

## RESPONSES TO MIGRATION

# The Bracero Program

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### Background

**B**etween 1942 and 1964, the United States and Mexico negotiated several executive agreements which made possible the recruitment of 4.6 million Mexican agricultural workers known as *braceros*.<sup>1</sup> The two governments arranged for the recruitment of railroad workers between 1943 and 1945. They also cooperated extensively in the return of unauthorized migrants to Mexico. During the early 1950s, the Mexican government made modest efforts at patrolling its side of the border and, at Mexico's request, the White House pressed Congress to adopt employer sanctions. The effort backfired and instead Congress adopted the "Texas proviso" in 1952, which exempted employers of unauthorized workers from any sanctions. This exemption was eliminated in 1986. The years between 1942 and 1964 mark the only period during which the two governments jointly managed labor migration between their countries.

The actual operation of the program evolved over time, though certain general features did not change. One or both governments operated migration stations in Mexico where rural farmworkers were selected as *bracero* candidates. From there they were transported to migration reception centers at the border, where grower

representatives hired them for relatively short periods—six weeks in many instances. Their employment and living conditions were regulated by the terms of an agreement negotiated by government representatives, with the U.S. officials representing the interests of farm employers and Mexican officials representing the interests of the *braceros*. Contracts for individual workers occasionally were renewed and extended. Otherwise, at the end of the contract period, workers were returned at employer expense to Mexico.

The recruitment of contract workers through the Bracero Program was accompanied by a parallel flow of unauthorized workers from Mexico. Most of these migrants entered without inspection and sometimes worked for growers that also employed *braceros*. Some also were *braceros* who “skipped” their contracts, thus becoming nonimmigrant overstayers. For a few years after World War II, some illegal entrants working for agricultural employers were legalized and given contracts under the *bracero* agreement. In the years before 1954 the flow of unauthorized migrants was larger—though it is not known by how much—than the movement of contract workers. In the 10 years after 1955, unauthorized migration from Mexico virtually disappeared. The manner in which the Bracero Program was run before 1954 stimulated unauthorized migration; after 1954 it substituted for it.

The Bracero Program offers numerous examples of the pattern of U.S. and Mexican responses to migration issues described in this report. This pattern consists of a triggering event or set of events that provoked debate and led to reactions in one country and counterreactions in the other. Indeed, this pattern repeats itself with small incidents themselves constituting “triggers” that also can be considered part of a broader process of debate, reactions, and counterreactions. Three examples are chosen here that illustrate this pattern: creating the Bracero Program (1941-43), changing the terms of bilateral cooperation (1953-54), and terminating the program (1961-63).

### **Creating the Program, 1941-43**

The events associated with the entry of the United States into World War II constitute the context in which the program came into existence. The United States sought Mexican government cooperation in the use of its neighbor’s airspace, the acquisition of critical raw materials, and the establishment of jointly operated listening posts in Mexican territory. To this end the U.S. government agreed to settle pending disputes regarding Mexico’s foreign debt and 1938 oil nationalization claims.

Entry into World War II led to a rapid expansion of the U.S. economy, ending the 1930s depression. In 1940 average annual unemployment was still high (14.6 percent). It dropped to 4.7 percent in 1942 and 1.9 percent in 1943. As early as

1941 California growers complained of shortages of harvest labor and petitioned the Immigration and Naturalization Service to admit Mexican temporary workers on an emergency basis, as had been done during World War I.

### ***Triggering Events***

Shortly after declaring war on Japan and Germany, the U.S. government created an interagency committee to explore the possibilities of recruiting Mexican agricultural workers. The Mexican government opposed unilateral recruitment on the grounds that the World War I program had not provided sufficient guarantees for migratory workers. Mexican government attitudes toward Mexican migration also had been shaped by unfortunate anti-Mexican incidents during the 1930s. The U.S. government perceived its potential domestic labor shortages as an obstacle in achieving desired levels of production in agriculture and in industries associated with the war effort. It did not want to complicate the wartime alliance with Mexico, however, by recruiting workers unilaterally. Neither did it want to alienate labor organizations, who opposed recruitment just as post-depression wages were starting to rise. The executive branch forged a compromise by reaching a migrant labor agreement with Mexico that met all key Mexican requirements and would be closer to the position of labor organizations. The agreement specified that the U.S. government was the legal employer (growers were subcontractors) and established labor protections in the contract that were consistent with Mexican law and far beyond any U.S. requirements. Because the Mexican government had observed frequent incidents of discrimination against Mexicans in Texas, it prohibited the employment of contract workers in that state for the duration of the war.

