

## OUTLOOK

# Lynchings teach us about mass murder

By Patricia Bernstein

The mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton, Ohio, this past weekend were just the latest in a long series of these grisly events. They shock and sadden us. But our nation has been in a similar situation in the past, and we didn't stop the bloodshed then. Are we going to fail again and allow more victims to die?

Our national epidemic of mass shootings evokes, tragically, the lynching epidemic that plagued our country during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With both mass shootings and lynchings, we have seen a lawless phenomenon continue unchecked for many years, horrific carnage, and the abject failure of politicians and governments to take action to stop the slaughter.

During the peak lynching period, very roughly 1880-1930, almost 4,700 people were lynched in this country, most of them African Americans. Nearly 500 of those lynchings took place here in Texas. What may have begun as vigilantes stringing up victims to tree limbs evolved into large-scale atrocities that historians call "spectacle lynchings," attended by thousands, who sometimes dressed in their best and brought their children and their picnic lunches. The victims were often tortured for hours, mutilated and burned alive.

Local governments almost never indicted the perpetrators, much less convicted them, even when the event had taken place before many witnesses and everyone knew who the leaders were. It was obvious that federal action would be required if lynching was to be stopped.

On Jan. 26, 1922, the U.S. House of Representatives passed an anti-lynching statute. Similar bills passed the House again in 1937 and 1940, but in each case they were filibustered to death by Southern senators motivated by racism and the desire to preserve white supremacy.

According to a highly detailed database compiled by Mother Jones magazine, mass shootings (defined here as incidents in which three or more people are killed) between 1982 and the present have already resulted in 934 fatalities and 1,406 injuries. And, as in the case of lynchings, the epidemic appears to be intensifying, with shootings happening more frequently and higher body counts resulting.

Police all over the country are now highly trained to deal with such an event, but the high-tech assault rifles generally used by the shooters can efficiently kill and wound many people in a matter of seconds, before the best-trained officers can possibly respond. It is obvious that the single most important measure that would help to end mass shootings would be to ban assault rifles, as we did from 1994 to 2004.

But Texas' own Sen. John Cornyn, rather than advocating for gun control, typically took refuge in a dishonest waffle: "Sadly,

there are some issues, like homelessness and these shootings, where we simply don't have all the answers," he tweeted Sunday.

Really? For starters, how about stronger background checks, "red flag" laws removing guns from persons deemed a threat to themselves or the public, and banning assault weapons again, as the recent House bill, now stalled in the Senate, provides?

In the wake of the most recent shootings, some Republicans have at least taken halting steps toward gun control. But too many of Texas' craven elected officials, beholden to the National Rifle Association, prefer to blame mental illness, video games, the absence of prayer in schools, and oh gosh, maybe the phases of the moon. Other countries have mental illness and the rest, but there are no mass shootings in those countries because there, guns are not readily available.

There is another element of similarity between the lynching plague and the mass shooting epidemic: raging bigotry. Hate speech is now encouraged and abetted by the freewheeling, casual hate speech of our president, and the comfortable acceptance – even defense – of this indefensible speech by Republican fellow travelers.

Hate speech at the highest level fuels the angry little man who commits these terrible mass shootings, targeting whichever group he happens to enjoy hating most, whether it be Mexicans, blacks, gays, Jews, Muslims or young women. In the old days, this malignant creature might have acted out his hatreds and miseries by joining a lynch mob. Today he will buy an AK-47 and shoot into a crowd, indiscriminately murdering strangers of all ages who have never done him any harm.

During the lynching years, black men were commonly referred to in newspapers and political speech as "black fiends" or "black brutes." No wonder men and women brainwashed by racism thought they deserved to be exterminated. How different is that from referring to Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals" who are "invading" our country? In addition to gun control, we need to persistently and passionately denounce all forms of hate speech in our public and private discourse.

Lynchings gradually dwindled, went undercover and into the backwoods, as even the most dimwitted official came to understand that a public lynching was bad for business, bad for the reputation of his town. Are we just going to hope the pestilence of mass shootings passes away on its own while more people die? We know what to do, just as we knew what to do in 1922. We need the will and the courage to do it.

*Bernstein is author of The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP, and Ten Dollars to Hate: The Texas Man Who Fought the Klan.*



## Keep Mexican links strong in state classes

By Rohan Naik

According to the Texas Education Code, fourth and seventh graders in the state must spend the year studying Texas history. The curriculum spans widely, covering the period of early statehood, the age of oil and the struggles of Texans during the Great Depression. It weaves a story of resilience, heroism and grit, and it gives students a history to be proud of.

What this history glosses over, though, is that of Mexican Americans. Sure, it's mentioned that Texas gained independence from Mexico, but the history of Mexican Americans in Texas since the state's incorporation into the United States is largely dismissed. In so doing, the curriculum relegates Mexican American history to the fringes.

But actually, the Mexican American population in the state has always been sizable. Some estimates approximate the Mexican-descent population in Texas may have reached 700,000 by 1930, and the number has only grown since then.

It's easy to celebrate tacos and tequila; it's harder to address a challenging history of discrimination and violence. But teaching kids that Mexican Americans have long been part of the American project is of paramount importance. Today Latinos make up more than half of the students in Texas public schools, but it's about more than just fairness: Without Mexican American history, it's impossible for any student to fully understand Texas history and the current immigration debate.

The current state history curriculum makes few mentions of Mexicans after Texas independence. This erasure gives the impression either that there were few Mexicans in the state or that they were seamlessly enveloped into the nation. Neither is correct.

