

There's a story behind this proposal. The New Yorker is notorious for not responding to proposals it doesn't want. Usually, the proposal just disappears into the ether, without the courtesy of a rejection. I sent this one – for a profile of a particularly interesting Mexican cabinet officer -- in May of 2002, and then forgot all about it. Four months later, Bennet called and commissioned the piece. In celebration, I took the day off and opened that day's New York Times, something I rarely took the time to do. In that day's paper was the news that the cabinet officer had been fired and his office closed. So this piece was never written. Bennet, though, called this "the best proposal he'd ever read," and he uses it in a magazine-writing class he teaches at Columbia University.

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John Bennet
The New Yorker
4 Times Square
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Dear Mr. Bennet:

In the Mexican village where I lived until recently, my daughter's friends played "wetbacks and Border Patrol" (mojados y Migra) the way I used to play cowboys and Indians. They would sneak through the sugarcane fields and cow pastures to a parklike hilltop they called "Los Angeles," while I – invariably forced to play La Migra -- would try to catch them.

The game always ended the same way. I'd catch a few, but most would slip through and taunt me mercilessly when we met up in "Los Angeles." "Okay," I'd snarl at the ones I'd caught, "I'm putting you guys on the bus for the border tonight!"

member, National Writers Union UAW/AFL-CIO

“No matter!” they’d sing, knowing exactly how the real border works. “We’ll just try again tomorrow!”

These kids have never seen the border any more than the kids on my block had seen Apache country. But like the Frontier of my American boyhood, la frontera looms large in the mythology of Mexican children. One Mexican in ten lives in the United States, about half illegally. The wages they send home are Mexico’s third-biggest source of income after tourism and oil. In the demographic undertow of that tidal wave are 90 Mexican microregions that have been drained of men. Migration to the U.S. is as central to Mexico’s culture as it is to its economy.

Yet for decades, the Mexican government – embarrassed at what migration said about Mexico’s ability to take care of its own -- pretended it wasn’t happening. Officials wouldn’t deny it, exactly, but neither did they manage migration, plan for it, endeavor to make it safer, or tap its potential.

That began changing with the election of Vicente Fox, who created in his cabinet an Office of Mexicans Abroad, a position he filled with a man I’d like to profile for the New Yorker, Juan Hernández Senter.

To introduce myself, I recently wrote a three-part series about Mexicans and the United States for Rolling Stone. That series, and a couple of other Mexico-related pieces are enclosed. I am also the author of two books: Smoke and Mirrors: The War on Drugs and the Politics of Failure (Little, Brown; 1996) and Citizen Coors: An American Dynasty (Morrow, 2000).

Anonymous among Americans, Hernández is a superstar on Univision, the parallel-universe Spanish-language network that reaches nine out of ten hispanic households in the U.S. When he addressed a luncheon of local business leaders at the Adams Mark Hotel in downtown Dallas, last August, the audience saw a fair-skinned man with green eyes who slicks his pale hair straight back, trims his beard close, and allows his mustache to sweep out beyond the line of his face – an effect that recalls Czar Nicholas II. They heard a soft, faintly patrician voice, devoid of accent or regionalism in the manner of a television personality. They listened to Hernández’s remarks, and clapped politely.

Then, as they waited for coffee, they saw Hernández surrounded by busboys and led, smiling, to the kitchen. A moment later a burst of applause and cheering issued softly through the walls. This sort of thing happens to Hernández wherever he goes in the United States. He makes speeches to the wealthy and powerful, and then gets his loudest ovation in the kitchen.

It was Hernandez who fired 43 of Mexico’s top 44 customs officials for extorting bribes from returning migrants. It was Hernandez who identified the 90 microregions bled dry of men and created a “padrino” – godfather – system

for successful migrants to invest their earnings safely in businesses and education plans at home. This may not sound like a big deal unless you've seen the re-bar sticking up from unfinished homes all over Mexico, emblem of the brick-by-brick effort that was until recently the only safe way Mexicans could invest at home.

Hernández calls himself “not fifty-fifty Mexican and American, but a hundred percent Mexican and a hundred percent American.” His father was a Mexican lawyer, his mother an American artist. He spent his boyhood in Guanajuato and went to college in Wisconsin. Until recently he was a professor of Latin American literature at the University of Dallas. He is so thoroughly bi-national he brings to mind one of those Monacan princes whose elegance, diplomacy, and disconcerting lack of accent makes him at home both everywhere and nowhere.

Hernández represents official Mexico at its least anti-Yanquí and simultaneously its most militantly anti-border. He wants to lead both countries, in the age of unfettered capital, into a redefinition of national sovereignty. It was Hernández who led the effort, during Fox's campaign, to institute absentee ballots, which would have effectively turned the United States into a hotly contested electoral district. (The PRI switched off the power to the Mexican Congress on the day of the vote, killing the bill.) The United States and Mexico, he argues, are becoming one country. While financeers erase the border with NAFTA, legions of campesinos do likewise with their feet. It is, for the moment, a single labor market: American businesses want to hire Mexicans and Mexicans want to work. Yet as many people died crossing the border last year as died crossing the Berlin Wall in its entire 28-year history.

I propose a profile of Juan Hernández as a window on the Mexican migrant phenomenon in the era of globalism. There's nobody in government, on either side of the border, quite like Hernández. Having interviewed him for the Rolling Stone series, I have good access to him. He has invited me to spend as much time with him as I need.

William Finnegan suggested I pitch this story to you, and says he spoke to you about it briefly last October. He suggested I keep my initial letter short. I can flesh it out if the idea appeals to you.

Please let me know if you'd like this profile for the New Yorker. Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Dan Baum

