk, who aren't bigoted or aren't prejudiced. I do think we need to find out where racial profiling occurs and say to the local folks, get it done and if you can't, there'll be a federal consequence.<sup>21</sup>

Gore argued for more affirmative action, and Bush acknowledged the fact that racial profiling has to be stopped. Bush realized the effects it would have if he could win the Latino vote in the elections. Therefore, Bush wanted to stay positive about immigration to attract more Latino voters, and on June 26, 2000 Bush stated:

Latinos come to the US to seek the same dreams that have inspired millions of others: they want a better life for their children. Family values do not stop at the Rio Grande. Latinos enrich our country with faith in God, a strong ethic of work, community & responsibility. We can all learn from the strength, solidarity, and values of Latinos. Immigration is not a problem to be solved, it is the sign of a successful nation. New Americans are to be welcomed as neighbors and not to be feared as strangers.<sup>22</sup>

Bush argued that Latinos should not be feared as strangers, and he presented himself as a pro-immigration candidate. In the meantime, other Republicans hoped to gain

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<sup>20</sup> “Presidents on the Issues.” [http://www.issues2000.org/Celeb/George\\_W\\_Bush\\_Drugs.htm](http://www.issues2000.org/Celeb/George_W_Bush_Drugs.htm)

<sup>21</sup> “Second Bush-Gore Debate, Wake Forest University.” October 11, 2000. (accessed June 21, 2012) [http://www.ontheissues.org/Wake\\_Forest\\_debate.htm](http://www.ontheissues.org/Wake_Forest_debate.htm)

<sup>22</sup> “Presidents on the Issues.” [http://www.issues2000.org/Celeb/George\\_W\\_Bush\\_Immigration.htm](http://www.issues2000.org/Celeb/George_W_Bush_Immigration.htm) (accessed June 10, 2012)

more control over the immigration issue and did not see the importance of the Hispanic community as possible voters. With the upcoming election in 2001, George W. Bush wanted to attract Hispanic voters and became ‘their Republican friend’ (Chavez 33). However, this perception of Mexican immigrants would once again change drastically in the immigration debate of 2006.

### 3.2 The G.W. Bush Administration 2001-2009

President Bush spoke Spanish in a part of his weekly radio address in 2001, to commemorate the importance of Hispanics in American society. He stated: “In Texas, it’s in the air you breathe. Hispanic life, Hispanic culture and Hispanic values are inseparable from the life of our state and have been for many generations” (Hutchinson 82). Bush’s tribute to Hispanics in Spanish was a first for an American president. In the beginning of his presidency, Bush praised Mexico-U.S. relations, gave support for the extension of the undocumented immigrant registration deadline and gave many broadcasts in Spanish. All of this was an attempt to wash away the negative taste the Republican opposition had left in the mouths of many Latino voters (83). Bush understood the crucial importance of the Latino voter better than any other Republican politician (Hutchinson 12). “As Texas governor during the 1990s, he adroitly read the political tea leaves. He wined and dined Latino voters, politicians, business leaders and Mexican government officials” (Hutchinson 12).

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, immigration policy was linked to “an increasingly amplified discourse about security” (McIlwain and Caliendo 139). Fear and a sense of danger were discernible in the language that described immigrant masses. The protection of the borders became important in national debates; America became nationalistic. Republicans wanted to increase awareness of the ‘broken’ border with Mexico, which led to illegal immigrants who became a security threat in U.S. society. The Bush administration promised action to solve the problem; whether it would be “fighting, leading, or planning” it was framed in relation to the immigrants themselves” (McIlwain and Caliendo 138). Charlton McIlwain and Stephen Caliendo stated that the Bush administration wanted to become known as the ‘problem solvers’ of the U.S.-Mexico border issues:

Candidates frame themselves as solutions to a border problem characterized by illegal immigrants whose criminal threat demands a legal remedy. “Illegals” are the law breakers; the [Republican] candidates are law enforcers. (138)

Republican Ron Paul, U.S. representative of Texas's 14<sup>th</sup> congressional district claimed in 2001 that the drug war fostered violence at home and bred resentment abroad and the threat of immigrants was now related to the war on terror:

For the first 140 years of our history, we had essentially no federal war on drugs, and far fewer problems with drug addiction and related crimes as a consequence. In the past 30 years, even with the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on the drug war, little good had come of it. We have vacillated from efforts to stop the drugs at the source to severely punishing the users, yet nothing has improved. The drug war encourages violence. Government violence against nonviolent users is notorious and has led to the unnecessary prison overpopulation. Innocent taxpayers are forced to pay for all this so-called justice.

On the other hand, Mexico was more concerned about their economy than the war on terror. Almost 90% of Mexico's trade goes to the United States, while only 15% of U.S. exports go to Mexico (Andreas and Biersteker 12). Mexico had the need to keep the U.S.-Mexico border open for business. The Fox Administration wanted in exchange for greater cooperation on the anti-terrorism front, the assurance of not only "unimpeded commerce across the Rio Grande, but also a migrant deal with Washington that would include regularizing the status of some 3.5 million unauthorized Mexican workers in the United States" (13). The U.S. concern about Mexico is that it might become a terrorist risk in the future. But Mexico supports the U.S. in its campaign against terrorism. Andreas and Biersteker argue that "the definition of drug trafficking and illegal immigration as significant threats to national security, positioned Mexico as a potential threat to the U.S." (56).

In 2004, the amount Bush and the Democrats spent on TV ads far exceeded what they had spent in past elections. During the 2002 mid-term national elections, the Republicans and Democrats broke the spending record on Spanish language ads. They poured \$9 million into 14,000 Spanish language spots on TV and radio. In 2004, Democrats and Republicans spent more than \$12 million (Hutchinson 82). All of Bush's efforts to regain the attention of the Latino population had worked, Bush nabbed more than one-third of the Latino vote, more than any other Republican president in history (89). Despite the fact that president Bush was more aware of the importance of the Latino vote to win the elections in 2006, political ads in the election campaigns were full of various racial stereotypes, images, and language that negatively depicted the Mexican and Latino community.

