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An Intellectual History of the Economic Debate about the Bracero Program, 1942-1964

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Bracero Program was a migrant labor program that brought Mexican nationals into the United States from 1942 to 1964. The program was initially created with the premise of filling the labor gap that World War II had produced, when many Americans went to fight the war. However, there were other reasons why the program began. The most important were economic incentives for agricultural producers who benefited greatly from having a steady flow of cheap labor. These producers, as well as their allies in Congress, kept the program alive after the end of the war and into the 1960s. Along the way, labor unions and politicians such as President Truman fought against the program in the name of keeping domestic wages high. These voices, as well as changing attitudes throughout the United States, brought about the eventual end of the program. This thesis refocuses scholarly attention away from ethnic prejudices against Mexican immigrants and toward economic issues as the dominant reason for the creation and extended life of the Bracero Program.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

To my parents and grandfather, for teaching me that our limit is ourselves.

## Chapter 1

### **The Bracero Program as a Historical Problem: Documents, Methods, and Scholarship**

This thesis, “An Intellectual History of the Economic Debate about the Bracero Program,” is an intellectual history of the public debate about the Bracero Program in the twentieth-century United States. The word “bracero” literally translates as “one who works using his arms.” Braceros were Mexicans who worked as manual laborers in the United States. The program was an initiative by the federal government to permit immigrants from Mexico to enter the United States legally and temporarily to work in American agriculture. Begun in 1942, when legislators acted on the premise that war mobilization of citizens had created an unusual demand for supplemental farm labor, the program continued through the early years of the Cold War. As American farm production expanded, and as products increasingly reached global markets, Congress endorsed the idea that farmers would be well served by a reliable source of immigrant labor. The program also offered a means to forge diplomatic bonds with Mexico at a time when many Americans feared communist influences, especially in underdeveloped countries. The program came to an end in 1964 in the context of a broad reform of U.S. immigration policy that opened the nation’s door wider to immigrants – who would presumably become workers – from around the world.

Throughout the history of the Bracero Program, however, there was never consensus about its importance or its specific provisions. Issues centered on relationships between immigrant and native workers and between small and large agricultural employers, as well as on conditions of labor and wages. Ongoing debate occurred in Congress, in state-level meetings, and in the public sphere through newspapers, pamphlets, and other documents. Arguments focused

on economic questions: how best to serve the national interest, the workforce overall (including unionized workers), owners of agricultural businesses, and the braceros themselves.

I argue that this rhetorical emphasis on economics is surprising in light of existing historical interpretation. The program generated a rich public record of conferences and legislative hearings at the state and federal levels about the braceros. Each of the main chapters of this thesis analyzes a representative document. These primary documents show that in public debate, economic considerations provided the core of various arguments. In all, I use immigrant agricultural labor in the United States as a case study of national debate about the intersection of economic expansion and diplomacy in the Cold War era.

Most of the scholarship on the Bracero Program and on immigration of any type stresses the importance of race and ethnicity. I do not deny that these are important matters that can affect policy, and when I began to write this thesis, that was what I expected to find. However, I found remarkably little debate that even mentioned race. The braceros were not given the best working conditions or a fair wage, but that was because limited investment in their well-being was the cheapest way for the employers to get what they needed out of them.

One recent example of scholarship that stresses prejudice is Deborah Cohen's book *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*. Cohen does a great job presenting many different stages of the program over time, and she has an engaging writing style. However, she, like many other scholars, places too much emphasis on racism's role in this issue. This thesis will demonstrate through its primary sources that racism may have played a role in shaping the discussion about the Bracero Program, but it does not deserve the emphasis that so many others have given it in the past. Public voices in the 1950s did not perceive social identity – and specifically ethnicity – as the core issue. Rather, politicians, union leaders, commercial farmers, and even clergy framed the issue for the United States as one of labor, production, and profits.

After an introductory chapter that frames the Bracero Program in time, titled “The Bracero Program and The Department of Labor, Unions, and Labor Activists,” I start chapter three by providing a record of a Migrant Labor Conference in Pennsylvania in December 1952 and then following the key actors from this conference as well as the Department of Labor’s approach to the Bracero Program in subsequent years. The key point of the meeting was to decide how to handle migrant laborers. These migrants included the braceros, but also migrant Puerto Ricans and African Americans, who traveled to find work during the periods when various crops needed to be harvested. The conference tried to figure out the best way to respond to workers who filled a previously nonexistent position in society. Several different agencies were present at the conference, but all of them favored improving the conditions of the migrants. Some of the main speakers at the hearing included Mr. Block of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Alfred Bartholomew, who was a minister with a Ph.D., and Mr. Mitchell, a labor activist who investigated the housing of the migrants. At the conference these three men and most of the others who spoke focused on the poor conditions experienced by migrants. They focused on trying to improve the housing and transportation of the migrants. Another key focus was improving the lives of the children of migrants, so that they would not have to work in the fields alongside their parents. However, the actual effect of these social activists, and those who came after them, was likely small. Still, all of the people featured in this chapter provide an important insight into how people (with a principal focus on labor) examined the issue.

The next chapter, chapter four, “The 1953 Hearing on a Possible Extension of the Bracero Program: A Case Study on the Bracero Program during Congress in the 1950s,” centers on a hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture that took place from March 24-26, 1953. The title of the hearing was “Extension of Mexican Farm Labor Program.” The hearing tried to determine whether or not the Bracero Program needed to be extended and for how many years that extension should last. The chairman of the Committee was Clifford R. Hope

(R-KS). Hope was a respected bipartisan leader who oversaw the hearing. Many of the other congressmen simply listened to the testimonies, but Harold Cooley (D-NC) and William Poage (D-TX) were more active. Each of these men strongly favored the Bracero Program and that showed in how they treated those giving testimony. There were no congressmen who showed any level of support for discontinuing the program. Only Walter Mason, the national legislative representative of the American Federation of Labor, spoke out against the program in his statement. The other people who were present at the hearing represented growers' associations and users of the braceros' labor, such as Austin E. Anson, the executive manager of the Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers Association, and Keith Mets, president of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association. The hearing eventually resulted in an extension of the Bracero Program, and it revealed how weak the anti-Bracero Program group was at this time.

The final document for the last chapter, chapter five, "The End of the Bracero Program: The Final Extension and the Aftermath of the End," is a report composed by the same Harold Cooley of the 1953 hearing. In 1963 there was another hearing on the "Continuation of Mexican Farm Labor Program" before the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture. A report was composed on May 6, 1963, to summarize the assenting majority and dissenting minority stance on the issue. The report outlined arguments of the majority who wanted to extend the Bracero Program once more, but there was also a strong minority report that accompanied the decision to extend the program. The minority group was now far larger than it had been in the past, and it presented strong economic-based arguments as to why the program should be allowed to end.

Together, these three documents, as well as the other primary sources that I have gathered, demonstrate chronological changes in the discussion of the Bracero Program. The debate went from initially having overwhelming support in Congress, with only mild dissent from unions and activists, to having Congress change its opinion altogether on the issue. Through all of

these documents the central theme was the economic considerations that each group found the most important.

The documents are a lens on American priorities concerning labor, agricultural production, and immigration -- and the role of government in advancing these interests -- during the postwar period. They tell neither the story of the braceros' actual social experiences, nor do they offer details about the institutional implementation of the legislation. As a chronicle of domestic debate, however, they reveal the economic aspirations of Americans and the extent to which Americans willingly used temporary legal immigrants from Mexico to advance national goals.

## Chapter 2

### Placing the Bracero Program in Time

Before understanding the debate that surrounded the Bracero Program, its origin must be explained in greater detail, and the historical context must be understood. The first form of the Bracero Program began on August 4, 1942, through a diplomatic agreement between United States President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and President of Mexico, Manuel Ávila Camacho, in Monterrey, Mexico. The program was initially created to help fill a labor gap in agriculture that was mostly concentrated in the United States Southwest. The Bracero Program subsequently existed as a series of laws and administrative agreements until it was solidified as Public Law 78 in 1951. This law was then consistently renewed until the final extension ended on December 31, 1964.

Within the United States, there was much discussion and politicking about the program, and almost all of it revolved around economic issues. Among the major actors who were interested in the Bracero Program were the Truman Administration, southern Democrats, labor, and agricultural producers. President Harry Truman wanted to end the program early on, but he was blocked by the southern Democrats. At the same time, outside of the government, unions fought to help the braceros in the name of human rights. The unions' major opponents were the large agricultural growers who benefited the most from the cheap Mexican labor.

Much of the scholarship focuses on prejudices that people held, but I do not believe that this topic deserves as much attention as it receives. Instead, I believe that the main factor for the fairly long life of the program was the economic motivations of large agricultural growers who developed factories in the fields and who saw the most benefit from the use of the braceros.

