History of Spanish Land Claims in the New World

Many Americans and nearly all Mexicans believe the southwest US historically belongs to Mexico. Some Mexicans believe most of the US and parts of Canada really belong to Mexico. These claims is not true. We need to set the record straight on Spanish land claims in the New World.

With the discovery of the New World in 1492 by Christopher Columbus, Spain and Portugal set out to colonize the entire Western Hemisphere. To prevent conflict between the two countries, Pope Alexander VI issued an edict in 1493, creating a demarcation line 100 leagues west and south of any of the islands of the Azores or the Cape Verde islands. This line gave very little land to Portugal, so the line was moved westward by the Treaty of Tordesillas, signed on June 7, 1494, giving modern day Brazil to Portugal. Spain had exclusive rights to colonize all of the rest of the Western hemisphere. However, in Spain’s rush to claim this vast amount of land, many of their claims were meaningless. The Spanish became famous for making grandiose claims to land they never stepped foot on, never got close to, often didn’t even know what was there and felt no need to settle.

For instance, in 1513, Vasco Balboa crossed Panama and was the first European to see the Pacific Ocean from the west coast of the New World. With a wave of his arm, Balboa promptly claimed the entire Pacific Ocean and all lands adjoining it for Spain. Although Balboa didn’t know it, he claimed modern day United States, Canada, Alaska, Siberia, Japan, Korea, China, The Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand - all for Spain. Spain claimed all islands in the Caribbean although they did not settle all of them and didn’t even know how many were there. In 1775, two Spanish ships sailed up the west coast to Alaska, claiming all land up to Alaska. In 1790, Spanish Explorer Salvador Fidalgo claimed more of Alaska for Spain. During these two expeditions, Spanish names were given to different areas. However, these areas were never settled by the Spanish. The Spanish were more intent on claiming land than settling land.

The fact is the Spanish grossly over extended themselves. Balboa may as well have claimed the whole world. This claim was meaningless. Unless a country put a sizeable permanent settlement on the land they claimed and could defend it, the claim meant little to nothing. For instance, Spain had a large presence in Cuba, Mexico and other central and south American countries. These were the lands with the gold, silver and other riches that Spanish ships hauled back to Spain. Spain concentrated on these lands and held them.

Spain also claimed land in north America but they never settled them with much more then small, widely scattered villages. Most of these villages were along the coast. The interior lands were mostlyunsettled and unexplored. Spain wasn’t interested in giving up huge amounts of land even when they had no one on it. Spain wanted it all. The other world powers had no intentions of allowing Spain to keep land they were not using.
Just as importantly, many lands were claimed by more than one country. The English claimed the land from California to Alaska. Sir Francis Drake claimed the land north of present day San Diego, California for England in 1579. The Russians made the first permanent settlement in Alaska in 1784 and further colonization were carried out until the mid 1800s. The Russians had trading posts as far south as Sonoma County in California, where, in 1812 they built an outpost called Fort Ross. The local Indian tribe, the Kashya Pomo, allowed the Russians to build Fort Ross on condition they protect them from the Spanish, later Mexican troops. In 1836 Mexico established a military base nearby (called The Sonoma Barracks) to prevent the Russians from expanding any further into the region. In addition, the Spanish launched about 100 expeditions out of Sonoma to subdue the local Indian tribes. The French sent several expeditions through northern California from the late 1700s on.

The deciding factor in all this was who put the most people on their land on a permanent basis. Possession meant ownership. Being first to an area didn’t mean it was yours. Countries that claimed land without having enough people to permanently settle AND HOLD the area made claims of ownership tenuous and your claims were open to challenge.

Once America became a country in 1789, thousands of immigrants began to push westward. Spain and France were colonial powers with large land holdings west of the original 13 colonies but could not put many people on their land. Both France and Spain recognized their position in North America was weak and getting weaker. France decided to sell their land to the US in 1803, which became known as the Louisiana Purchase. Spain negotiated the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819 with the US. This treaty resolved long standing disputes with the US on Spanish claims in North America. Spain gave up all claims north of the 42nd parallel north (northern boundary of present day California), gave Florida to the US and established the Sabine River as the boundary between Texas (then a province of Spain) and Louisiana.

When Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, they inherited huge amounts of land north of the Rio Grande, but had hardly anyone to settle there. Although roughly half of Mexico’s land area was north of the present day boundary with the US, only 1% of the population of Mexico lived on this land. Ninety nine percent of Mexicans lived on the southern half of the country. Mexico then lost the northern half because they lost wars to Texas in 1836 and then the US in 1836 - wars Mexico started. (See Mexican American War.)

It was really inevitable that Spain/Mexico’s land claims would come into conflict with America’s more limited expansion. While Spain/Mexico was claiming land just to claim it - land they had a difficult time putting people on - the US was rapidly expanding based on a growing population.

Although Mexico lost Texas and the southwest US to the US over a century and a half ago, many Mexicans believe these lands historically belong to Mexico and are holding a grudge against the U.S. The truth is this land historically belongs to the Indians, not the Spanish. The Spanish took this land from the Indians.

This sounds crazy, but many Mexicans claim the 500 year old Treaty of Tordecillas of 1494, gives Mexicans the legal and moral right to ignore the border and claim parts of the US for Mexico. Their assertions are fatally flawed. Since no other country signed this treaty, they were not obligated to obey it. In addition, Mexicans ignore all subsequent treaties after the Treaty of Tordecillas, the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo - which Mexico signed to end the Mexican American War in 1848. Mexico signed away their rights with these treaties. Therefore, the U.S. has legal ownership of the southwest U.S. CASE CLOSED.

Some people don’t know this, but because of the dysfunctional state of Mexican politics - and only 2 years after independence - five states in Central America declared themselves independent from Mexico - Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. On July 1, 1823, the United Provinces of Central America was formally established in Guatemala City. Constant infighting and wars resulted in the Union falling apart in 1838. The five states became independent nations without any interference from Mexico or threats of perpetual war. WHY??

Sources:

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