In 2005, Bush signed a law to make it harder for illegal immigrants to get drivers'

licenses and another to build a wall along the Mexico-U.S. border (Hutchinson 47). The U.S.-Mexico border fence has 3 main goals: the prevention of the entry of terrorists (although the border with Canada remains open); stopping the flow of drugs into the U.S.; and preventing the flow of weapons brought into the U.S., which are smuggled into Mexico. The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Acts of 2005 were fueling the debate about immigration. The legislation passed with “the support of 203 Republican members, while only 36 Democratic voted for it” (McIlwain and Caliendo 131). James Sensenbrenner, a Republican from Wisconsin emphasized the enforcement aspect of the bill as one of its chief attributes, he referred to immigrants as “those breaking the law, whether they are smugglers, [...] employers hiring illegal workers, or alien gang members terrorizing communities” (131). The language of immigration had become focused on stereotypes and it is within this context that the debate about immigration became even more heated in 2006.

In 2006, the immigration issue exploded into national debate between pro- and anti-immigrant reform forces (Hutchinson 110). According to Earl Ofari Hutchinson, battles over illegal immigration “will profoundly alter the way Americans look at immigrants” (161). Charlton McIlwain and Stephen M. Caliendo analyzed the language of immigration in the 2006 election ads of Republicans and Democrats. They focused on the terms that targeted immigrants, a particular immigrant population as a whole (e.g., Mexicans), or even specific types of classes of immigrants (e.g., undocumented workers)” (133). The terms that are used in the ads “reflect how the candidates view, and how they suggest viewers should see, the immigration issue” (133). The table on the following page shows the fact that immigrants are first grouped according to their pervasive criminality. And the terms that candidates, both Republican and Democrat, most frequently used to describe Mexican immigrants in political advertisements:

<b>Criminal</b>			
Criminals	Danger	Illegal	Kill
Arrested	Deported	Immigrants	Rape
Bad	Drunk	Illegal aliens	Murder
Break laws	Gang members	Illegal immigrants	Terrorists
Crime	Hurt	Undocumented workers	
Crime rate			
Heinous crimes			
Bail			
Released			(134)

The table shows how the link between immigrants and crime was used in political ads in 2006, almost as common knowledge. Immigrants’ “criminal nature” was described and used to spread fear and anxiety among many Americans and to focus more attention onto issues of immigration along the U.S.-Mexico border. Republican congressional candidate Randy Graf of Arizona opened his speech with the title: “Drugs, criminals, terrorists – we just don’t know” (134). The negative tone of these advertisements does not only link criminality to immigrants, but it goes even beyond that, suggesting that immigrants are linked to “the most deplorable crimes imaginable” (135). The immigrant threat and the idea that all immigrants are criminals were dominant themes in the political advertisements. Statistics were also used to show how serious the White House should be about these issues. By stating that “Over 50 million immigrants and dependents are already crowded into our communities”, illegal immigration is presented as a situation that is out of control; in some ads “numerical precision was replaced with exponentialized and abstract designations” (McIlwain and Caliendo 136). In the 2008 election campaign, Bush argued that the issue of illegal immigration is complicated, but that it can be resolved; “if we find a sensible and humane way to deal with people here illegally.”<sup>23</sup>

To conclude, during the Bush administration immigration was an important element in national debates (Hutchison 14) and will continue to be. The pre-9/11 U.S. border enforcement focused on drugs and illegal immigration (Andreas and Biersteker 4). Most critics argue that after 9/11, the Bush administration made a mistake when they permitted

<sup>23</sup> “State of the Union address to Congress, January 28, 2008.”

the formation of a high-level commission to investigate ways to improve security after 9/11 (Chomsky 28). Chomsky states that “[t]he Bush administration responded by shifting agents to the Mexican border, which was not a concern of the 9/11 commission, but it is important to prevent a flood of immigrants (28). Bush invested in a new and expanding counterterrorism effort to secure the borders. Once again, the cause of the problems was not addressed in political debates. It seems to occur that Clinton and Bush both were dealing with the issues of illegal immigration and the ‘porous’ border with Mexico. But the perception of Mexican immigrants remained negative in the media and in national discussions. Furthermore, U.S. demand in illicit drugs is not mentioned in the debates. Also, the reason of Mexican immigrants to cross the border illegally can be linked to the increasing drug cartel violence in Mexico. However, politicians blame the illegal immigrants for the increasing violence in the U.S., without bringing forth a solution to solve these problems. The cause is not investigated or considered to be a key to the solution of immigration problems. Even though Bush mentioned the importance of controlling and fighting racial profiling, anti-immigrant sentiment increased and the Latino vote seemed to be more important than actual discrimination situations in U.S. society.

### 3.3 Barack H. Obama

During the debates for the upcoming election of 2008, Obama and Joe Biden argued about the seriousness of hate crimes. The perception of illegal and legal immigrants had still negative connotations because of the illegal immigration debate of 2006. Bush also referred to hate crimes in debates, but did not take serious action during his presidency.

Obama and Biden claim:

Obama: There is a consequence to the demagoguery [over immigration] – hate crimes against Latinos have gone way up over the last year. [...] It indicates the degree to which a president has to set a tone of bringing all people together as opposed to excluding people. And being willing to talk about racial issues when they arise and having a civil rights division of the justice department that is aggressive about investigating. So, what can we do to strengthen the enforcement of hate crimes legislation? It is something that I will prioritize as president but I don’t want to have to wait until I am.