Without economic motivations, there would be no need to seek an easily exploitable labor source. I believe that these major growers within the United States would have used members of any ethnic group to fill their labor gap, and that they would have paid them as little as possible. Nearly every immigrant group that came to America was subject to prejudices and used as a source of cheap labor for a time. This was not a new phenomenon that was unique to Mexicans. The dominant motivation, then, was that they could be used to improve the economic standing of people in power. This does not mean that ethnicity did not matter and that prejudices did not exist. Both did. I simply wish to argue that they should not be the first variable that people look to when trying to explain why the Bracero Program existed for the amount of time that it did.

#### *Opening the Door to Mexican Immigration: Chinese Exclusion*

Mexicans had immigrated to America for many decades before the Bracero Program tried to control that movement in 1942. Mexican laborers were not the first to help the United States manage its seasonal laborer needs. The Chinese had provided cheap labor to the American West and Southwest since the 1850s. They only stopped coming after the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted on May 6, 1882.<sup>1</sup> This legislation was the first significant restriction on free immigration in United States history. It barred all “skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining” from entering the country for ten years under penalty of imprisonment and deportation.<sup>2</sup> The Exclusion Act also made it impossible for current Chinese immigrant aliens within the United States to apply for United States citizenship. The Exclusion Act changed the way the United States handled immigration, and it also put Mexicans into a perfect position to fill the labor gap that the Chinese had previously occupied.

Labor historians do not agree on the primary reason for Chinese exclusion. Some emphasize racial prejudice in the labor movement as the motivation, and others believe it was caused by racial prejudice in Congress itself.<sup>3</sup> In the Senate’s *Report of the Joint Special*

*Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration* (1877), the Chinese were called a “terrible scourge” and “a great and growing evil.”<sup>4</sup> The Chinese had once been welcomed into the United States with open arms and provided much of the labor on the western frontier in railroad-building and agriculture. However, as more people moved westward and as the railroads were completed, the need for the Chinese was no longer as prevalent. The Chinese were excluded because the economy changed, as did the social structure of the regions where the Chinese lived. It was also a time when racism was far more overt, and so it was acceptable for congressmen to speak about the Chinese as lesser persons to Americans. When the Bracero Program was in effect, overt racism was not as publicly acceptable. It appeared quietly, however, even in Congress. For example, William R. Poage said in a 1953 hearing on the Bracero Program that Mexicans could not be trusted to do skilled labor.<sup>5</sup> He did not call them an evil, but he did not think that they should be trusted with anything other than the most basic jobs.

#### *The Era of the Quota System and the Beginnings of Controls on Mexican Immigration*

The Bracero Program was a case study of one aspect of American immigration. It existed under the umbrella of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, which was otherwise known as the Immigration Act of 1924. This program was the final form of the Quota Act of 1921, which gave Mexicans newfound freedom to immigrate into the United States. The Quota Act and then the Immigration Act of 1924 capped the number of immigrants from each nation at three percent of their current population as of the 1910 census.<sup>6</sup> However, nations within the American continent were exempt from this upper bound on immigration.<sup>7</sup>

Influenced by the Immigration Act of 1924, Mexicans rapidly increased their presence in America. In 1925, the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in the House of Representatives held a hearing to discuss the recent rise of immigration from Latin America, in particular immigration from Mexico. Mexico alone had exceeded three-fifths of the quota for all

transoceanic countries and made the legislators wonder for the first time whether “the new additions of the race stock of the United States can be regarded as beneficial or as detrimental, and what main lines of policy should be laid down for dealing with this immigration .”<sup>8</sup> Mexican immigrants per year went from just under 30,000 in 1921 to over 87,000 in 1924.<sup>9</sup> Legislators were uncertain of how to control this unregulated stream of people into their country. The Bracero Program could be seen as an eventual answer to that question.

The border patrol was one of the first attempts by the United States government to control immigration from Mexico. The border patrol was formed immediately after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 as a response to the increasing number of Mexicans migrating to the United States. In the early 1920s, the number of Mexican migrants entering the United States was estimated to be 100,000 a year or more when counting both legal and illegal migrants. Mexican immigration may have continued to occur at these extremely fast rates, but the Immigration Act of 1924 lowered the requirements for deportation.<sup>9</sup> This allowed the border patrol to increase the number of deportations that could be made. In 1920 the number of deportations had been 846, but in 1930 that number had increased to 8,438.<sup>10</sup> There was a great statistical increase in the number of deportations, even though the total number of deportations was still small.

The economic downturn of the Great Depression further pushed the United States government to limit Mexican migration to America. In order to prevent Mexicans from taking jobs that American citizens were desperately searching for in the 1930s, the United States enforced a strict ban on contract labor. The nation also imposed a literacy test upon migrants and excluded anyone who, according to the Department of State, was “likely to become a public charge.”<sup>11</sup> Mexicans were now refused visas more often than they had been in the past, and legal immigration quickly dropped off. Legal immigration went from about 58,500 a year in the late 1920s to 12,703 in 1930. It then dropped off again in 1931 to 3,333, partly because the Great Depression decreased employment opportunities in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Though immigration from Mexico had fallen greatly during the Great Depression, World War II provided a new incentive to expand the number of migrants. Newspapers spread the idea that there was an extremely pressing need for the braceros. The *Excelsior* newspaper used article titles such as “Only Mexicans Can Save California Harvests” and “They are Requesting Mexican Workers in the US” to convince the public of the urgent need for Mexican labor.<sup>13</sup> The members of Congress who passed the wartime Bracero Program told their colleagues and the citizens of the United States that the nation needed the Mexican nationals in order to compensate for the men who were fighting abroad. This was the foundation of the Bracero Program.

#### *The Bracero Program as an Agreement Between Nations*

The first iteration of the Bracero Program came in 1942, and it was a wartime measure grounded in the claim that America needed Mexican men to fill the labor gap that service in the United States army had created. Congress agreed to have Mexican nationals assist the Allies by having them work in the vast agricultural fields of the United States. The Mexicans would provide labor for the United States, and the Americans would fight overseas. Though the Bracero Program at this time may have actually existed to fill a labor gap in America, it is possible that growers saw an opportunity to gain access to cheap labor and sought to seize that opportunity. The United States also benefited by tying their neighbor to the south to their war cause. Regardless of what the true reason was, the United States had reasonable motivation to want the agreement.

The Bracero Program also was useful to Mexico because it strengthened their economic ties to America. Mexico and the United States had had strained relations since the Mexican-American war in the 1840s. Tensions between the two nations were heightened in 1938 when then President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the Mexican oilfields in an effort to strengthen the nation’s own economic power.<sup>14</sup> This nationalization of the oilfields was a economic blow to the

United States, since then the United States had refused to come to agreement over Mexican debt to the United States. World War II drained labor away from all industries in America. Women who were left at home helped to fill some of this labor gap, but they were not enough women working in agriculture. Mexicans could fill that gap, and their government understood that America would want those men. The Mexican government seemed to be willing to temporarily sacrifice its people to the United States in order to gain diplomatic and economic benefits from the program.

The Mexican administration also supported the program because their officials believed that the Bracero Program could help Mexico to modernize. These officials believed that its citizens would learn about modern farming practices while in America and that they would be able to bring back with them back to Mexico. They also believed that the agreement would help to bring them into the democratic nation-state community and that membership in that community would enhance Mexico's trade options.<sup>15</sup> The Undersecretary of Foreign Relations for Mexico, Jaime Torres Bodet, acknowledged that Mexico had an unemployment problem and said that sending the nation's citizens to America would help to mitigate their unemployment problem.<sup>16</sup> Mexico also understood that immigration to the United States would occur naturally because of the higher wages that could be earned in America. The Bracero Program gave the Mexican government some control over the migration of their citizens and also created a system that would bring their wages back to their families in Mexico to be spent there.

