I have never before seen fit to respond to a review of my work, but a recent review of my book, *A Glorious Defeat*, strikes me as flagrant scholarly malpractice. I have been teaching and writing about Mexican and Latin American history for some twenty-five years, have published four books on Mexican history, and have presented my work at high-profile conferences in several countries on two continents. Never once in all that time has anyone implied that I am a racist or xenophobe. Crawford Freed is the first, and I cannot let such serious charges go unchallenged.

Book reviewers, it seems to me, have an obligation to represent the books they review fairly and accurately. Crawford Freed’s review contains more distortions and misrepresentations than I have time to address here, but her original sin lies in failing to divulge what sort of book this is. She deliberately gives the impression that this book claimed to present original
research and paradigm-destroying analysis. She repeatedly chides me for failing to introduce levels of nuance and sophistication of the sort one might find in the most rarefied scholarly works. In fact, 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. It is quite clearly aimed at general readers and undergraduate students, and should be evaluated on the basis of its own modest pretensions, rather than berated for failing to be something it never intended, and never claimed, to be. It should hardly be surprising that the book fails to add “depth and nuance to our understanding of nation building” or that it “moves through complex histories at a fast and easy clip.” My publisher allowed me around 200 pages to explore three decades of the complex histories of two nations. It would be difficult indeed to accomplish this while also breaking new conceptual ground or including all of the nuance Crawford Freed seems so disappointed to find wanting. My aim, and that of the publisher to whom I was contracted, was simply to introduce this material to readers who were new to the topic.

Crawford Freed chides me for neglecting “many” works on the war without divulging what these works are. Obviously, the same charge can be made of any and all historical works. Who can seriously claim to have read everything ever written on a topic? Not Crawford Freed, certainly. In fact, she reveals major gaps in her own command of the literature. I contend that one prominent argument—an argument the book refutes—holds that Mexicans entered the war with the United States because they were “proud to the point of delusion, arrogantly overestimating their own strength.” Crawford Freed declares that, in asserting this, I am inventing “xenophobic strawmen.” Apparently she does not recognize the case made by Justin Smith, author of arguably the most influential book ever written in English on the war. Others have made similar arguments, but given that this book was not written for an audience of scholars I did not feel it necessary to cite every source I used, and my publisher would likely have excised excessive footnotes had I sought to include them.
Crawford Freed’s suggestion that I am racist and a xenophobe rests on a number of highly dubious premises. First of all, I have the temerity to suggest that, in the early nineteenth century, Mexico was “weak.” Frankly, in all my years of reading, I don’t know of any historian who has suggested otherwise. During the early nineteenth century, Mexico’s treasury was chronically bare and the country had a staggering foreign debt; in the first thirty years of its existence, central power changed hands well over twenty times, with only one president serving out a full term in office; it had a bloated yet demonstrably inept military; the vast majority of its inhabitants suffered severe poverty, oppression, malnutrition, and illiteracy; its regions repeatedly sought to separate themselves from the nation-state; it endured several foreign invasions and one serious civil war. Yet Crawford Freed contends that it is unreasonable and, apparently, bigoted, to suggest that Mexico was a troubled nation state, weaker and less cohesive than its northern neighbor (something she repeatedly scorns as a “false dichotomy”). While Crawford Freed mocks my interpretation with smug condescension, she never actually offers an alternative explanation for why Mexico lost its war with the United States so lopsidedly or what a real dichotomy might look like. She accuses me of failing to consider the “the position held by some” (which presumably would include Crawford Freed) that “the war started because one nation acted in aggression upon another nation.” In fact, I do not fail to consider that position at all; indeed, quite a bit of the book’s limited space is devoted to detailing the history of U.S. arrogance and aggression. But even if, for the sake of argument, I did fail to consider that interpretation, how does Crawford Freed propose to account for the fact that Mexico lost every engagement of the war except for one minor skirmish, despite its superior numbers? Suggesting that Mexico was weak is not a value judgment, and it is hardly evidence of an “anti-Mexican” bias.