Biden: We can and we should move [the pending Hate Crimes legislation] forward. The impediment right now is the president. We need someone in the civil rights division who is aggressive in going after these hate crimes. I would not wait.<sup>24</sup>

Contrary to George W. Bush, Obama addressed the importance of racial profiling in the very beginning of the election debates in 2008. Obama addressed the fact that African Americans and Hispanics are more than twice as likely as whites to be searched and

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<sup>24</sup> Iowa Brown and Black Presidential Forum, December 1, 2007 (accessed June 22, 2012)  
<<http://www.bbpresforum.org/transcript.html>>

arrested when they are stopped by the police. The unfairness in treating racial minorities different than white Americans had to stop.<sup>25</sup> Obama believes the time to fix the U.S. broken immigration system is now; he is in favor of stronger border enforcement and “has properly identified the magnitude of the immigration problem” (Talbot 120-121). Obama states that the undocumented population is exploding and that it is his priority to stop the current wave of illegal immigration into the United States. Furthermore, Obama made clear in the back-to-back speeches with McCain in 2008, that America has nothing to fear from today’s immigrants:

For all the noise and anger that too often surrounds the immigration debate, America has nothing to fear from today’s immigrants. They have come here for the same reason that families have always come here – for the hope that in America, they could build a better life for themselves and their families. Like the waves of immigrants that came before them and the Hispanic Americans whose families have been here for generations, the recent arrival of Latino immigrants will only enrich our country.<sup>26</sup>

Obama distanced himself from the Latino threat narrative, by comforting U.S. citizens to look at the positive effects of Latino immigrants, instead of all the negative portrayals that dominated U.S. society. His Republican opponent John McCain, did the same and was positive about the new Hispanic immigrants ‘enriching America’:

Let me close by talking briefly about my respect and gratitude for the contributions of Hispanic-Americans to the culture, economy and security of the country I have served all my adult life. I represent Arizona where Spanish was spoken before English was, and where the character and prosperity of our state owes a great deal to the many Arizonans of Hispanic descent who live there. And I know this country, which I love more than almost anything, would be the poorer were we deprived of the patriotism, industry and decency of those millions of Americans whose families came here<sup>27</sup> from Mexico, Central and South America.

Both Republican and Democrat candidates were more tolerant toward the Latino community. Once again, the importance of the Latino vote cannot be left out. However, what clearly changed in the perception of Mexican immigrants is that politicians were more positive in 2008, than two year before. Obama blurred the distinction between immigrants and white Americans when he ended his speech with the words: “Todos somos Americanos.”:

Ultimately, the danger to the American way of life is not that we will be overrun by those who do not look like us or do not yet speak our language. The danger will come if we fail to recognize the humanity of [immigrants] – if we withhold from them the opportunities we take for granted, and create a servant class in our midst. [...] America can only prosper when all Americans prosper –

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<sup>25</sup> Obama, Campaign Booklet “Blueprint for Change” (2008): 49.

<sup>26</sup> Obama and McCain back-to-back speeches at NALEO, June 28, 2008. (accessed June 24, 2012) <[http://www.ontheissues.org/Archive/2008\\_NALEO\\_Immigration.htm](http://www.ontheissues.org/Archive/2008_NALEO_Immigration.htm)>

<sup>27</sup> McCain back-to-back speech at NALEO, June 28, 2008. (accessed June 24, 2012) <<http://www.cfr.org/immigration/mccains-speech-naleo-immigration/p16688>>



brown, black, white, Asian, and Native American. That's the idea that lies at the heart of my campaign, and that's the idea that will lie at the heart of my presidency. Because we are all Americans. Todos somos Americanos. And in this country, we rise and fall together.<sup>28</sup>

Immigrants, and thereby Mexican immigrants were supported in political speeches. Obama and McCain both argued about the enrichment of the United States with the presence of Latino immigrants. The same occurred during the election of George W. Bush who glorified the Hispanics to win the Latino vote. Obama argued that the U.S. media is partly to blame for feeding a kind of xenophobia. "There's a reason why hate crimes against Hispanic people doubled last year. If you have people like Lou Dobbs [CNN] and Rush Limbaugh ginning things up."<sup>29</sup>

Barack H. Obama inherited a lot of problems of his predecessor; the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic crisis, bankruptcy of the U.S. and increasing nativist sentiment in U.S. society. However, Obama showed in speeches and debates in 2008 that nativist sentiment should change in the future. For instance, Obama claims that he does not believe in the scapegoating of immigrants for high unemployment rates, what needs to be done is to get control of the U.S.-Mexico border and "immigration should not be used as a tactic to divide."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, Obama concludes that the lack of enforcement sets tone for more hate crimes between white Americans and Latinos. Since 2009, Obama had different meetings with president Calderón from Mexico to discuss the war on drugs. What important is that Obama acknowledged the fact that Mexican immigrants cannot be blamed for high unemployment rates, drug-related crime and that not all can be labeled as illegal immigrants. Anti-immigrant sentiment and increasing nativism among white Americans led to a more active attitude towards Mexico's drug war. Moreover, during her visit to Mexico in 2009, minister of foreign affairs Hillary Clinton concluded that the U.S.'s "insatiable demand for illegal drugs fuels the drug trade" (Farrell 65) and that the United States has the highest rate of illegal drug use in the world. For the first time in years, the high demand of the U.S. of illicit drugs is addressed to be fueling Mexico's drug war. In 2010, there was an increase in communication between Mexico and the United States; various meetings between president Obama and president Calderón made it clear that a partnership would be more effective than working independently (Farrell 94).

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<sup>28</sup> Obama and McCain back-to-back speeches at NALEO, June 28, 2008. (accessed June 24, 2012) <[http://www.ontheissues.org/Archive/2008\\_NALEO\\_Immigration.htm](http://www.ontheissues.org/Archive/2008_NALEO_Immigration.htm)>

<sup>29</sup> Obama Palm Beach Fundraiser, May 22, 2008. <[http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2008/06/barack\\_obama\\_vs\\_lou\\_dobbs.html](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2008/06/barack_obama_vs_lou_dobbs.html)>

<sup>30</sup> Democratic Debate in Los Angeles before Super Tuesday, January 31, 2008. <[http://articles.cnn.com/2008-01-31/politics/dem.debate.transcript\\_1\\_hillary-clinton-debate-stake?\\_s=PM:POLITICS](http://articles.cnn.com/2008-01-31/politics/dem.debate.transcript_1_hillary-clinton-debate-stake?_s=PM:POLITICS)>

To conclude, President Obama is often blamed for not taking serious action regarding the illegal immigration issues and the war on drugs. Yet, he also reduced the notion of all Mexican immigrants being criminals, as Bush once stated. Besides, the awareness of “co-responsibility” for the drug war has found a place on the U.S. political agenda. Obama realized after his meeting with Calderón in 2009, that the war on drugs must come to an end, or else the stigmatization of immigrants, especially Mexican immigrants, would end in more racial violence between different groups. The presence of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment were elements that contributed to a more active attitude toward the drug war. For the first time in years, the Obama administration acknowledged U.S. demand for illegal drugs as a factor that fueled Mexico’s drug war. Clinton and Bush were during their presidencies caught up in the issues with illegal immigration, but never addressed their own demand for illegal drugs as the cause of the increasing violence of Mexico’s drug war. Obama even argued that the media is also partly to blame for the negative portrayal of Mexican immigrants.