*Public Law 78: The Institutionalization of the Bracero Program*

The Bracero Program became institutionalized as Public Law 78 after some public debate and politicking in the United States. For the longest stretch of time, Public Law 78 was the statute that continued the Bracero Program. The full official title of the bill was "An Act to Amend the Agricultural Act of 1949."<sup>17</sup> The bill came from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, which was composed of 47

Democrats and 49 Republicans in the Senate and 235 Democrats, 199 Republicans, and 1 Independent in the House. Interestingly, the bill originated in the Senate, which did not have a Democrat majority. The law was signed by President Truman on July 12, 1951. It was set to expire two years later, but it was extended for one or two years continuously until December 31, 1964. Though President Truman did sign the bill, he was against it from its start. However, Truman's approval rating was around 30 per cent at this time because of the Korean War and other issues, so he was not free to execute his own plans.<sup>18</sup> In principle, he wished to expand the New Deal under his Fair Deal, which favored domestic labor and which called for stricter border enforcement along the United States-Mexican border.<sup>19</sup>

Truman created a President's Commission on Migrant Labor in American Agriculture on June 3, 1950, which gathered information to strengthen his argument against the Bracero Program. Truman's main opponents were the growers who used the braceros and the congressmen from the states that benefited from their use.<sup>20</sup> As would be expected from such a commission, it found that the economic labor shortage was not as pressing as the growers had claimed. The Department of State also told the commission that Mexico was not strongly attached to the program.<sup>21</sup> The Bracero Program represented the United States trying to control migrants for the sake of America's gain, rather than a mutually beneficial outcome. The report concluded by recommending to the President that "no special measures should be adopted to increase the number of contract laborers."<sup>22</sup> Instead, the report proposed an improvement in housing, a minimum wage in agriculture, improved labor management relations, the creation of a Federal Committee on Migratory Labor, and penalties for employers who hired illegal workers.<sup>23</sup>

The congressmen who fought the strongest against Truman were representatives from the South and West whose constituents used the braceros and who were more resistant to change. In the Senate, Allen Ellender (D-LA) led the fight for the Bracero Program, and in the House William R. Poage (R-TX) was a consistently strong supporter of the Bracero Program from its

start.<sup>24</sup> Both men came from regions that invested heavily in agriculture, and they both saw the benefits that could come from using cheap labor. The West had a strong desire for the braceros after Chinese Exclusion and in controlling the flow of immigration. Southern white agricultural employers also saw a potential need for new laborers, since African Americans were pushing for more rights and were moving to escape Jim Crow. Truman met with opposition in Congress and he also did not possess sufficient Presidential power and influence to defeat such well-positioned Bracero proponents.

Public Law 78 was the longest standing version of the Bracero Program. It existed “for the purpose of assisting in such production of agricultural commodities and products as the Secretary of Agriculture deems necessary, by supplying agricultural workers from the Republic of Mexico”<sup>25</sup> The law gave the Secretary of Labor multiple rights and responsibilities: to recruit these agricultural laborers, to establish and operate reception centers that would receive and house workers as the arrangements for their employment were written up, to provide transportation of the workers from the centers to the United States and then back to Mexico after the end of their employment, to provide the workers with subsistence, emergency medical care, and to pay if needed for burial expenses while the braceros were at the reception centers or while being transported, to assist the workers and employers in negotiating the contracts, and to guarantee that the employers pay the agreed-upon wages.<sup>26</sup>

Legally, the law seemed to create a fair system of exchange in which the braceros were protected. However, it is difficult to determine how well the law was enforced, and it can be assumed that it was rarely followed completely. Even if it was completely enforced, the law clearly favored American employers over the braceros. One major issue was that there was no legal minimum wage that was established for the braceros. It was the employers and the Department of Labor that oversaw their compensation. The predominately Spanish-speaking Mexicans had to rely upon the Department of Labor to create their contracts. By the time that the

braceros got to the contract-signing, they would accept any deal, and once they were in the United States, they had no rights of collective bargaining.<sup>27</sup> On the employers' side, they had to agree to a few specific points before they could employ any braceros. They had to compensate the United States for any loss that resulted from not following the agreed-upon contract and to reimburse the United States in its essential expenses of transportation and subsistence of the workers not to exceed \$15 per worker.<sup>28</sup> The employers also had to pay the United States if the worker was not returned to the reception center on the agreed-upon contract date.

Furthermore, the United States government had to allow the Secretary of Labor to determine when there was sufficient domestic labor to make the Mexican braceros no longer necessary. The Secretary was also supposed to take all reasonable efforts to attract domestic workers before tapping into the bracero labor force.<sup>29</sup> The last measure said that the braceros were never to adversely affect the wages and working conditions of domestic agricultural workers. In its first form, Public Law 78 was also not to last any longer than December 31, 1953.<sup>30</sup>

#### *Major Contemporary Events and Their Impacts Upon the Bracero Program*

The Bracero Program, like all things, did not exist in a vacuum. It was in effect throughout the early stages of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement. The Cold War affected the United States' foreign policy and how it dealt with every nation, as well as thoughts about communism within the nation. The rise and fall of various nations to communism made citizens within the United States fearful of possible invasions. Communism had already spread to Cuba during the existence of the Bracero Program. The United States needed to be sure that its neighbors did not provide a threat, and the Bracero Program helped to tie the United States to Mexico. Fears of communism and its spread were present throughout the debate on the Bracero Program. It was not just a question of how to handle the braceros. Another realm of the discussion was about Mexico as a trade partner and as an ally.

The Civil Rights movement gained momentum during the Bracero Program. One of the biggest milestones was the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision reversed the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896 that had established the “separate-but-equal” doctrine. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963 also was a critical moment of change in America. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have A Dream” speech was delivered at this event. This speech remains an iconic reminder of the promise America holds for all people and of its failure to achieve the goal of equality in practice. The Civil Rights movement challenged the way America behaved as a nation and caused a ripple effect that helped all minorities challenge the existing norm. Public consciousness was changed by the Civil Rights movement, and that undoubtedly raised concern about the plight of the braceros who were exploited economically throughout the Bracero Program.

#### *Key Statistics*

To better understand the impact of the Bracero Program, I will now share information about the number of braceros who came each year. Table 1 shows the number of braceros who entered the United States each year from 1942-1967.<sup>31</sup>

Year	Number of Braceros
1942	4,203
1943	52,098
1944	62,170
1945	49,454
1946	32,043
1947	19,632
1948	35,345
1949	107,000
1950	67,500
1951	192,000
1952	197,100
1953	201,380
1954	309,033
1955	398,650
1956	445,197
1957	436,049
1958	432,857
1959	437,643
1960	315,846
1961	291,420
1962	194,978
1963	186,865
1964	177,736
1965	20,286
1966	8,647
1967	7,703

Table 1 <sup>32</sup>

The Bracero Program started as a wartime measure, but it did not come to exist in its full form until the mid-1950s. During the war, the number of braceros slowly increased and then fell off at its conclusion, but the number of migrants never exceeded 63,000 per year. Though the program did drop off after the war, it quickly revitalized, likely because employers realized that they had a great economic incentive to continue to exploit the braceros even though the war was over. Then in 1951, when Public Law 78 passed, the number of braceros went from being under 100,000 a year to being about 200,000 or more a year until 1961. In the middle of this period, from 1955 to 1959, the number of braceros who entered America was nearly 450,000. In 1960,

though, the public debate started to shift, and just as fast as the number of braceros had grown, it fell off. Public discussion during the major growth period was dominated by the economic interests of agricultural growers and the apathy of all other parties. The program was extended easily throughout the 1950s; but as awareness about the program and its exploitation spread, the anti-Bracero Program contingent gained in strength. At this time, the number of braceros dropped quickly, and soon the program was over. The official end of the program did come on December 31, 1964. There were still some braceros who came between 1965 to 1967. The number of braceros coming at this time was insignificant compared to those who had come just a few years earlier, however.

### *Looking Ahead*

Now that the Bracero Program has been basically explained and placed in time, the remainder of the thesis will demonstrate the public debate on the Bracero Program. This debate centered on economic issues. Though President Truman spoke to the merit of ending the program before it could gain momentum, in order to aid domestic laborers, he was not successful in discontinuing the program. The public debate throughout much of the 1950s was dominated by large agricultural firms that benefited from the braceros. These firms were the main employers of braceros and so were the most intimately engaged in the debate. Labor activists and unions did try enter into the debate, but their voices did not carry weight in Congress, and the public was not yet interested in the lives of the braceros. It would take many years before the Bracero Program would be defeated, but throughout the discussion, the dominant issue was always the economic effects of the program. The next three chapters demonstrate this through a close analysis of some key primary documents that provide an excellent summary of where the Bracero Program stood at the time of each one's publication.

## Chapter 3

### **The Bracero Program and the Department of Labor, Unions, and Labor Activists**

Over the course of the Bracero Program, many different voices emerged from groups that were both directly connected with labor and those who had an interest in labor and laborers. These labor unions, activist groups, government agencies, and even religious groups all contributed to the national discussion about the Bracero Program, as well as growing numbers of migrant workers of all types. From Pennsylvania to California, migrants became an object of interest. Most labor organizations did not know about or address migrant laborers or the Bracero Program during its formative years; but as migrant labor became a permanent fixture of American life, labor groups, and all those concerned with labor, started to pay attention. The labor groups offered recommendations and criticisms to government officials to pursue their interests.