### ***Debate, Mexican Reaction, and Counterreactions***

Many growers were unsatisfied with the agreement when they discovered that, at least formally, it required certain labor benefits such as the payment of transportation to and from Mexico and living expenses while employed, which they would not have to provide for domestic workers. They lobbied Washington, and in 1943 Congress enacted legislation to provide for an alternative recruitment mechanism, used also for agricultural workers from the Caribbean. This legislation threatened the bilateral agreement, which had been created as the exclusive mechanism for the regulation of Mexican labor migration to the United States. To prevent Mexico's abrogation of the agreement, the State Department decided against the growers and determined that workers could not be recruited from Mexico under

the new legislation. Growers unhappy with the *bracero* agreement had only two other alternatives—to raise wages and make other adjustments that might attract domestic workers, or hire unauthorized workers. For the most part, they chose the latter. The growth of unauthorized migration from Mexico during World War II and afterwards created a new context of public debate and government negotiations in the early 1950s.

### **Changing the Terms of Bilateral Cooperation, 1953-54**

In the early 1950s, the U.S. public and the federal government perceived unauthorized migration from Mexico to have reached crisis proportions. INS apprehensions of Mexican migrants shot up from 64,000 in FY 1945 to 865,000 in FY 1953. The 1951 Presidential Commission on Migratory Labor reported that unauthorized workers took away jobs from domestic farmworkers and caused social problems. Criticism was directed at the U.S. government for not preventing the massive inflow of unauthorized workers at the same time that it expended money to recruit *braceros* in Mexico. U.S. officials blamed the Mexican government for setting unrealistic standards for the administration of the program, for interpreting the agreement unilaterally, and for undermining grower confidence in the program. Mexican government officials blamed the continued flow of unauthorized migrants on the failure of the U.S. Congress to enact employer sanctions. They blamed the growers for hiring and exploiting unauthorized workers. And they defended the bilateral agreement as the most appropriate way to regulate migration and set humane standards for Mexican workers in the United States.

### ***Triggering Events***

In 1953 the U.S. embassy in Mexico City sought to persuade the Mexican government to interdict would-be unauthorized migrants at travel embarkation points in the interior of Mexico before they got to the border. The Mexican government refused on the grounds that this would violate constitutional guarantees. The U.S. government also explored briefly the option of stationing troops at the border to prevent illegal entries. The attorney general made a widely publicized “fact-finding” trip to the California border, where he issued statements designed to build public support for later action to stop this migration. Late in 1953 the United States pressed the Mexican government to modify the labor agreement in ways that would make the program more attractive to growers. Mexico refused. The agreement expired, and early in 1954 the United States recruited Mexican workers unilaterally.

## ***Mexican Reaction, Debate, and Counterreactions***

The Mexican government issued a public appeal for workers not to go to the United States. It also announced plans to prevent their departure through the use of force. Mexican soldiers patrolled segments of the border with California, and Mexican police and migration officers tried to prevent workers from going through the ports of entry to the United States. This effort ended in spectacular failure. Subsequently the Mexican government relinquished attempts at control, and workers rioted at the border as U.S. authorities were unable to handle all of the people trying to get in. The U.S. comptroller general issued a finding that government expenditures for unilateral recruitment were not authorized by existing law and the recruitment was stopped. Both governments received considerable domestic criticism for their handling of this crisis and returned to the bargaining table.

A new agreement was reached subsequently where almost all U.S. demands were met. Congress passed legislation to authorize the unilateral recruitment of Mexican workers if need be. The two governments also created a commission to settle other pending migration matters, which concluded its work in six months.

Later in 1954, the U.S. government planned and launched the mass deportation campaign known as "Operation Wetback." The Mexican government participated in its implementation by transporting migrants, close to 2,000 per day, from the border to points in the interior. User fees were dropped for employers who hired *braceros*. The United States obtained Mexican government acquiescence to an additional key grower demand: *bracero* contracts for four weeks. Many growers faced with the prospect of interrupted access to unauthorized workers were persuaded to hire *braceros* under new contracts. During "Operation Wetback" large numbers of agricultural employers dropped their previous opposition to hiring contract workers. The Bracero Program was expanded to accommodate much of the previous unauthorized flow. In 1951-52, "there were five apprehensions per *bracero* admission; by 1956-57, there were five *bracero* admissions per apprehension."<sup>2</sup> The new program was attractive to growers in large part because labor guarantees were not enforced.