#### **Chapter 4: Stereotyping, Racialization, and Conflict: The Effects of Media Imagery and Political Rhetoric for the Mexican-American Community**

The negative perception of Mexican Americans by white Americans is largely a result of the influence of immigration. In addition to the immigration debate, Mexico's drug war is another one of the reasons that Mexican Americans have been stereotyped as drug addicts, criminals, and a community that will not adapt to American culture. The media and politicians have generalized Mexican Americans a single group, eliminating the differences between legal immigrants and illegal immigrants. The threat of the United States being invaded by Mexican immigrants was a heated and recurring theme in debates about the future of the American economy. White Americans tend to perceive Mexicans as threatening in two ways. First, the high number of Mexican immigrants coming to the Southwest since the 1980s contributed to the feeling of white Americans of being "invaded". Second, newspaper coverage of the drug war and political rhetoric about the immigration debate fueled the preexisting fears among many white Americans that Mexican immigrants were contributing to the increase in crime in the United States (Oskamp 28).

The media presented the Hispanic and Latino community as a threat and caused fear and anxiety among white Americans. The result of media imagery and political rhetoric has been stereotyping, racialization, and conflict – not only for Mexican immigrants but for the entire Mexican-American community. The distinction between illegal and legal Mexicans was blurred in the media, and Mexican Americans began to question their own identity. Leo R. Chavez argues that Mexican immigrants in particular have been "represented as the quintessential 'illegal aliens', which distinguishes them from other immigrant groups" (3). Chavez states that the social identity of Mexican immigrants has been plagued by "the mark of illegality, which in much public discourse means that they are criminals and thus illegitimate members of society, undeserving of societal benefits, including citizenship" (3).

This chapter will examine the effects of the media imagery and political rhetoric for the Mexican-American community. The first part will examine to what extent the stereotyping and racialization have influenced the image of Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans constantly have to defend themselves against the negative image the media and the immigration debate have given them. Therefore, this chapter will analyze the consequences of the negative portrayal for the Mexican-American community, which

include conflicts between white Americans and Mexican Americans. Ultimately, what was the response of the Mexican-American community, and how did it deal with stereotyping, stigmatization and anti-immigrant sentiment?

#### 4.1 Racialization, the Question of Whiteness, and Unnoticed Racism

One of the consequences of the negative media imagery and political rhetoric has been the stereotyping and racialization of the Mexican-American community as an illegal and non-white group. George J. Sánchez argues in his book *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* that Mexican-American culture during that period remained a “phase”, “always a prelude to the attractions of a ‘purely’ Mexican or ‘purely’ American stance” (8). In the 1990s, the media and politicians referred to Mexican Americans as “illegal aliens”, Mexicans, Chicanos, Hispanics, Latinos, and even today, there is still no specific category for Mexican immigrants living in the United States. Mexican immigrants, both legal and illegal, have been the victim of discrimination since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just because Mexican Americans speak the same language as other Latin-American minorities in the United States, they are mostly referred to as Hispanics or Latinos. In this way the media and the American government try to diminish the differences between Puerto Rican Americans, Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and so on, to create one minority group and cast this group as the upcoming threat. Many white Americans share a “all pay for one” mentality; just because some Mexican Americans are criminals or do drugs, white Americans extend negative judgments to all of them (De Fina 161). Katherine Beckett and Theodore Sasson argue that “when it comes to concern about crime (and drugs), it appears that the public is following the leadership of politicians and the media, not the other way around” (126).

In general, Mexican Americans have not reached a very clear consensus on whether they are a racial group, or a cultural group, or even if they are white or nonwhite (Moore 158). Mexican Americans often consider themselves as white, and therefore identify with the values and standards they perceive are held by white Americans, although many white Americans do not share the same opinion of Mexican Americans’ ethnicity (Hutchinson 32). The question of whiteness has been a returning element in American history. For instance, in the 1920s “nonwhite” Latin Americans did not belong “in the republic, and could never be accepted as full-fledged members” (Gerstle 5). This led to the debate about whether the Latino identity corresponds with the “white identity” of the majority of the American population. Linda Martín Alcoff argues in her essay “The Whiteness Question”

that whiteness has always been fractured by class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity and claims that the Latino identity does not correspond with whiteness. Mostly because whiteness is considered homogeneous, and the Latino identity is mixed (Alcoff 208). Mexican immigrants can often relate to the African American community. Different scholars have researched which communities Mexican immigrants identify themselves with. For example, Nicholas de Genova argues in his research that “Mexican migrants thus negotiated their own re-racialization as Mexican, always in relation to both a dominant whiteness and its polar opposite, a subjugated and denigrated blackness” (De Genova 8). The question of whiteness is complex, especially within the Mexican-American community and their struggle for self-awareness.

Martha E. Giménez argues that people “can be reduced to interchangeable units that can be counted for political and administrative purposes” (7). Unnoticed racism is a powerful indicator “of the pervasiveness and strength of racism” (Giménez 7). Because Mexican immigrants are sometimes not visible as a ‘community’, but rather are ‘invisible’ within the Latino or Hispanic label, these racist labels remain unnoticed. The racist labels ignore national-origin differences among people, thus blurring the differences between “minority groups” and immigrants (Giménez 7), and these racist labels reinforce racism:

- They reduce people to a set of stereotyped, generally negative traits which presumably define their culture and identity and predict a given set of negative behaviors (for example; crime, drug-addiction)
- They reduce people to interchangeable generic entities, negating the qualitative differences between minorities and immigrants. (Giménez 7)

Mexican Americans in particular have been represented “as the quintessential ‘illegal aliens’, which distinguishes them from other immigrant groups” (Chavez 3). In the Latino Threat Narrative, Latinos, and mostly Mexican Americans, are perceived by white Americans as ‘the undesirable Other’. This perception consists of the idea that this growing minority is an invading force from ‘south of the border’ that is bent on “reconquering land that was formerly theirs (the U.S. Southwest) and destroying the American way of life” (Chavez 2). The social identity of Mexican Americans has been marked by illegality, and they are therefore perceived as criminals and illegitimate members who are not wanted (3).

