First, I would like to thank *A contracorriente* for providing the forum for this conversation. I hope that the following response to Professor Timothy J. Henderson's rebuttal to my recent review of his book, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States*, conveys my respect for Professor Henderson, as well as the profession for which we clearly share great enthusiasm. Sincere and even heated discourse between dedicated students of history is vital to the integrity of our work. I hope to debate ideas, not adjectives, and refrain from any language that could be understood to be personally insulting. I will use this opportunity to respond
to Professor Henderson’s claim that his book was intended for an uncritical and less demanding audience—and thus, somehow suggesting that the standards by which it has to be judged need to be lower—and to reemphasize objections I have to Professor Henderson’s methodology and what I see as his teleological perspective that explains events as the result of some sort of historical inevitability.

History, and its construction, is a sharp tool; never fully harmless and not to be wielded carelessly. Popular history produced for casual consumption is a crucial part of our shared access to knowledge and interpretation. That access is itself foundational to a society’s ability to remain conscious and critical of the past. History written for undergraduate and general readers is not distinguished from scholarly endeavors for its lack of responsibility to methodological integrity, sound reasoning, or intellectual honesty. While I applaud the clear and intuitive feel of *A Glorious Defeat*, I cannot accept a rubric that categorizes some history as unserious, or as something to be completed in a hurry, when one isn’t too busy at work. Professor Henderson identified my misrepresentation of the type of history he has written as my “original sin,” and claimed in his rebuttal that “this book does not pretend to be a scholarly endeavor at all. It is a book that was written under contract over the course of about one year (while maintaining a full teaching schedule, I might add), and it is based almost entirely on secondary literature.” I respond that all historical contributions are powerful and potentially dangerous, and perhaps the history marketed to an undergraduate and general readership more so.

Historical integrity is not only achieved through original research or ground-breaking analysis. An introduction to a general topic like the Mexican-American War needs neither modesty nor pretension to justify its place on bedside tables or university syllabi. Often, however, to be successfully marketed, a book such as *A Glorious Defeat* needs a way to garner interest and attention, or a “hook.” Professor Henderson relies on two hooks. First, he promises his readers the story of the Mexican American War from the Mexican perspective. As a fellow non-Mexican studying the intersections between the historical narratives of Mexico and the United States, I recognize the importance of such attempts to tell the
other side of the story, but I also understand how difficult it can be to keep
that promise, and how risky it is to make. Professor Henderson’s promise is
itself significant and invites scrutiny. An introduction to the Mexican-
American War with appeal to a popular and undergraduate audience, based
primarily on secondary sources and privileging the Mexican perspective
would be a welcome addition to the literature, but *A Glorious Defeat*, in my
opinion, is not that book.

The second hook Professor Henderson uses to draw readers into his book is his claim that his analysis will explain current tensions between
Mexico and the US by re-examining the causes and outcomes of the
Mexican-American War. This framework is only emphasized in his preface,
and while it does not develop into a consistent theme in the body of the
book, it does foreshadow Professor Henderson’s reliance upon hyperbolic
examples and fringe positions to conjure up an exaggerated and unhelpful
impression of a social, cultural and historic chasm between Mexico and the
US. Setting up Mexico-US dynamics in a polarity, Professor Henderson
presents only the perimeters of the debate over the war’s legacy. The anti-
Mexican position is illustrated by Professor Henderson this way:

A letter to the editor of the Greensboro *News & Record*, written in
the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, proposed,
without a hint of drollery, that the United States follow up on the
Iraq venture by invading Mexico. ‘Since we have no way to stop
[Mexican immigration],’ this citizen wrote, ‘why not invade Mexico
and make it our 51st state?’ (xix)

The Anti-American position is revealed by Henderson in an excerpt of a
letter to *La Prensa-San Diego* reacting to controversy over burying a
Mexican-American who was killed in Iraq: “Our heroes,’ read one letter to
a national newspaper, ‘are not the traitors who join the American army (to
fight Iraq) but those Mexicans who fought the Americans when they
invaded our country in 1846” (xxi). While I do not doubt the authenticity of
these quotations, I offer them to illustrate Professor Henderson’s tendency
to use fringe positions and exaggerated examples as a form of argument.