The most tasteless and insulting part of Crawford Freed’s screed is the charge that I ascribe Mexico’s weakness to the existence of its large indigenous population, even going to the extreme of labeling me “neo-positivist.” The clear implication is that, in Social Darwinian fashion, I maintain that Mexico’s weakness was owing to the inferior DNA of the
majority of its inhabitants. Crawford Freed suggests that, by drawing a stark contrast between race problems in the United States and race problems in Mexico, I am creating yet another of those famous “false dichotomies.” She accuses me of “omitting” Indians and African-Americans in my consideration of the United States. Frankly, I did not omit those groups; the white ruling classes of the early republic omitted those groups. In the early 1800s, blacks comprised only a bit over two percent of the total United States population, and they were not invited to participate in citizenship; Indians, meanwhile, were considered so irrelevant that they were not even included in the U.S. census until after 1860. Mexico, by contrast, was comprised of roughly 83 percent Indians and castas, many of them poorly assimilated or not assimilated at all, most of them impoverished and holding no great love for whites or their society, and all of them the victims of blatant race prejudice on the part of white elites. To suggest that Mexico’s racial problems were starkly different from those of the United States, and that they were a crippling obstacle to nation-building, is not exactly “neo-positivist” racism. Again, if this is a false dichotomy, I would love to be enlightened as to what a real dichotomy might look like.

Crawford Freed also resorts to tactics that are perennial favorites of demagogic writers. For instance, she reproduces quotations that are clearly intended to express attitudes commonly held by Mexican elites, and pretends that these are in fact expressions of my own sentiments. She also cherry-picks adjectives from the book in order to argue that I always refer to Mexicans pejoratively and to Americans admiringly. This is a tactic worthy of Ann Coulter. Frankly, anyone who wished to go to the trouble could scour the writings of Martin Luther King for adjectives and make a case that the man was a seething anti-black racist.

Crawford Freed does get one thing right. She notes that I regard Mexico’s loss of its northern territories as inevitable (naturally, she gussies up the charge with the more pretentious epithet, “teleological”). Presumably, she has concocted some sort of hypothesis by which Mexico could conceivably have parried the threats to its northern territories and prevailed over the world’s mightiest powers. I am not the first to suggest
that Mexico was fated to lose those lands. Most informed, intelligent, and realistic Mexicans living in the early Mexican republic had the same opinion. General Mier y Terán was driven to abject despair by this conviction. As well he might be, upon taking sober account of the facts: Mexico’s northern territories were very sparsely populated; Mexico lacked the infrastructure to assert central government authority in those remote regions, and its army was perennially engaged in struggles in central Mexico; Mexico inhabited a world of predatory imperialistic nations that were unlikely to respect Mexico’s claims; and Mexico’s regions had long displayed centrifugal proclivities. Perhaps Mexico might have availed itself of the good offices of England and France in preserving the independence of Texas, but those countries were hardly disinterested parties to the imperialist race. I think if the United States had not taken those territories, some other power surely would have done so. Mexico did not have to lose those lands in a war with the United States, but I can’t easily imagine how it might have maintained its claims for long. Yes, this is speculation. But it is speculation based on logic and historicity. Crawford Freed does not reveal her own speculations, which makes it devilishly hard to critique them.

Perhaps most absurdly, Crawford Freed charges that my work is based on “limited and compromised data.” Crawford Freed may have the luxury of working from unlimited data, but I know of no other historian who is so fortunate. Moreover, the many distinguished authors upon whom I relied would surely be surprised to learn that their data is “compromised” (whatever that means). At the conclusion of the review, Crawford Freed goes in for the kill with what she must have regarded as the ultimate zinger: “When Henderson asserts that ‘the war, in the end, only caused a further unraveling of an already broken nation,’ he obliges his readers to abandon historical analysis in exchange for a narrative that reifies the xenophobic strawman he claims to confront.” I spent a good while trying to puzzle out what exactly that sentence means, and I now feel confident in asserting that it makes no sense.

I appreciate the free exchange of ideas, but to imply that someone who has devoted a career to studying, teaching, and writing about Mexican history is an anti-Mexican bigot is despicable.