The question of whiteness and the different racial categorizations Mexican Americans are faced with are also affected by the growing drug violence in the United States. De Fina argues that the widespread use of ethnic categories “favors the formation of a stereotyped vision in which the identity of individuals is strongly determined by their ethnic affiliation and the social meanings associated with that affiliation” (145). Negative

stereotypes are fueled by the drug war, and Mexican Americans constantly have to defend themselves against possible accusations of drug trafficking across the border (De Fina 41).

#### 4.2 The Racial Impact of the War on Drugs

Doris Marie Provine states that racism makes it easy “to construct a frightening image of the racial ‘other’ as out of control, violent, and sexually predatory” (Provine 164) and that racial fears and stereotypes of Mexican Americans play a dominant role in American society (89). For instance in the 1990s, young Mexican American males were often seen as gang members, responsible for drug-related crime in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border. Being stereotyped as gang member had serious consequences for Cesar Rene Arce in 1995:

January 31, 1995. William Masters, a white man, was out for a late night walk. He spotted Cesar Rene Arce and David Hillo, two Mexican American teenagers, spray painting columns under a freeway. Masters was carrying a loaded gun in his funny pack [...] and he planned to report the boys to proper authorities. He was tired of seeing gang-type graffiti all over the city. Cesar Arce approached Masters and demanded that he hand over the piece of paper. A scuffle ensued. [...] Then Hillo came over and help up a screwdriver in a threatening manner. Masters gave up the paper and began walking away. Suddenly, Masters pulled his gun out of his funny pack, swung around, and began firing at the teenagers. Masters hit Arce in the back and Hillo in the buttocks. Arce died as a result of this shooting. (Lee 156-157)

Even though Masters was initially arrested and jailed on suspicion of murder, he was exonerated on the ground that he acted in self-defense. Despite the fact that the victim was shot in the back. The local community voiced loud support for Masters. “His vigilant anti-graffiti efforts were appreciated and Masters was honored as a crime-fighting hero” (Lee 158). This example shows that the Mexican American youth are stigmatized because of the existing stereotypes that labels them as “gang members, drug dealers, and criminals”. The perception of dangerousness among many white Americans in the 1990s can be seen as an indirect consequence of Mexico’s drug war; the negative stereotypes are fueled by the media coverage of the drug war.

With the rising violence and drug-related criminality within the United States, the division between white Americans and the Mexican American community increased. In U.S. society, Mexicans have to deal with an “uneven judicial playing field”, “in which the likelihood for arrest, detention, conviction, and extreme sentencing is much greater than for other segments of the population of the Southwest” (Vélez-Ibáñez 192). In her book *Unequal under Law: Race in the War on Drugs*, Provine argues that federal, state, and local governments claim to be, and to some extent are, actively committed to racial equality, while at the same time different immigration and crime policies prove otherwise

(Provine 5). Provine shows in her book that racial minorities tend to be overrepresented in U.S. prisons and states that racial minorities, especially the African American community and the Hispanic community have always been the target of the harshest drug laws (3). She concludes that the association of minorities with drug abuse and drug-related crime “feeds the convenient fiction that racial minorities are responsible for their own victimization” (32). Mexican immigrants were seen as “illegal aliens” and their presence was unwanted and, therefore, the white majority claims to bear no responsibility for the “unassimilated others” in American society (32).

According to Cynthia Kwei Yung Lee, racial stereotypes affect all people, including prosecutors, judges and jurors (Delgado 209). Lee states that stereotypes play “a more important role in our thinking and interactions with other people than we may be willing to admit” (210), especially when those stereotypes have harmful consequences. Latino stereotypes are varied and complex, and not all Latinos suffer from the same stereotypes because some Latinos look like they are white, while other Latinos do not (Delgado 207). Lee argues in her essay that there are three recurring Latino stereotypes in American society: the “Latino as foreigner” stereotype, the “Latino as illegal immigrant” stereotype and the “Latino as criminal” stereotype (207). Mexican Americans are often perceived as foreigners, outsiders to American society, and they are always seen as immigrants. The “Latino as criminal” stereotype is linked to the “Latino as illegal immigrant” stereotype, “because the undocumented are often characterized as lawbreakers” (208). The influence of the ‘spill over violence’ of Mexico’s drug war in U.S. border states has sent unprecedented numbers of poor, minority citizens to prison (Provine 18). African Americans (56%) and Hispanics/Latinos (23%) are the most imprisoned ethnic groups and the focus of attention of the U.S. press and politics is on nonwhites (18).

The media seems to be ‘silent’ about the demand for drugs created mostly by white Americans, who are partly to blame for the continuing war on drugs. Despite the fact that white Americans are leading the demand for cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine, they are often portrayed as innocent regarding drug use. Meanwhile African Americans are portrayed as “crack-users” and Mexican Americans as “marijuana-users”(19). Images of drug use became racialized and the suspicion of racial minorities and fearful assumptions continued to be present in American society. The media used stereotypes of African Americans and Hispanics to create an image of the growing threat of minorities. Race remained relevant in sentencing. Paul Blythe researched the representation of minorities in newspaper articles and showed the recurring “white innocence” in the following example:

“Most of the dealers, as with past drug trends, are black or Hispanic, police said. Haitians also compromise a large number of those selling cocaine rocks, authorities said [...] Whites rarely sell the cocaine rocks” (Blythe 4668). Even though Blythe researched the representation of “white innocence” in the 1980s, the representation of Hispanics/ Mexican Americans remained the same in the 1990s and the 2000s. The theme of racial danger continued to be a part of the media and political debates. Some scholars like Provine, argue that it is very difficult to eliminate prejudices in American society, because they already exist and play an important role. Provine concludes:

Racial stereotypes tend to persist not just because of selective information processing, but also because of the way people differentiate themselves from others, what cognitive psychologists call the out group homogeneity effect. [...] Individuals tend to accentuate differences from groups they perceive as different from themselves, at the same time minimizing the differences among individuals in the out group. (Provine 157).