#### *State Level Examination of Migrant Labor*

The Bracero Program was mostly concentrated in the southwestern United States, but migrant labor was an issue that was spreading across the entire country. Some labor activists in Pennsylvania got together and looked at the question of migrant labor in general at the Pennsylvania Migrant Labor Conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on December 10, 1952. At this time, the Bracero Program was just starting to take off under Public Law 78. The issues discussed at the conference were questions of how to deal with migrant labor and what should be done to help the migrants. One issue that was widely discussed at the conference was establishing a minimum wage for agricultural workers and improving the housing of both migrant and sedentary farm workers.<sup>1</sup> Other participants tried to determine just what the state of migrant labor

was in America, but they met resistance. When this occurred, they concluded that exploitation was occurring and tried to assist the migrants.

One of these men who tried to examine the state of migrant labor at the conference was named Mr. Mitchell, a labor activist. Mitchell spoke about the unjust conditions that migrants had to endure. They were moved from location to location in dilapidated trucks, with many migrants crowded together.<sup>2</sup> Mitchell spoke of how he had tried to speak to the man who was in charge of the transportation of migrants in his region, but the response he received was simply, “Not in my department.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Mitchell examined a labor camp and found that there was no running water and that beds were simply straw thrown upon the floor.<sup>4</sup> This was the kind of dismissive attitude and lack of concern that have contributed to the scholarship believing that prejudice was such a dominant factor when examining the Bracero Program. The exploitations of migrant laborers pushed Mitchell and other labor activists to speak out regarding the lack of human rights. This was most likely true, because the conditions of the migrants were poor. However, I believe that the reason they had straw beds and were thrown into the backs of trucks for long journeys was not chiefly because of prejudices. The people who spoke about these awful conditions recognized that they are awful, but they do not ever say that the reason for neglect was because the workers were Mexican or, in the case of Pennsylvania’s migrants, Puerto Rican. The reason they were treated this way was because they could gain the most profit by treating the immigrants poorly and paying them low wages.

Labor unions also had a clear interest in the lives of the braceros and of migrants, because they such workers operated in and influenced the domestic labor market. The migrants were willing to work for very little and endured the working conditions of their fields. For this reason, they were welcomed by employers and a threat to unions. The unions had been trying to change the way laborers were treated. They had successfully brought about shorter working hours and higher wages for their worker membership, but the braceros and the migrants provided a threat to

that security. A bracero could function as a strikebreaker and force unions to end their strikes and accept whatever employers were willing to offer. The Bracero Program limited the braceros to work in agriculture only, but laws could be changed if the economic gain would have been great enough for those interested in the matter. Potentially, legal immigrants from Mexico could jeopardize union control if they became industrial workers.

The braceros were consequently a threat to the unions' success. Rather than fight migrant labor, the unions actually sided with the migrants and the braceros. They claimed human rights reasons for supporting them, when in actuality they seem to have been acting in their own economic best interest. By advocating a minimum wage in agriculture and improved working conditions for the braceros, the unions would ensure that the migrants were not preferred over domestic labors. It would make more sense to hire an American and pay the citizen worker an universally-applied agricultural minimum wage rather than hire a Mexican to do the same job.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) were both present at the Pennsylvania Conference on Migrant Labor and provided examples of the logic stated above. The two unions would eventually merge to form the AFL-CIO in 1955, but at this time they were still separate so that each presented its own argument. Through its representative Mr. Block, the CIO voiced its dedication to helping all laborers no matter where they were born. He said that the CIO identified with the migrants, because their plight was similar to the plights of the laborers in the CIO.<sup>5</sup> Block spoke to the common brotherhood of man, especially that bond that laborers all shared, no matter where they were born. He said that the CIO wanted to improve the quality of life for all farm workers, even those not born in the United States.

Like other activists at this conference, Block stressed the importance of having improved housing and stricter enforcement done by the agencies responsible for the inspection of migrant housing.<sup>6</sup> He believed that if growers were taught what good housing was, they would implement

those standards. He did not admit that it was advantageous for the growers to spend as little on the braceros and migrants as possible. In the coming years, labor unions verbalized this point; but at this early stage, he stated that the problem could be fixed through communication. In time, labor unions switched from appealing to the agriculturalists and instead concentrated their efforts at more directed government mandates and enforcement.

Block's other proposals were mostly economic in nature. He wanted to amend Social Security so that medical and hospital needs could be given to residents, even if they were not citizens of the United States.<sup>7</sup> Here the union logic of increasing the cost starts to be revealed. Block claimed that he felt so passionate about helping all people that he was willing to use American taxpayer dollars to cover the medical expenses of migrants. However, I believe that Block chiefly wanted to increase the cost of hiring a migrant. He also wanted to increase education in agricultural areas for migrants' children. While the braceros did not come with children, many of the migrants in Pennsylvania did.<sup>8</sup> Children were an easy target to use to help in driving up the costs of hiring migrants.

Another speaker at the conference was Alfred C. Bartholomew, a minister who spoke about the shifts in society that had brought about a diminishing in the number of workers in the fields. The first reason that he gave was that industrial workers had secured higher wages in recent times, and they no longer needed to work in the fields after hours.<sup>9</sup> The second reason was that unemployment benefits, Social Security, and small numbers of young workers than in previous decades all served to further lower the number of part-time workers who had labored in the fields for extra money.<sup>10</sup> With fewer domestic laborers seeking jobs in agriculture, it became necessary, in his opinion, for migrants like the braceros and other nations to come work in the United States. Bartholomew was a religious man, who may be expected to focus on moral issues above all else; but counter to that assumption, he spoke solely of economic changes that he believed explained the rise of migrant laborers in America. He is an excellent example of the way

chiefly economic-based arguments dominated even at this early time in the Bracero Program's existence.

#### *The AFL and NAACP Reach Out to Migrants*

The following groups were not at the Pennsylvania Migrant Labor Conference, but they built on many of the same arguments that were presented at the conference. Unions and minority groups were consistently involved in these debates. The AFL was somewhat slow to fully enter the debate on the Bracero Program and on migrants, but it voiced many of the same arguments as the CIO did. It entered the discussion by affiliating with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In the one resolution, the NAACP said that it wanted "rigid licensing of all migrant labor agents, conditions of employment on farms protected by the state, rigid enforcement of child labor laws, and state inspection of farm labor camps."<sup>11</sup> The AFL fully supported these recommendations, possibly for the same reasons the CIO wanted to raise the costs for employers of migrants.

The NAACP also operated without support from the AFL and launched an attack on the exploitation of the Bracero Program. While the CIO believed the agricultural growers could be willing partners in ending the cheap wages and poor working conditions of the braceros, the NAACP identified that those growers as the ones who were the most interested in maintaining the system. They believed that the "large-scale fruit, vegetable, and cotton ranches of the West and South" were the true culprits.<sup>12</sup> The NAACP said that without a fair wage being paid to the braceros, the employers were destroying the economic well-being of all of the farm workers, migrant and domestic.

#### *The Department of Labor*

The U.S. Department of Labor was in charge of administrating the Bracero Program, and so it faced pressures and recommendations from both sides of the debate. On one side there were the unions and labor activists like those at the Pennsylvania Migrant Labor Conference who were pressuring the government agency to improve the conditions of the braceros and increase the costs of the employers; but the growers pressured them from the other side and wanted the Department of Labor to let the program exist in its current form or to cut costs to employers even more.

In order to help satisfy the requests of the unions and labor activists, the Department of Labor used the issue of the education of migrant children as an example of progress. The Department associated the future of the migrants' children with the future of the United States. One report claimed that there were "180,000 youngsters under 16 are working on commercial farms."<sup>13</sup> The Department of Labor shied away from pushing for a minimum wage in agriculture in the early 1950s, but it used the issue of improved education of children to canvas for positive change and reform.

There was already research and scholarship that showed the plight of migrant children to be a real issue. R.K. McNickle in 1950 had researched the conditions of farm labor in Maricopa County, Arizona, where there were 100 children suffering from "first degree starvation, malnutrition."<sup>14</sup> McNickle said that the AFL-affiliated National Farm Labor Union already was well aware of this problem, and it reported that at least 100,000 children from unemployed farm workers were suffering from malnutrition.<sup>15</sup> Education promoted by the Department of Labor could help those children mitigate against their poverty, but it still would not do much to end the starvation and low wages of the migrants. Children were suffering in the fields, and the Department of Labor was willing to hold them up as a symbol of reform. In reality, the change that the agency brought was slow.