In fact, a wave of white immigration to Texas at the turn of the 19th century ushered in a new racial order. The view that Mexican Americans were racially inferior took hold and had drastic implications. Mexican Americans were excluded from whites-only public places, including theaters, parks, swimming pools and even schools. Restaurants in Dallas hung signs that read "No dogs, negroes, Mexicans." The state systematically disenfranchised citizens of Mexican descent, and until 1954, it even retained the right to prevent Mexican Americans from serving on juries.

These policies cultivated and advanced the notion that Mexicans posed a racial threat to the United States, which in turn led to state-sanctioned violence. Specifically, the racial trope of the Mexican as a bandit precipitated a culture in which any Mexican could be targeted in response to a perceived action by one. Texas Congressman Claude Benton Hudspeth even once remarked, "You have got to kill those

Mexicans when you find them, or they will kill you." Scholars estimate that between 1848 and 1928, mobs lynched more than 200 ethnic Mexicans in Texas.

The violence did not only manifest through solitary murders, however. On the night of Jan. 28, 1918, in response to a series of cattle raids, Texas rangers descended upon the town of Porvenir in southwest Texas. They roused 15 Mexican men and boys from bed, marched them out of their homes, and executed them, despite having no evidence of their involvement in any crime.

This period is imperative to study because it allows students to understand that minority communities aren't new, and that efforts to police identity and belonging are endemic in American history. The

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study of past injustice also creates space to have conversations about how society can move forward. Learning this history at an early age equips students for challenging conversations and helps them avoid feeling immobilized by the weight of the past or needlessly guilty for the actions of their forebears.

Furthermore, Mexican American studies amplifies multiple perspectives, which are important for understanding a country as diverse as ours. It teaches that history often involves contested claims and that dominant narratives are not the only narratives.

Some critics of the study of Mexican American history claim that it needlessly emphasizes differences amongst Americans. One former member of the Texas state school board said, "I don't subscribe to hyphenated Americanism. I find hyphenated Americanism to be divisive." The natural implication is the dangerous view that some history should be censored.

Perhaps above all, the incorporation of Mexican American history into Texas history is crucial because it reminds us of the dangers of hate. In today's hotly contested debate over immigration, the history of Mexican Americans in Texas reminds us that racist political rhetoric has dire consequences – ones that our country has seen before.

*Naik is a freelance reporter and native Houstonian.*



## Downtown, motorists need planned I-45 expansion

By Oscar Slotboom

The North Houston Highway Improvement Project will rebuild the downtown freeway system and Interstate 45 north to Beltway 8. As TxDOT nears the end of the 17-year process to develop plans for the project, it's a good time to spotlight the huge benefits this planned project will provide to motorists, downtown and adjacent neighborhoods.

First and foremost is mobility. Houston's downtown freeways were designed in the 1950s and 1960s to serve motorists going to and leaving downtown, not trips which pass through downtown. But today 67 percent of weekday peak-period vehicles using downtown freeways pass through downtown, and these trips are virtually impossible to serve with traditional public transit.

The NHHIP will redesign downtown freeways to serve today's needs and relieve congestion, with average speed increases up to 24 miles per hour expected during peak periods. This will not only reduce the frustration and costs of congestion, but also provide important economic benefits since Houstonians will have more opportu-

nities to access jobs that require trips through downtown, and employers will have access to a larger pool of potential workers who will be able to travel through downtown.

The NHHIP will be highly beneficial to Midtown by sinking the existing I-69 elevated freeway into a trench, removing the elevated structure that has often been a location for homeless communities. The new lanes included in this section will relieve the chronic backups which occur on the inbound side of I-69.

The NHHIP will retire the Pierce Elevated as a transportation corridor, allowing stakeholders to decide its future to maximize the corridor's benefit to the community, either by removing the existing structure or converting it into a linear elevated park, which could potentially become one of the most distinctive urban parks in the United States.

Where I-69 and SH 288 merge, new arched bridges with pedestrian-friendly sidewalks will provide an architectural highlight to enhance neighborhoods.

On the east side of downtown, the NHHIP will remove one mile of elevated freeway and place the freeway below

ground level, providing the opportunity for new community spaces on platforms that can be built above the freeway, with the potential for a focal point similar to Dallas's highly successful Klyde Warren Park.

The NHHIP will substantially reduce the number of highway structures along the present I-45 on the west side of downtown in the area of Allen Parkway and Memorial, opening up more space for use as parks.

On the north side of downtown, the consolidation of the two east-west railroad corridors into a single corridor north of I-10 will remove the railroad through UH-Downtown and the warehouse district. The railroad removal, northward realignment of the freeway and separately proposed north canal will provide the opportunity for transformative new development.

Just north of downtown at North Main Street, a potential park over the freeway will reconnect the neighborhoods currently separated by the freeway trench.

From the Loop northward, the freeway and frontage roads will meet modern standards with replacement of the antiquated Loop 610 interchange, new managed lanes and more efficient intersections at cross

streets. Safety improvements include full shoulders and better-designed merging zones.

The NHHIP adds only limited new general-purpose lanes to the freeways, mainly in bottleneck locations. New capacity is primarily managed lanes similar to the highly successful managed lanes on the Katy Freeway. Managed lanes are optimized for transit and carpool use, and the NHHIP will provide valuable new options for public transit in the North Freeway corridor, potentially including high-speed express bus service to Bush Airport.

While the NHHIP is expensive, with a price tag around \$3.9 billion for the downtown work and \$7 billion overall, its huge benefits make it a vital investment in Houston's future. Let's move forward with the North Houston Highway Improvement Project as soon as possible to achieve better mobility, a better downtown and more opportunity for Houstonians.

*Slotboom is author of the 2003 book "Houston Freeways, A Historical and Visual Journey," available for free download at HoustonFreeways.com. He works as a web and software developer.*