Mexico’s drug war has had a major effect on Mexican Americans in the United States. They are stigmatized as being criminals, invaders, drug users and dealers, and these negative stereotypes are also fueled by the rising violence of gang members and cartels coming north. During the 1990s and after September 11, 2001 the image of the ‘undesirable Others’, who have typically been nonwhite, non-English speaking people from poor countries, returned once again and caused white Americans to fear that America was “being invaded by illegal immigrants”. The distinction between white Americans and Mexican Americans caused Anti-Mexican sentiment and racialized fears of immigrants became once again important elements of the political discourse (Nevins 144-147).

#### 4.3 Anti-Mexican Sentiment and Conflicting Situations

Anti-Mexican sentiment has been a recurring element in American history. During the 1990s, the increasing number of Mexican immigrants was referred to as a “threatening invasion” in the media and political debates. The situation would become even worse when private vigilante groups were formed to guard the U.S.-Mexico border. David M. Potter argues that the question of nationality is central to the United States, and that because virtually “all Americans are descended from immigrants, they were compulsively preoccupied with the question of national identity” (Sánchez 4). Potter notes that “Americans feel deprived of an organic connection to the past, especially when confronted with their diverse religious, linguistic, and political heritage. The result has been an



obsessive fixation on the elusive tenets of Americanism” (Sánchez 4). The perception of being invaded by Mexicans led to conflicts between white Americans and Mexicans.

One of the conflicts that surfaced in the 1990s was the “English Only” campaign. The Spanish language has always been seen as a threat to the American nation, because language is interwoven with culture, nationality, and it is necessary for a certain sense of uniformity and cultural homogeneity. Language diversity and the forming of a national identity are complex structures in the lives of Mexican Americans, and therefore it seems that Mexican Americans are in a constant state of dilemma, constantly wondering if white Americans consider them as equals in American society. The Republican Party claimed that bilingual education did not have positive effects for U.S. society; it would lead to unemployment of many Mexican Americans, because one language was more than enough to learn. Bilingual education would harm the process of Latino children to become fluent in English. Many Republicans argued that these children would end up as gang members and drug dealers “making your city unsafe.” In 1998, former Republican Ron Unz dumped millions of dollars into the campaign to pass Proposition 227 in California, which denied bilingual education to Latino children. Unz argued that “bilingual education was costly, wasteful and ineffectual; non-English speaking students, mainly Hispanics, did not learn much English in bilingual classes; and the programs were a sneaky way to promote multiculturalism” (Hutchinson 69). The English Only campaign quickly became a national issue, when Unz decided to involve other states as well. Hutchinson claims that the “English only” amendment nourished the racist myth that immigrants do not want to learn English (71). Mexican immigrants were being haunted by the stereotypes that were dominant in American society. The debate about Proposition 227 was very similar to the debate about Proposition 187, the proposition that denied public services to undocumented immigrants. These actions from (former) politicians led to conflicts between white Americans and Mexicans. It fueled anti-immigrant hysteria and the insecurity among Mexican Americans that caused them to stay isolated in their own communities. Many white Americans shared the opinion of Unz that Mexican children just had to learn English in public schools, because bilingual education would only lead to uneducated, unemployed Mexican Americans, which would be a disaster for the American economy. On the other hand, Clinton also argued that there were positive side effects of bilingual education, for it would be enriching to the American economy and foreign relations if there were more bilingual Americans. America could renew her contact with Latin America and bilingualism could be considered valuable for society.

In 2005, one conflict that led to many different opinions among white Americans and Mexican Americans was the Minuteman Project. The Minuteman Project was founded by a group of private individuals, who saw it as their duty to monitor the U.S.-Mexico border's flow of illegal immigrants. Although the project described itself as "a citizens' Neighborhood Watch on our Border", they are considered by many to be an extreme nativist group, who attracted even more media attention to illegal immigration. The website of the Minuteman Project was filled with "xenophobic, nativist, [...] race-tinged code word taunts at the 'invasion' of 'hordes' of 'illegal aliens'" (Hutchinson 145). There were reports of taunts, harassment and physical assaults on some Latinos in Texas and California. These actions were the consequences of the national attention the project obtained. The anti-immigrant sentiment and Latino bashing attitude of the Minutemen were strengthened by support of the white nationalist community, which wanted to help stop the flow of illegal immigrants coming across the border. They would control the U.S.-Mexico border and stop the "invasion". As a counter reaction, Latinos marched in the streets and demanded amnesty and a virtually open border (146). However, the Minutemen, though always careful to disavow the racists among them, "remained passionately convinced that the majority of Americans agreed with them that illegal immigration was a plague on American society and that harsh employer sanctions, tough criminal penalties and the militarizing of the border were the only ways to eliminate it" (Hutchinson 146).

However, not only white Americans experienced the "invasion" of Mexicans as threatening. In the 2000s, the African American community had little understanding of "the political repression and economic destitution that drove many Mexican, Cuban and other Latin American immigrants to seek refuge in the United States" (Hutchinson 46). By 2004, Latinos displaced the African American community as "the largest nonwhite minority in America" (Hutchinson 172). In 2007, it was estimated that Mexico's population would grow by one million per year for the next three decades (Hutchinson 46). The African American community was alarmed by this, and feared that Mexicans would take their jobs, overcrowd their neighborhoods and become more visible in American society than the black community. Hate-related violence occurred in jails between African American and Latino inmates. Violence between the two minorities in jail was a response to "racism and deprivation, negative stereotypes provided a convenient rationale for their violent acts" (Hutchinson 63). Some researchers have found that "those individuals who suffer from low self-esteem or have serious self-image problems are much more likely to

view others, especially those they consider rivals, through the warped lens of racial stereotypes” (Hutchinson 63). Because Mexico’s drug war led to more harsher sentences for minorities in the United States, Mexicans were overcrowding U.S. jails and felt isolated. For decades Mexican Americans have been followed by negative stereotypes and stigmas, which are mostly created by the U.S. press and politicians. Because the drug war is still controlling the state of affairs in Mexican society, many Mexicans move to the U.S. in the hope of a better life. Those that do come constantly have to defend themselves against the negative associations with the drug war in Mexico.