In my review of his book, I discussed other false dichotomies upon
which Professor Henderson depends, such as his characterizations of the
diabolical Santa Anna compared to the heroic Winfield Scott; the frail and
scattered native people of the US and the stubborn barbarous indigenous
people of Mexico; and the Jacobine rioting in Mexico City juxtaposed with the enlightened discourse in Washington. Henderson too often overlooks what lies between such extremes, and by doing so he obscures commonalities and differences that would enrich historical analysis and undermine his oversimplified thesis. A methodology completely reliant upon comparisons cannot only present the far ends of spectrums without neglecting or obscuring crucial truths. I believe it is important to challenge both these types of generalizations and a methodology that presents them as reliable evidence.

Hooks aside, I find Professor Henderson’s historical question (why did Mexico go to war in 1846?), his answer to that question (because it was a weak nation), and the method by which he leads his readers from his question to his answer (broad generalizations made with emotionally loaded language) to be fundamentally misleading. In my interpretation, Mexico went to war with the US because the US military invaded Mexico, killed Mexican civilians, and subsequently occupied the capital city. By seeking to explain what in his subtitle he calls “Mexico and Its War with the United States,” and by declaring he will do so without laying blame on either participant, Professor Henderson removes the simplest answer to his question from consideration. Asking why the political leaders of Mexico fatalistically chose to defend the sovereignty of their nation instead of pragmatically conceding to US demands creates a flawed premise for analysis. Furthermore, if the answer to this question lies in Mexico’s weakness, then must one assume that a robust Mexico would not have acted to defend its national sovereignty? Would a strong Mexico, without a legacy of division and defeatism, have conceded to claims made by the Polk administration and cooperated with US expansion? I suggest that the only way Professor Henderson can convince readers of his thesis is by relying on comparisons that exaggerate Mexican weakness and US heroism, and by incorporating fate as an historical actor. In his rebuttal to my book review,

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1 For example, Henderson evokes images of Mexicans drunk on pulque (A Glorious Defeat, 10) without acknowledging the extraordinarily high rate of alcoholism in the US, creating false and dichotomous images of drunken Mexicans compared to earnest yeomen. For an analysis of alcohol consumption in the early republic, please see W.J. Rorabaugh, The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
Professor Henderson states: “I am not the first to suggest that Mexico was fated to lose those lands.” If the historical agency of fate is truly what Professor Henderson has attempted to demonstrate, then *A Glorious Defeat* belongs in a different section of the library.

Perhaps time and length constraints influenced Professor Henderson’s tone and argument, and his eagerness to appeal to a general readership by providing an intuitive narrative, innocently resulted in a superficial interpretation of a complicated subject. A more troubling motivation for Professor Henderson’s analysis could be a desire to exonerate the US from blame in the Mexican-American War and what some see as a blatant act of imperial aggression without ideological justification. Patriotism should not underpin an historical analysis claiming to privilege the perspective of the other side. My assertion that Professor Henderson’s book “reifies the xenophobic strawman he claims to confront,” can be best illustrated by Professor Henderson’s description of General Scott’s infamous entrance into the Zocalo in Mexico City:

> On the morning of September 14 the American forces mustered in Mexico City’s main square while a band played martial music and the Stars and Stripes [capitalization Professor Henderson’s] were raised over the National Palace. Around midday General Scott rode into the square, resplendent in full-dress uniform, to accept the formal surrender of the city. (172)

Such romanticized projections of national pride into an historical narrative do little to move Mexico or the United States beyond their shared legacy of resentment and distrust, and instead reinforce caricatures of difference and division.