

Joe Dunn: Apology and Reform for Unspoken Migrant Injustices

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In February 1931, federal agents surround La Placita Park, a social and cultural hub for the Mexican population in the city of Los Angeles. Following the erection of a barricade, the officers demand that Mexican migrants within the area demonstrate a form of citizenship or residency. The U.S. government deported over 400 of those unable to produce these documents to Mexico, likely never to see this country again (Wang).

This incident in Los Angeles wasn't a unique event during this time period. From 1929 to 1939, between 400,000 and two million Mexican migrants from across the country—primarily the Southwest—were deported through the Mexican Repatriation Program under the Hoover administration, unjustly forced to move to a country many of them had never seen. (Wang) Such a historically repressed event, that's only recently come to light, raises numerous questions on how to conquer the past injustices and move forward as a nation. The work of California State Senator Joe Dunn has shown that apology cannot only mitigate these injustices, but begin to address the hidden atrocities committed throughout the Great Depression.

While the program was portrayed as a way to repatriate migrants back to their "mother country," this title was a misnomer (Block). In reality, the Hoover administration

operated as a form of governmental racial cleansing, in correlation with growing eugenicist sentiments. According to Kevin R. Johnson, a professor of public interest law at University of California, “This was a kind of ethnic cleansing, an effect to remove Mexicans from parts of the country” (Wang). Despite the program’s initial focus as a means of compensating for the effects of the Depression, the justifications behind it were based on racial ideologies. In 1924, the Johnson Reed Immigration Act severely limited immigration. The Hoover administration implemented the repatriation program in response to the exacerbation of this sentiment among America’s white population by the Great Depression. In spite of the relatively small time frame the program lasted, the effects were catastrophic for the country’s Mexican population, especially in the Southwest. At a minimum, the *International Migration Review* estimates 400,000 Mexicans were repatriated, and this population decline suggests upwards of two million deportations over ten years (Gratton and Merchant). It’s even estimated that one-fifth of all Mexicans in California were unjustly repatriated by 1932, and Vicki Ruiz further asserts that a third of all Mexicans in the country had undergone the same process between 1931 and 1934. Many Mexican migrants were forced to claim Spanish or European descent in order to avoid deportation by the government, according to Claire Wang of *The Guardian*.

In 2005, action was finally taken to counteract the disastrous effects of the program through the work of California State Senator Joe Dunn, who issued an official apology and advocated policies addressing this injustice. The apology itself acknowledges the

numerous acts of hatred the state committed during the repatriation program. One of the significant topics brought up in the apology was the series of large-scale raids conducted on Mexican communities throughout the state during the program. The act acknowledges these raids, and the fact that they resulted “in the clandestine removal of thousands of people, many of whom were never able to return to the United States” (Dunn). The act also apologizes for a further result of these unconstitutional raids, the defrauding and selling of property by California local authorities—represented as a form of payment for the transition expenses to move those affected by the program. As a form of compensation, the apology called for a commemorative plaque to be placed in Los Angeles near the location of the 1931 raid in La Placita Park (Little). While this may seem to be a relatively small act to counter the anti-immigrant sentiment that came with the Mexican Repatriation Program, Senator Dunn’s apology sparked other forms of civic advocacy, raised awareness, and paved the way for policies to address this history. After the plaque in La Placita Park was unveiled in 2012, California passed a law requiring public schools to teach the history of “repatriation drives,” educating youth on a relatively hidden part of the state’s history (Patino). Furthermore, in 2024, State Senators Josh Becker and Lena Gonzalez followed in Dunn’s footsteps, co-authoring SB-537, a bill to commemorate those affected by the program through the founding of a nonprofit organization to maintain a memorial for them (Patino).

Senator Dunn has shown great pride in his work on the apology act but argues for reform beyond the work he’s accomplished. In a 2006 interview with NPR, he stressed

sympathy for those who suffered the disastrous effects of the program and made it especially clear that the people most affected by it were sent away to a country they had little connection to: “That is the tragedy. Their familiarity was absolutely zero.... And they were not only thrown out of their country of birth, the United States, they were foreigners in the new land that they were shipped to, that being Mexico” (Block). In the interview, Dunn advocated for continued reform building on the apology he’d written; he claimed that, despite the legislative support in Sacramento, much of the executive branch still opposed the implementation of a reform system for the effects of the repatriation program, saying that “both former governor Gray Davis and current Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger have vetoed a bill not to actually pay reparations. ... but, rather, to create a commission to complete our investigation about what should be done to correct the injustice” (Block).

The Mexican Repatriation Program was undoubtedly an obscured part of California’s history. And, up until Senator Joe Dunn’s act of political courage, it remained no more than a series of atrocities not addressed in a civic manner. Despite the current lack of a permanent solution, Dunn’s work has shown that apologizing undoubtedly holds significant impacts and is capable of creating changes to push our country in a forward direction.

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