#### 4.4 Reactions of the Mexican American Community

The identification of Mexican immigrants as “Mexican American” is important to the larger society. After being framed as Latinos and Hispanics, the majority of the Mexican-American community argued that “they see themselves as a distinctive people, rather than as a people or stock fully merged with an all-encompassing American identity” (Moore and Cuéllar 8). Many Mexican Americans accept many “self-depreciatory stereotypes”; however, they do tend to blame discrimination for at least some of their problems (8). In addition to the different labels white Americans used for Mexican Americans, they were mostly defined as a “problem population” due to the immigration issues occurring since the 1990s. The negative portrayals of Mexican immigrants as criminals and “illegal aliens” led to the isolation of many Mexican Americans (Moore and Cuéllar 124). Not only did Mexican immigrants have to adjust to a strange culture, customs and language, but they also had to deal with the negative perception of their native country from the start (Hutchinson 46). Contact between white Americans and Mexican Americans has always been limited, mostly because of white Americans’ rejection of the Spanish language, Mexican food, music and folk religion (Moore and Cuéllar 127).

Latino activists have waged a furious battle for decades against the image of poor Mexicans invading the U.S., as well as against the depiction of Mexicans as “lazy, immoral, crime-prone, drug dealers, illegal aliens, service workers, and mothers with packs of ragged children” (Hutchinson 50-51). By 2000, Latinos had become more aware of their power as a group; Latinos, and especially Mexican Americans in California, complained about discrimination after the 2000 presidential election campaign. They saw the Voting Rights Acts of 1965, which prohibited language discrimination and restricted ballots, as an important tool that would help them to attract more attention to their situation. “The Voting Rights Act was an especially powerful new weapon that Latino groups brandished”

(Hutchinson 86). Lobby groups were established to promote the importance of Spanish and bilingual education. More Mexican Americans felt comfortable being a part of the Latino community, because they finally got a voice to speak up in American society.<sup>31</sup>

Even in 2003, the stereotypes of Mexicans remained unchanged in the media. In Hollywood, and in different TV shows, Mexican men were still portrayed as “greasers” and “gang members.” And many Latino activists, such as Hector Flores, President of the League of United Latin American Citizens, pointed to the damage that stereotypes “have wreaked in poisoning ethnic relations, stoking the racial fires and reinforcing the destructive images of Latinos among many Americans” (Hutchinson 51). Flores quickly made the connection between such portrayals and images and the damage to the Latino image “that drives fears, misperceptions and even hatreds of many Americans toward Latinos, especially recent immigrants” (Hutchinson 51-52). Flores concludes that “now more than ever, immigrants are placed under intense scrutiny by others in America” (52). Many Latinos are dissatisfied with both of the major parties and some surveys from the Pew Hispanic Center show that Latinos, to some extent, are holding the Republican Party responsible for what they perceive to be the negative consequences of the immigration debate (181). “The general lumping of all Latinos into one group of people” (Gracia 9), which is often based on stereotypes, is feared by many Latinos. However, some Mexican Americans accept the stereotypes that haunt their community, if they do not affect their jobs, children or other important parts of life.

The Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) is an organization that stands up for the rights of Mexican Americans, Hispanics and Latinos. It stimulates political empowerment and self-determination in the Mexican-American community. MAPA demonstrated during the debates about Proposition 187 and Proposition 227 and it made Mexican Americans more aware of their own situation and how to deal with it as a strong group. In 2006, many Mexican Americans protested against “the draconian anti-Latino legislation” pending in Congress (Takaki 433). Their action “A Day Without a Mexican” was initiated to send a message to America: the economy needs their labor.<sup>32</sup> Mexican Americans became more aware of their value in American society. The American economy needed their labor, and it was time for the Mexican Americans to speak up

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<sup>31</sup> Mexican Americans were often described as “the silent minority” because they were not as active in demonstrating for their rights as the African Americans (Moore).

<sup>32</sup> Reyes, Raul. “Latinos Can You Hear Us Now?” *USA Today*, December 29, 2006. (accessed June 19, 2012) <[http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-12-28-reyes-edit\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2006-12-28-reyes-edit_x.htm)>

against this “exploding racially tinged nativism” (Takaki 433). Productive dialogues are necessary to change the negative perception of Mexican Americans. Some members of the Latino community once stated: “neither of us is an ‘other’, necessarily opposed, different, and alien no need to fear, no real threat with which the white Americans need to be concerned with” (Gracia 210). Furthermore, the immigrant marches in 2006 were a huge success, the U.S. and Mexican flags were used as symbols of inclusion and exclusion (Chavez 158). The marches raised the nation’s consciousness “about the severity of congressional immigration proposals” (174). The unified voice of Mexican immigrants was finally active in U.S. society; demanding equal rights for all immigrants. Chavez argues that the immigrant marches forced Americans to think about “what unifies us as a nation? What does it mean to be an American?” (174). Commitment to equal opportunity would “signal society’s recognition of, and pragmatic support for, Latino social and cultural citizenship” (184).

To conclude, the stereotyping of Mexicans has a long history. The question of whiteness, racialization and stigmatization of Latinos, and especially the Mexican immigrants in the U.S., are components of the increasing anti-immigrant sentiment that is still present in American society today. In the 2000s, anti-immigration sentiment increased because of the increasing number of immigrants. In a 2006 National Survey of Latinos conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, more than 54% of the surveyed Latinos say that they have seen an increase in discrimination as a result of the immigration policy debate (Hutchinson 180). Since 2002, more Mexican Americans expressed confidence in Latino unity (180). Nativist sentiments among white Americans fueled new projects, such as the Minutemen Project, which created more fear and anxiety about the illegal immigration debate. By being stigmatized as illegal, criminal, drug-related Mexicans, many Mexican Americans are experiencing the consequences of the ongoing drug war in Mexico. However, increasing discrimination since 2006 led to the rise in Mexican American ethnic confidence. Mexican Americans saw the opportunities of being part of a large group, for instance the Latino community. Even though the group is made up of very different communities, and only has the Spanish language in common, together as a group they can stand up against discrimination in American society.