## **Terminating the Program, 1961-63**

In 1959 a study was conducted for the Department of Labor that persuaded U.S. officials that domestic farmworkers were adversely affected by the bilateral program. That same year the Department tightened the administration of the program significantly, leading to grower protests and starting a steady decline in the number

of workers contracted. In 1960 congressional opponents succeeded in preventing amendments to the program by pro-agribusiness legislators who wanted to curb the secretary of labor's authority over the program. In 1961 the Kennedy administration extended the agreement, though reluctantly, citing adverse effects on the wages and working conditions of domestic farmworkers and the "serious impact in Mexico if many thousands of workers employed in this country were summarily deprived of this much-needed employment."<sup>3</sup> As the Bracero Program was winding down, some growers became less dependent on Mexican contract labor by increasing their use of mechanical harvesters, reorganizing labor activities, and sponsoring the adjustment of some *braceros* into permanent legal immigrants (also referred to as green card workers). U.S. labor unions and public interest groups lobbied for the termination of the program.

### ***Triggering Events***

Congressional opposition to the Bracero Program mounted. To the surprise of many observers, in March 1963 the House of Representatives voted to terminate the program.

### ***Mexican Reaction, Debate, and Counterreactions***

In response to congressional action, the Mexican government expressed its objections in a diplomatic note. It argued that the agreement did not cause the migration of workers; rather, the agreement was the result of an existing tendency for migration to occur. Eliminating the program would not stop migration. Instead it would produce "a de facto situation" of the "illegal introduction of Mexican workers into the United States." Unauthorized migration "would be extremely prejudicial to the illegal workers and, as experience has shown, would also unfavorably affect American workers, which is precisely what the legislators of the United States are trying to prevent."<sup>4</sup>

In response to these and other concerns, the U.S. Congress postponed the termination of the program by one year, and the last *bracero* agreement expired in December 1964. The Mexican government responded to the anticipated job loss by enacting rules which made it possible for U.S. companies to establish assembly plants (*maquiladoras*) along the northern border. The reluctance of Mexican authorities to accept the U.S. decision to terminate the program was manifested in the decade after the U.S. congressional action of 1963. Shortly before the expiration of the Bracero Program, President-elect Gustavo Díaz Ordaz met with President Lyndon Johnson and raised the possibility of a new migrant labor agreement. Johnson pointed

toward labor union opposition but expressed doubts that U.S. workers would be found to perform the labor of Mexican *braceros*.

“[O]nce the policy that the American labor leaders want was proved a failure, [the U.S. government] could work out a satisfactory agreement with Mexico.”<sup>5</sup>

This did not occur, however, during Díaz Ordaz’s administration. His successor, Luis Echeverría, also attempted unsuccessfully to interest the United States government in negotiating a neo-Bracero Program agreement. He gave up at his summit meeting with Gerald Ford in 1974, arguing that a new assessment of the history of the Bracero Program had shown that such an agreement would not protect the labor rights of Mexican workers.

## Notes

1. See Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (Austin, TX: U. of Texas Press, 1971); Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story* (Santa Barbara, CA: McNally & Loftin, 1964); Juan Ramón García, *Operation Wetback: the Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Manuel García y Griego, “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964,” in David G. Gutiérrez, ed. *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 45-85; García y Griego, “El comienzo y el final: la interdependencia estructural y dos negociaciones sobre *braceros*,” in Blanca Torres, ed. *Interdependencia ¿Un enfoque útil para el análisis de las relaciones México-Estados Unidos?* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1990), 97-117; and Otey M. Scruggs, *Braceros, “Wetbacks,” and the Farm Labor Problem; Mexican Agricultural Labor in the United States, 1942-1954* (New York: Garland, 1988).

2. Philip L. Martin, *Promises to Keep: Collective Bargaining in California Agriculture* (Ames, IA: Iowa State U. Press, 1996), 65.

3. President Kennedy’s statement upon signing H.R. 2010 on 4 October 1961, quoted in Craig, *The Bracero Program*, 173.

4. Mexican Ambassador to U.S. Secretary of State, 21 June 1963, in George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser, eds., *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press), 120-121.

5. LBJ Library, Austin Texas, NSF Country File, box 61, Sayre to Bundy, 14 Nov 64, item 38.