While the CIO and AFL were willing to work with the Bracero Program to help promote their own economic well-being, the National Farm Labor Union (NFLU) identified the main problem: an actual oversupply of labor, not a dearth of labor.<sup>16</sup> This group was much more intimately connected to the problems of agriculture. If the AFL and CIO truly identified with agricultural laborers, it would make sense for them to come to the same conclusion as the NFLU. However, the unions did not reach the same conclusion as the NFLU—that is, to end the Bracero Program. The AFL and CIO wanted to maintain their own interests and so adopted a strategy of improving the braceros' working conditions. At the same time, they claimed to care about agricultural laborers interests. The NFLU represented those interests by openly trying to end the Bracero Program. The low wages allowed agricultural employers to bring prices down, and that drove the market prices of all agricultural production down. At these reduced wages and low prices, other agricultural workers and producers could not compete as well. The NFLU fought for those people. The NFLU attempted to end the Bracero Program, but its efforts did not gain much support because of the strength of politicians who came from states that used braceros intensively.<sup>17</sup> Labor had some power, but the wealth and influence possessed by the employers of the braceros and other migrants were still too valuable for politicians to sacrifice for the sake of the benefit of foreigners or even for poor American farmers.

#### *Unions Change in Approach: From the Growers to Congress*

As the Bracero Program continued to be renewed, the unions and labor activities moved past the issue of education for a small group of migrant children and improvements in housing. The issues of the Pennsylvania Migrant Labor Program still existed, but they evolved over time. At this time they changed to focus on establishing a universally applied minimum wage law for all agricultural laborers. This minimum wage was an idea that had existed before, but it had never received the amount of attention that it did starting in the late-1950s. The AFL-CIO had merged

by this time, and the new organization's official position was to be a friend to all laborers, even migrants. In the pamphlet titled *The People America Can't Forget* (1959), the AFL-CIO affirmed its support for establishing a universal minimum wage law for agriculture. The document stressed that the level of inflation had far outpaced the wages that agricultural laborers were being paid. It pointed out that \$1.00 in 1959 was worth less than \$0.25 in 1938, when the first minimum wage act, the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, was passed.<sup>18</sup> The pamphlet said that wages needed to increase in order to keep its original function. If wages stayed at the same level for too long, then such would have the functional result of lowering the standard of living for workers rather than helping to raise them. Whatever the reason for the AFL-CIO's support of this reform, the language and focus is undeniably economic. The organization was not trying to help a minority group avoid ethnic exploitation; rather, it maintained that it wanted to end unfair labor practices.

The AFL-CIO's official 1957 Resolution on Economic Issues relied on economic means and measures to change the quality of life for braceros and to drive up the costs for their employers. The resolution stated that farm cooperation, rural electrification, farm credit aids, soil conservation, insurance, and Social Security coverage would all be useful to agriculture and improve people's desire to work in the industry.<sup>19</sup> The resolution noted that the net income per farm from 1953 to 1955 had dropped 20 per cent in just two years.<sup>20</sup> The AFL-CIO blamed the government for allowing this practice to occur. The labor union believed that politicians were shaping policies so that labor and the small farmer would lose out. Large commercial farms had easy access to government officials and could use their money to keep the braceros and migrants coming. In order to combat these large commercial farms, the labor union decided to invest its time and energy into making a simple and universally applied agricultural minimum wage law. Though the resolution called for many reforms, the union knew that it would not be implemented.

A part of the union's reasoning for an agricultural minimum wage was that it would increase the buying power of all and help everyone in the nation to improve.<sup>21</sup> The AFL-CIO

argued using a Keynesian view of economics. Keynesians of that period believed that the macro-economy can be influenced by aggregate demand. If the aggregate demand increases, then the total output of the economy would grow as well. Keynesian-minded AFL-CIO spokesmen recognized that consumption would increase if more people were being paid more money, so that they could spend that money or invest it. However, those who rejected the Keynesian logic, such as the growers and employers, argued that raising the minimum wage would have a completely different outcome.

These critics said that the economy would not grow and that it may in fact shrink if the minimum wage was implemented. They said that a minimum wage would make employers hire fewer people and make those who they do hire have to work harder to make up the difference. The higher wage would increase employers' costs if they retained the same number of workers, so they would have to hire fewer workers. This would increase unemployment and would make the unemployed decrease their consumption and investment. This drop would not be offset by the higher wage the remaining workers would receive and then spend. Therefore, the minimum wage would not raise output and help all industries; instead, it would actually lower output, hurt the economy, and cause crops to go without being harvested.

### *Awareness Spreads*

In the 1960s the Bracero Program was a more widely known than in the past. There had been major changes in the debate since the Pennsylvania Migrant Labor Conference at this point. The Department of Labor was pressured into implementing greater reforms, because labor activists and unions were gaining in strength due to public backing. Public interest in the topic was increased by the CBS broadcast of the documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, in 1960. The broadcast spread awareness of the migrants' work and living conditions, and the documentary was highly supported by the AFL-CIO. The head of the Pennsylvania CIO, Harry Boyer, even

wrote a praiseworthy letter journalist Edward Murrow, the man who reported and narrated the documentary.<sup>22</sup> In the past, the unions had struggled to have any public support for their initiatives outside of their union members but, now, the issue was spreading and becoming a national concern.

Awareness of the issue was also spread by farmers themselves. One of these farmers was Fredrick S. Van Dyke, a California farmer, who wrote in 1959 about his support of unionizing farm laborers. Van Dyke opposed the Bracero Program. He saw the braceros as the biggest threat to his security and to other small farmers in the United States. They were the reason, he argued, that large growers could give domestic labor such low wages. In order to stop the growers from paying so little, Van Dyke believed that unionizing would be the best course of action.

Van Dyke supported unionizing for a number of reasons. He first appealed to all religious people in his community. He said that “as a Churchman, I cannot condone the number of people who live in poverty in our community.”<sup>23</sup> Van Dyke knew that he had to approach this issue delicately, or else he would look like he was throwing too much support behind the Mexicans and abandoning his fellow Americans. However, he argued that this was not his intent at all.

Van Dyke also said that he was in favor of unionizing against the braceros because he was a citizen of the United States and a farmer. As a citizen, he thought that the community could benefit from the increased wages that unions would secure for farmers. Unions in the fields, through collective bargaining and other proven union tactics, he thought, would thus have the same beneficial effects that had been achieved in the cities.<sup>24</sup> Finally, as a farmer, he saw that domestic laborers and farmers were being squeezed out of the system. He wanted the U.S. to supply more labor and Mexico to supply less. He thought that the higher wages unions would induce more Americans to seek agricultural jobs. Van Dyke had seen migrants return to Mexico early and leave the tomatoes to rot in the fields, which caused some farmers to have to give up

their land.<sup>25</sup> He believed that unions would remove the dependency upon migrants and allow the country to harvest its crops efficiently.

Van Dyke could have been voicing an anti-minority prejudice. Anti-minority discrimination was still prevalent in the nation. Seeing dark-skinned Mexicans taking the jobs of white Americans could have greatly upset Van Dyke, who may have believed that white workers were more worthy. He does not expressly say this in his writing, but it does seem as though he may have been influenced by a certain dislike for the migrants.

Van Dyke also justified his support for unionization by saying that in addition to being a churchgoer, a citizen, and a farmer, he was also against “the large farming syndicates.”<sup>26</sup> He believed that the large agribusinesses were the only ones who were actually able to take advantage of the Mexican labor force. It was a system that pushed family farmers like Van Dyke out of agriculture. He said that braceros had driven wages down to \$.90 an hour, which amounted to \$150 a month. He asked his audience a rhetorical question, “Who can live on such a wage?”<sup>27</sup> A union of farm laborers could secure a living wage and would push the braceros out of the picture. Van Dyke believed unions and a minimum wage would allow farmers to fight back against agribusiness, and that is why he pleaded with other farmers to join him. With higher wages, the lives of farm workers would be more stable, the workers would be more qualified, and the whole system would be more productive. Throughout this argument, Van Dyke spoke about the need to unionize and the economic results that unionizing would produce. He did not want to remove the braceros because they were a different ethnicity than himself. He simply wanted to protect his income.

