



Forging the Tortilla Curtain: Cultural Drift and Change Along the United States-Mexico Border from the Spanish Conquest to the Present

Thomas Torrans

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Some have called it the tortilla curtain. Others have viewed it as a Third World entity where primitive conditions and poverty exist alongside the latest marvels of the computerized Information Age. But the border region between Mexico and the United States is more dynamic than ever since its transition into a sort of Mexamerica—a world fueled by corporate colonialism, the North American Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA) and contraband of every stripe, from illegal drugs to illegal aliens.

Forging the Tortilla Curtain reveals how the borderlands got to be that way. Thomas Torrans's narrative is a sweeping history of the 2,000-mile-long borderlands from the time of the early intrusions of the Spaniards in their endless quest for gold to the recent invasions of multinationals in their endless quest for cheap labor. It is a fascinating story of the long struggle to establish a boundary as an institution and cultural margin of the two Americas—an Anglo North and a Latin South. It was a difficult and hazardous course heavily peopled with westering adventurers: filibusters—William Walker and Henry Alexander Crabb, among many others; scalp hunters like John Glanton; dreamers and schemers—vanquished Confederate generals Alexander Watkins Terrell and John B. Magruder, who hoped to establish a new Confederacy south of the border, and Albert Kimsey Owen who founded a short-lived socialist utopia at Topolobampo; empire builders like William Cornell Greene and William Randolph Hearst; and profiteers in the industry of contraband.

Americans, contained at the Rio Grande since the 1840s by the Mexican-American War and the boundary that later developed across the desert Southwest to the Pacific, did not accept that contentedly. Thwarted in efforts to secure a port on the Sea of Cortez—the Gulf of California—they nonetheless were successful in bridging the continent by a climatically favorable southerly route. Even so, in the minds of many the notion of further aggrandizement long prevailed: for example, some argued that even Baja California properly should be United States territory, a sort of geographically balanced equivalent, so to speak, to the Florida peninsula itself.

From the outset the frontier that would become the border was a work in progress and remains so today.

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