

# It's Time To Dispel Conquistador Myth

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The Bernalillo County Republican Party chairman's recent remarks about the presidential election should be exposed as the race-baiting tactic they are.

Fernando C de Baca told a BBC reporter, "The truth is that Hispanics came here as conquerors. African-Americans came here as slaves. ... Hispanics consider themselves above blacks. They won't vote for a black president."

He's playing the race card in as cynical and calculated a way as anyone could, and he's wrong. The most recent Pew Hispanic Center national poll shows Obama leading with 66 percent of the Hispanic vote to McCain's 23 percent. In Española last week, Obama drew an audience of 10,000 people, and no one doubts most of them were Hispanic.

But that's not all C de Baca is wrong about. His comments invoke nothing less than the Spanish mythology that portrays today's Mexican Americans, in New Mexico particularly, as heirs to the 16th and 17th century Spanish colonization of the Southwest. I use the word "mythology" deliberately because when one looks closely at the historical record, the story is one of various peoples mixing sexually, socially and culturally, rather than one of "Spanish" conquistadors vanquishing the native Indian peoples.

In fact, the earliest Spanish expeditions were racially diverse, including the darkskinned, likely African-origin Estevan, who spoke six indigenous languages and who had been a leader in the Spanish explorations of Florida, Texas and central Mexico before coming to New Mexico in 1539.

Estevan may have been a slave, but it seems unlikely given the autonomy he had on these various expeditions. Those of us in New Mexico who can trace our families back to the earliest period of Spanish settlements might well be his descendants, and, in a metaphorical sense, all New Mexicans are Estevan's children.

Yet we do not need to rely on tenuous connections to Estevan to know that the Spanish-Mexican settlers of New Mexico were a racially mixed group. Most of them did not come from Spain at all, but from central and southern Mexico. In 1650, Mexico had as many Spaniards as African slaves (about 200,000 in each category), and a whopping 10 times as many Indians and Indian-Spanish mestizos as either Spaniards or Africans. There was no concept of "miscegenation" or illegal marriage and sexual mating across racial lines as there was in the colonial United States with respect to African Americans, so the result in

Mexico was a thoroughly mixed population.

Moreover, if your ancestors include the early “Spanish” settlers to New Mexico, it is likely that your family was even more mixed than those who stayed behind in central Mexico. You see, racially mixed persons could improve their fortunes by taking risks like moving to the dangerous northern frontier, which New Mexico was at this time.

Coronado’s 1540 expedition to New Mexico included twice as many Indians and mestizos as Spaniards. In 1598, Oñate’s settlement party of 130 people included only 13 married couples, so that the remaining single men turned largely to native indigenous and mixed women to make families.

By the time of the Pueblo Revolt in 1680, New Mexico’s so-called Hispanic population was overwhelmingly of mixed racial ancestry. Yet virtually all such mixed persons who identified as Spanish were expelled from New Mexico for 12 years by the revolt’s leaders. Very few of those original settlers chose to return in 1692. Instead, the organizers of resettlement were forced to go deep into Mexico to recruit mostly single men and single women for what was seen as a risky endeavor.

The settlers of Santa Cruz de la Cañada in 1694 were listed as “españoles-mexicanos” in the official records — 90 percent of them were born in Mexico, and they came from 15 regions in Mexico as well as from the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe.

So where in the world did these racially mixed persons get the idea that they were “Spaniards” or the heirs to the Spanish conquest? I argue that claims to Spanish identity arose in New Mexico in the 1880s in direct response to the intense antiMexican racism experienced by native sons and daughters in the first decades of American rule. Suffice to say that C de Baca’s claim that Hispanics came as conquerors and African Americans came as slaves is considerably more complex.

It’s as complicated as an election that has some Republicans playing the race card and other Republicans nervous about the increasingly brown electorate they must woo to win in the future, if not in 2008.