### *Reforms Through the Department of Labor*

The Department of Labor continued to struggle between the benefits and costs of the Bracero Program. In its retrospective review of the past decade in March 1958, the Department

voiced many of the same concerns about reform that the unions advanced. It said that the agency wanted to assist the braceros, but at the same time it also recognized that agricultural production was up 80 per cent.<sup>28</sup> While production had increased, the farm population had fallen off from 27.1 million people in 1947 to 20.4 million people in 1957.<sup>29</sup> The braceros, illegal immigration, and mechanization all contributed to the increase in production and to the decline in the total farm population. These trends all contributed to what the Department of Labor identified as major changes in agriculture that it described as being like “a heavy flywheel [that] once set in motion is hard to slow or reverse.”<sup>30</sup> The program was extraordinarily helpful to the United States, through more robust exports, which had risen by 66 per cent from 1947 to 1957.<sup>31</sup>

The state of agricultural labor had changed throughout this period of change. Far fewer illegal immigrants were entering the United States than during the peak in the 1950s. The Bracero Program did not meet the supply of laborers in Mexico who wanted to enter the United States. American growers still recruited and hired illegal laborers, and previous border enforcement was not able to stop the Mexicans who chose to enter America outside of the Bracero Program’s provisions.

“Operation Wetback” was an immigration law enforcement initiative carried out by the Immigration and Nationalization Service in 1954 that used special tactics to stop Mexicans from entering the United States illegally. It was seen as a success in the Department of Labor’s report. The number of estimated undocumented laborers was over one million in 1954; in 1957 this number fell dramatically to 40,000.<sup>32</sup> The operation’s name, “wetback,” is derogatory by itself, and the program was known to feature mistreatment and abuse. However, it put the United States and Mexico in a better position to control the flow of the braceros and was seen as a success by the Department of Labor.

At the conclusion of the 1958 report, the Department of Labor stated that it was happy with the current state of affairs, and that it would continue to try and assure that Americans

followed the laws and that the braceros received better working conditions. The review said that there had been great improvements in housing. Even random inspections of living quarters produced findings that were up to par with the requirements set by the Department of Labor. An increased number of laborers was also being covered by insurance in 1958, and the Department found that contracts were being followed far more than they had been in the past.<sup>35</sup> The Department of Labor did not speak to abuses or prejudices in its report. The document simply spoke of improved conditions and of the importance of the Bracero Program for American agriculture. Change was being enacted, but it was still moving slowly.

With the Department of Labor in favor of the Bracero Program, the average uninformed American could well reach the conclusion that the United States was trying to help the braceros, but he or she might also most likely be pleased to see the braceros were stuck in agriculture and not a threat to their jobs. Small farms and agricultural workers had been hurt by the program, but it was still not a major issue for average laborers in cities. Agricultural employers that used the braceros sent the message that the crops in the fields would not be harvested if the braceros did not come. The braceros at this time were still viewed as a necessary source of labor that helped to increase United States harvesting of agricultural goods that, in turn, strengthened the nation as a trader and as a self-sufficient producer. The Department of Labor saw its position as being one that required the agency to bring in the necessary number of braceros, but to never give the migrants so much that they would never leave. The flow of Mexicans had to be regulated, and giving in to too many of the unions' recommendations could make the incentive to come to America – and stay—be too high.

The Labor Department walked a thin line between being too kind to the migrants and alienating native workers. It seems to be that its spokesmen believed that if citizens thought that the federal government supported the migrants too much, then the citizens might be upset that the migrants were using too much taxpayer-funded government resources. In addition, there would

be a fear that they were taking jobs away from willing Americans. However, if every migrant lived in a tent, then the Labor Department would have to deal with the humanitarian fallout from groups and unions like the AFL-CIO that preached its commitment to all laborers, no matter where they come from.

A Labor Department report—from an investigation of one camp—provides a breakdown of costs per worker, which explains what growers were doing at the time. The Labor Department flaunted these numbers in its publication, which seemed to show that the agency was in support of the cost breakdown as a good representation of its administrative goals. The cost breakdown can be seen in this table:

Year	Building Costs	Equipment Costs	Total Supplies Costs
1950-51	\$10,614.27	\$5,002.98	\$582.59
1951-52	\$7,929.00	\$4,765.59	\$774.70
1952-53	\$27,591.44	\$3,194.60	\$2,437.46
1953-54	\$35,327.78	\$20,439.78	\$4,480.83

Table 2<sup>36</sup>

By these numbers, the Labor Department tried to show that it was supporting the braceros. Its administrators wanted to demonstrate that they were getting results to silence the critics of the Bracero Program. Wages were still low, and Mexicans were rarely treated with much respect. Still, times were starting to change, and the actions of the Labor Department contributed to that change. They were not helping the Braceros and migrants rapidly, but they were slowly helping to improve the lives of the Braceros in their housing and in the services available for children as well.

While the Labor Department had been saying that conditions were improving, others did not find this to be the case. In *The Patriot*, a newspaper published in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, William L. Batt Jr. wrote about the migrant program in 1957, a year before the labor review was released by the Labor Department. He believed that the system still had many flaws, and that the best way to benefit the American farmer was not to help the common migrant laborer, but to

secure the “elimination of unfair competition resulting from uneven obedience to the law.”<sup>38</sup> Batt believed that most growers did not follow the laws, and by doing so saved money. The law-abiding growers faced a more difficult path because their costs were higher than those who were not following the laws. Those who followed the laws were being driven out of business, and for this writer, that was not acceptable. His position was seconded by many other supporters of laborers and small family farmers around the country such as the previously mentioned farmer from California, Fredrick Van Dyke.

Another of these supporters of stricter laws was a humanitarian, Sol Markoff of the National Child Labor Committee, who addressed the reportedly improved conditions. Markoff accused the big “bracero” employers—and, by connection too, the Labor Department—of providing “less money, worse housing, being transported under perilous conditions, receiving less education, less medical care, and less or no legal protection.”<sup>39</sup> Markoff maintained that workers were being paid less than \$20 a week, and that despite labor unions’ attempts, farmers were still mostly unorganized and unable to do any type of collective bargaining.<sup>40</sup> Markoff, just like other activists, discussed the Bracero Program principally in economic terms, rather than ethnic terms. He was concerned about migrant laborer’s children throughout the nation, but he did not think that the problem was caused by prejudices. He was mostly focused on just improving their conditions and ending their exploitation.

### *Conclusion*

The discussion of all of these actors was nearly always focused on the economic situation of the braceros. The expressed reason for this focus was human rights; but at least in the case of the unions, this point could be contested since there was an economic incentive for the unions to drive up the cost of hiring the braceros. In any case, while this discussion did help to shape the debate and put it into the public eye, it was Congress that had the final say on whether or not the

program would be renewed every few years. The debate is Congress helps to pinpoint the practical status of the program, and I analyze that discussion in the next two chapters.

## Chapter 4

### **1953 Hearing on an Extension of the Bracero Program: A Case Study on the Bracero Program in Congress**

Although the wording used by labor activists, farmers, and unions was nearly always connected to economic goals, those groups did not actually get to shape the policy. Even the Department of Labor had to conduct its operations in accordance to the laws created by Congress. This chapter will examine the debate in Congress through a representative and indeed routine hearing about the Bracero Program in 1953.

During the lifetime of the Bracero Program, there were many hearings dedicated to deciding its fate. The hearing examined here took place on March 24-26, 1953, and it was titled, “Extension of Mexican Farm Labor Program.” The hearing was held before the Committee on Agriculture in the House of Representatives during the Eighty-Third Congress’s first session. It looked at House Resolution 3480, which proposed an extension to Public Law 78. The Committee on Agriculture had representatives from around the country, including Minnesota, California, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Texas. Almost all of the people who spoke at the hearing, though, were the people who interacted with the braceros as their employers. These were the people who wanted the Bracero Program to continue, and to get that result, they spoke about all of the economic benefits that the program had. Some even tried to lower the costs of the program for themselves, which they said would also benefit the nation.

Hearings on the Bracero Program occurred at least once a year after Public Law 78 was passed in 1951. The law would expire after a certain time, which varied based upon whether it received a one-year or two-year extension. This meant that the program was constantly being reexamined. However, in the early years of the program under Public Law 78, the universal

opinion amongst the congressmen was to extend the program.. The claims of unions and labor activists were often rejected, while the opinions of agricultural employers of braceros were accepted as fact.

This particular hearing's committee was headed by Clifford R. Hope. He was a Republican from Kansas who was described in a biography as a politician who wanted what was best for all of those who were affected by the legislation he helped to enact, and who did not vote strictly on party lines.<sup>1</sup> Hope received national fame for his defiance of the Ku Klux Klan in his home state of Kansas, and he moved up on the national stage by working with Franklin D. Roosevelt on New Deal and World War II programs. These examples, as well as his resistance to supporting the Democratic Party line on agricultural issues, show him to be a strong bipartisan who would not be swayed easily by his party or just any testimony.<sup>2</sup>

A congressional hearing is a meeting or session of a Senate, House, joint, or special committee of Congress.<sup>3</sup> Hearings can have many purposes, some of which include obtaining information and opinions on proposed legislation, conducting an investigation, or evaluating or overseeing the activities of a government department or the implementation of a federal law.<sup>4</sup> In order to testify, you must be invited by the committee. Normally, it is the chair of the committee who sends the invitations or subpoenas to testify; but the chairperson often defers to requests or recommendations to other members of the committee, especially those in his or her own party who are championing the legislation. In theory, anyone with an interest in the bill could lobby the committee to testify, but ultimately it is up to the panel or chair to determine who is allowed to speak. Because of this, it is possible for a committee to invite only people and groups in agreement with their point of view. That is why it is generally a good thing for committees to have an eclectic group of members who represent a variety of interests from around the nation. Though this committee did have a variety of members, the people who were invited were overwhelmingly in favor of the Bracero Program.