## Conclusion

Mexico's drug war has led to a negative public discourse about the Mexican-American community. Not only are Mexican immigrants stigmatized, but they also have to fight against nativist sentiment and discrimination on multiple levels in American society. Even though the actual goals of the war on drugs are often unclear, illegal immigration and the portrayal of Mexican immigrants were entangled in U.S. policies to fight the drug war. It can be said that the U.S. media and politicians can be held responsible for the negative image of Mexican immigrants in U.S. society. Newspapers as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* are fueling the negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans in the controversial discussion of illegal immigration. The question that guided this thesis is: to what extent has Mexico's drug war influenced the perception of Mexican immigrants by white Americans in the United States?

First, the historical background of Mexico's drug war in Chapter 1 showed that 'spill over' violence in the United States had strengthened the perception of an invasion of Mexican immigrants. Corruption of Mexican and U.S. law enforcement officers had made the border less secure, which led to an increase in border security. Even though the crime statistics in the U.S. decreased in the 1990s, Mexican immigrants were unjustly blamed for drug-related crimes and were often considered to be the cause of all the problems. The link between Mexican immigrants and crime is still a common theme in the U.S. media today. Hence, because of Mexico's drug war, there is a negative discourse in the U.S. media concerning Mexican immigrants in the United States, who are connected to the violence and drug-related.

Second, stereotypes of Mexicans are also closely linked to the drug war. Mexicans, who are often portrayed as criminals and drug lords, caused many white Americans to become an "anxious public" whose fear was fueled by the negative images and portrayals in the media and national debates. In the 1990s, anti-nativist sentiment was prevalent in U.S. society and this led to different confrontations between Mexican Americans and white Americans. Because the racial stereotypes of Mexican Americans are being repeated by academics, government officials, and the media, the negative image of Mexican Americans remains the same (Gracia 12).

Third, illegal immigration and drug-related violence became the new targets of the war on drugs. Public anxiety and anti-immigrant rhetoric of politicians led to the

perception of Mexicans immigrants as “illegal aliens”. No distinction was made between legal and illegal immigrants, and many Mexicans felt isolated in their new country. Many Republicans claimed that the United States was becoming overwhelmed by the Mexican culture and language and argued that it was their job to stop the invasion. Politicians tend to spread the message that Mexican immigrants will burden government services, threaten U.S. jobs, and bring crime with them to the United States. The third chapter describes how the language of immigration had become focused on stereotypes, which only caused more heated debates about immigration.

The ‘who to blame’ discussion among many scholars is still continuing today. The U.S. demand for illegal drugs, which is the cause of the drug war and keeps the Mexican cartels in business, is scarcely mentioned in U.S. newspapers. Instead, the U.S. media is often critical and dishonest about the Mexican supply side. Mexico is often portrayed as a “lawless country, which is led by criminals” (Lawson). While the United States, which is portrayed in the media as ‘the good guy’, who offered to help to reduce the increasing drug-related crime along the border but was rejected by Mexico. Scholars, such as Miriam Davidson and Eva Bertram, therefore argue that the problem of drug use should be addressed more often, and the focus should not only be on the supply side. Change in public thinking and public policy will allow policy makers to create strategies that are more effective than those used in the 1990s. Moreover, many critics argue that it is the U.S. press that is responsible for the fact that Americans are poorly informed regarding the truth about Mexican immigrants in their country. The expressed opinions of journalists and politicians are important determinants of support or opposition to immigration issues (Brader and Valentino 959). The main objective of the media is to fuel public debate about the presence of Mexican immigrants and spread anxiety among its audience. Even President Obama acknowledged the fact that the U.S. media is fueling anti-immigrant sentiment and presents Mexico as a lawless criminal country. With the awareness of Hilary Clinton that the U.S. demand for illegal drugs is partly responsible for Mexico’s drug war, a different attitude toward the war on drugs was established. Obama claims that he wants to change this negative portrayal of Mexican immigrants and is more active in working together with Mexico to control the drug war.

Many scholars argue about the responsibilities of the United States and Mexico, but the connection between Mexico’s drug war and the stigmatization of Mexican immigrants has not been researched on all possible levels. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to focus on the effects of Mexico’s drug war on U.S. society. Because 2010 is

considered the bloodiest year of Mexico's drug war, it would be interesting to learn how the situation will change over the next five years. The 'real' truth and the most interesting stories of the drug war are not known today, but it would be interesting to learn more about the situation on both sides of the border. How seriously concerned are white Americans about the Latino threat, and what further effects will the negative public discourse have on the Mexican-American community? More further research can contribute to the development in different fields; such as Border Studies, and Mexican American Studies. Anti-nativism is a recurring theme in U.S. society and an interesting phenomenon to investigate. The 1990s dealt with a pluralistic, multicultural, and ever-more fragmented American culture; the 2000s showed "a social process of further fragmentation" (Johnson 445) The recurring nativism among white Americans showed that America is a divided nation, where diversity became the new cultural ideal. Mexico's drug war has definitely consequences for the perception of Mexican Americans. But without addressing the causes of the drug war and illegal immigration, the discrimination of Mexican immigrants will continue. Active and persistent neutralization by the U.S. media, government, and academia is necessary to stop the stigmatization of Mexican immigrants, and the Mexican American community. Even though the distinction between white Americans and Mexican Americans isolated the Mexican American community, it led to a more ethnic awareness. Even though the Mexican-American community is known for not being one of the most politically active minority groups, it appreciates the opportunity to be part of a larger and more politically powerful Latino community, with whom it only has the same language in common. 'Becoming Latino' can strengthen the Mexican-American community, and together they can form a powerful opposition to the dominant white society.



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