The 1953 hearing helped congressmen decide whether or not they wished to produce legislation that would continue the Bracero Program for another three years. The people who came to speak on this issue were all heavily involved in agriculture, and many represented growers associations that represented major agricultural producers. Some of these parties were the Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers Association, the National Cotton Council of America, and the National Farm Labor Users Committee. The parties who spoke at the hearing were considered to be the experts on braceros by the committee who invited them because they were the ones who were employing them and using their labor. The Department of Labor and the Under Secretary of Labor also appeared because of their connections with the Bracero Program and because the Labor Department was responsible for negotiating the agreement with Mexico. By hearing the opinions of these parties, the committee hoped to determine whether or not it should extend the Bracero Program in the form of Public Law 78.

Examining this hearing provides an important point of view to study how the Bracero Program was assessed in the U.S. The politicians on the committee, the representatives of the different organizations, and the constituent interests they represented were all responsible for the continuation of the law. With time, their changing opinions, the work done by the labor groups analyzed in the previous chapter, and other factors contributed to an end of the Bracero Program, but not an end to the movement of Mexican laborers into the U.S. That is an issue that the nation is still grappling with today.

### *Power Politics in Congress*

Power is most commonly defined as the ability of one actor, A, to get another actor B, to do something that B would not otherwise do.<sup>5</sup> When the United States and Mexico created the first iteration of Bracero Program during World War II, the U.S. had a more pressing need for labor and was put into a position where Mexico had more relative power than it normally would

because so many Americans enlisted to fight in World War II. Though some women also entered the military and even more helped to compensate by going to work in industries at home, there was still a need for more labor in agriculture. The Korean War produced a similar but smaller effect in the early 1950s. By 1953, however, the United States was stronger than Mexico and could use its strength potentially to change the Bracero Program to benefit the nation at the expense of Mexico. Some people argued at the 1953 hearing for this approach. They wanted to have Mexico cover more of the costs of transportation and hiring, which were again economic arguments that centered around cost.

For this reason among others, Lloyd A. Mashburn, the Under Secretary of Labor, was asked to speak at the hearing. Mashburn knew that the United States still needed Mexican labor to offset the dearth of Americans who were willing to work in the fields. He said, “we have no doubt of the need of the program at the present time because we do not have enough domestic workers to meet agricultural labor requirements.”<sup>6</sup> However, Mashburn feared what it would mean for U.S.-Mexicans relations if the current situation continued. He told Congress that the Mexican government would begin to think, “We have the labor, and they need it.”<sup>7</sup> He believed that if this attitude became common place then the Mexican government would become more difficult to negotiate with.”<sup>7</sup>

Congressmen also worried about this possibility. They wanted to continue the flow of labor to offset the seasonal demands for labor, but they also did not want Mexico to believe that they held any sort of power over the United States. That is why part of the debate centered on the United States shifting the cost of the program to Mexico. Some members of Congress wanted to shift the economic costs of the program to Mexico to improve the United States relative power over its neighbor to the south. Most of the debate focused on people within the United States and the braceros, but as an interstate agreement, the economies of the two countries were also important.

Mashburn went on to say that Mexico had not been living up to its end of the agreement, even though he believed that the Bracero Program profited Mexico. To show the Mexican government that the United States was the dominant power in the relationship, Mashburn favored a plan to reject a Mexican proposal to move the bracero processing centers closer to the Mexican interior—placing his support, instead, behind the United States plan of moving them closer to the United States-Mexico border.<sup>8</sup> His motivation for doing so was largely economic. He said that the program was costing the United States government more money than it needed to, and that meant American taxpayers paid more as well.<sup>9</sup> Economic dominance plays a major role in defining the relative power between two states, and to help balance the scales more strongly in the favor of the United States, he wanted to move the centers closer to the United States and save the American government and people money.

Congressman Ezekiel C. Gathings of Texas agreed with the push to bring down the costs of the program below their current levels in 1953. Being from Texas, Gathings had many constituents who were extremely interested in having cheap labor to keep their production costs low. As their representative, Gathings was responsible for ensuring that those interests were met, and so he asked Mashburn to “bear in mind the farmer’s attitude toward this program when you negotiate the new agreement with the Mexican Government.”<sup>10</sup> Gathings said that with the price of agricultural goods declining, the farmer commonly had to call upon the Disaster Loan Corporation to continue his operations. This group would then pay the expense of bringing the cheap imported labor to them, which he cited as being \$11, reduced from \$15 in the past.<sup>11</sup> Gathings did not want his constituents to have to depend upon the Disaster Loan Corporation, and he believed that the problem lay in the way contracts with braceros was carried out.

Gathings said that the braceros had nothing to prevent them from leaving his constituents’ farms and migrating to American cities to seek better employment there. The Texan Gathings had to look out for his constituents, who clearly believed this to be a major problem.

However, he did not push Mashburn on this issue. He simply asked that Mashburn to keep all of the potential costs in mind. It seems as though he was merely playing politics here. By bringing up the issue, but not pushing for it, he could return to his electorate and tell them that he represented well their economic interests in Congress. Mashburn recognized that Gathings had to do his best to represent his constituents' best-case-scenario economic interest, and he told the hearing that he would do his best to keep growers, domestic laborers, and the Federal Government pleased with the situation.<sup>12</sup>

Mashburn then returned to the issue of power politics and told the hearing that he was most interested in putting the United States in a better position with respect to Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Everyone in this setting was playing politics. Mashburn had to balance his interest in helping all three of the groups he identified, and congressmen like Gathings had to play politics to try and get what their constituents wanted, without pushing too hard and disrupting the status quo. In their statements and ensuing exchange, Mashburn and Gathings focused mainly on economic interests. They each wanted to ensure the optimal economic situation for the people who they needed to please.

Just as the statement of Mashburn emphasized the importance of the United States keeping its relative power in connection with Mexico, the testimony of Arthur J. Holmaas, Chief of Manpower Staff, Production, and Marketing Administration from the Department of Labor, emphasized the importance of agriculture for national security and power. Holmaas said, "Agriculture is a basic industry contributing to the welfare of our civilians, the support of the Armed Forces, and the meeting of the food and fiber needs of the free world."<sup>14</sup> Holmaas feared that the United States would not be able to produce the necessary crops for itself and for its allies in the global fight against communism. He said, "current high levels of activity in our civilian economy, stimulated in part by the defense program, have resulted in increased calls for manpower." In other words, it was not only the higher wages that drew people to shift from their

rural homes to live in American cities. It was also the government's emphasis on defense that pulled people away from agriculture, and so, in his view, the government was responsible for helping to offset the movement of people that it caused.<sup>15</sup>

While economics largely shaped the debate, it was not the only issue. Prejudices and the United States' global fight against communism also came into play. Holmaas demonstrated how the issue of communism was relevant to the Bracero Program. The U.S. government presented communism as an absolute evil, and doing anything to stop communism's spread was the main tenet of American foreign policy from after World War II until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. Because Mexico was not a communist state, it was seen as an ally of the United States. It was then both economically useful because of the cheap labor that the braceros provided and geopolitically beneficial because it allowed the United States to strengthen its bonds with another non-communist state.

Holmaas wanted the United States to have a strong defense program, but he also did not want Mexicans to be the only ones to be used as laborers on farms. He said that "greater mechanization, rural electrification, and improved farming methods have enabled agriculture to meet food and fiber needs with fewer total workers."<sup>16</sup> Despite these advances, farms still needed large numbers of manual laborers, and that was why the Bracero Program was still needed. Mexican braceros and all migrant workers in agriculture were generally subjugated to performing stoop labor that the growers said no one else would want to do. Stoop labor is physically intensive labor that is required to plant, cultivate, and harvest crops. Holmaas mourned the continued need of extending Public Law 78, but he recognized that at the time it was essential. However, he did want to implement some changes in 1953 to make employment of braceros more acceptable and equitable across the states.<sup>17</sup> However, Holmaas did not actually lay out a strategy for how to achieve these goals. He simply said that it should be done so that all parties involved would benefit from a reduction of costs at the expense of the Mexican government.

*The Unstoppable Momentum of Extension*

The hearing resulted in an extension of the Bracero Program, and based upon the people who prepared their statements, that result seemed a foregone conclusion. Though the hearing was held to answer the question -- "Whether or not to renew Public Law 78?" -- nearly every speaker and Congressman seemed to already believe it to be a useful program economically for the United States. Many of those present were even in favor of extending the program for three years rather than one, so that it would not be an issue that needed to be discussed again so soon. There was not enough support in Congress itself for domestic laborers at this time, and the only economic interest that was truly present was that of the growers who benefited from hiring cheap migrant labor.

Even the opponents of the Bracero Program did not fight strongly against the program. They thought that the program was too useful for the United States to be terminated at this point in time. Matt Triggs represented the American Farm Bureau Federation, and he said that the Bracero Program artificially lowered the wage of all farm workers. He suggested that Congress work on changing the wage structure going forward. For the moment, though, he saw the Bracero Program as necessary and recommended a two-year extension.<sup>18</sup> Charlie W. Jones, the Assistant Washington Representative for the National Cotton Council of America, adopted a similar position. Jones said that large-scale agriculture was making advances, but that there was still a pressing need for the manual labor of the braceros. His only feasible solution was to keep recruiting the braceros and to expand research and education into agricultural production.<sup>19</sup>

With opposition so weak, the interests of the growers predictably prevailed in Congress. The argument of these growers was that the economic and political well-being of the country depended upon the braceros. Fred Bailey of the National Grange said that the present law adequately protected domestic laborers and that there was no unfair competition between the

braceros and American farm laborers. Bailey used the Korean War as an excuse to expand the program even further. He said, "The Department of Agriculture has estimated that there will be approximately a 300,000 decrease in the American labor force this year. That has been continuing, as Mr. Trigg has pointed out, for several years."<sup>20</sup> Trigg exemplified the arguments of the early Bracero Program advocates. These opinions stayed with those advocates throughout the duration of the program, but the opposition groups changed their arguments over time. For now, though, Trigg's opinion was the one that was most widely accepted. That opinion was that the Bracero Program was economically useful to the United States as a whole and that it did not hurt the earning potential of its citizens.

Frank E. Smith was a Democratic representative in Congress from Mississippi, who was not as intimately involved with the Bracero Program as the other individuals who participated in the hearing. Nonetheless, he came to the same conclusion as many of them. He believed that the best action that could be taken was to have a three-year extension of the program. Smith's district did not heavily use braceros; in fact he said only about fifty braceros had come to Mississippi over the past year to pick and chop cotton.<sup>21</sup> Even though he was not connected to the program, he still believed that it was important for the nation that the braceros continue to come into the United States.

It seems obvious that the growers and Department of Labor, the administrative unit in charge of the program, would want to see it continue. Their opinions are important because they reveal their motivations for continuing the program; but their perspective could be skewed because of their connection to the program. Smith provided an outside opinion. He was connected to the program, but his state only used fifty braceros in a year, which was very different from California or another state in the Southwest that used thousands. He simply said that the country had a labor problem in agriculture and that the Bracero Program was an adequate solution to that problem. Smith said, "We try to get primarily domestic labor. But, if the other areas of the

country that are dependent upon seasonal labor can work out arrangements to bring in Mexican national or nationals from other countries, it helps the overall labor supply over the country, and thus eases our problem.”<sup>22</sup>

Although this is what Smith said, his true intentions might actually be more related to race than he let on. Smith was, again, a Democrat from the then white supremacist state of Mississippi. The reason his state did not have to rely upon the braceros was because the black population of the South was still largely without social and economic rights. This was starting to change with the start of the Civil Rights movement following 1954 the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which reversed the “separate but equal” doctrine established in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. Smith’s attention was fully occupied with dealing with these issues. He was fighting the process of social change in his own region, and he may have wanted the Bracero Program to continue so that there would be a possible source of a new type of labor if there was a marked out-of-state migration of African Americans. The Bracero Program was not as important as his own issues, but he wanted to ensure that a dark-skinned race was limited in its rights and that this population continued to be exploited. Prejudices seem to have played a role here, but at least publicly, he had the wisdom to not state those prejudices.

Prejudices were also expressed by William R. Poage (D-TX) who debated with some of Mashburn’s subordinates about the possibilities of expanding the program. Poage believed that the current law was flawed because it only allowed for the braceros to work in the fields, and he wanted them to be able to assist with all phases of cotton production for the improved profit of the cotton industry of the United States and for his state’s agricultural producers. Poage said that braceros should be allowed to do the manual labor of pressing cotton. He used the familiar argument that without the braceros in this phase of production, the cotton would not be baled and would be wasted. Although he wanted an expansion of the program, Poage was very careful to say that he did not want the braceros to do any sort of skilled labor. He simply wanted them to do

more stoop labor. He said, "These Mexican workers can heave a bale of cotton just as well as anybody else can."<sup>23</sup>

Poage presented this matter in economic terms. He wanted to increase production of cotton while keeping the costs low; but in doing so he also revealed what could be interpreted as either racism or a defense for domestic workers. It is unlikely a defense of domestic laborers, however, because he requested that braceros expand and threaten other American jobs. Rather, he seemed to be vehemently opposed to having the braceros working the machinery. He said,

They do not need somebody from Mexico to operate that press or operate that boiler. I do not know anybody who would let one of these contract workers handle his expensive machinery. But they probably had half a million bales of cotton on the ground in Lubbock County this fall... We saw it out there for miles and miles. And it was utterly impossible to hire anybody to go out there and load it on the truck and to move it."<sup>24</sup>

Poage only trusted the Mexicans to do unskilled labor, and he believed that no one should permit a bracero do a skill job. His comments are not overtly prejudiced, but it is certainly possible, and perhaps even likely, that he did not trust the Mexicans do to a job an American could do, because he did not think they would be able to do it because he viewed them as inferior or somehow deficient. Another barrier to the Mexicans being able to do skilled labor was that they had limited command of the English language. With more schooling they could have become capable of doing skilled labor jobs, but in their current state, which was viewed as acceptable, they apparently did not have the aptitude to do skilled labor.

Later in the hearing, Congressman Poage, Congressman Andresen of Minnesota, and Mr. Larin, another one of Mashburn's subordinates, engaged in another debate over the prospects of expanding the Bracero Program into the other aspects of agriculture such as the parts of the cotton industry that Poage wanted. Poage said that ginning and baling cotton should fall under the Bracero Program. Andresen supported his fellow Congressman and said, "Certainly fixing up bales of cotton is agricultural labor, if it is out in the cotton field."<sup>25</sup> Larin conceded this point,

and the Department of Labor once more revealed the difficult balance it had to maintain among the various economic interests represented throughout the United States.

William H. Tolbert, Chairman of the National Farm Labor Users Committee, believed that the problems started with the Immigration Act of 1924. Tolbert called it the Exclusion and Quota Act of 1924 because of limits it put on how many people could enter the U.S. from each country.<sup>26</sup> He said that when the Immigration Act of 1924 passed the nation was just getting out of World War I, and that mass production was becoming commonplace in every industry. Even in agriculture the cotton gin, the harvester, and other machines were reducing the number of people who were needed to produce goods.<sup>27</sup> Tolbert said that while things were advancing, the process of change had not occurred quickly enough. Agriculture still lagged behind many other industries, and that was why it had to depend upon cheap labor from abroad to make up the difference.

Tolbert believed that immigrant labor was essential because he did not think braceros would be brought in unless it was absolutely necessary. He said, "Imported labor is far more expensive than domestic labor and that agriculture only turns to imported labor of necessity when an adequate supply of able and willing domestic labor cannot be found."<sup>28</sup> While this point could be called into question, he identified the root cause to be economic in nature. He made no mention of prejudices or exploitation, though both existed. From his point of view, the Bracero Program was simply a necessary occurrence that would only last so long as it was economically beneficial for the United States. Nearly every other group wanted the braceros to keep coming because it kept their labor costs low, but Tolbert believed that growers would prefer to use American citizens. His view on the situation may not have been correct, but it demonstrated another economic argument.

*Opposition to Unions and the Department of Labor*

While the unions' perspective on the debate has already been analyzed, this chapter now examines that debate as it reappeared in Congress. The unions had to deal with congressmen who clearly were opposed to them, as well as growers who were in formidable opposition too. The animosity between these two groups -- those in Washington and the labor groups outside of it -- was made clear in this hearing. Keith Mets, President of the Imperial Valley Farmers Association, showed this disagreement well. He said,

We are vitally opposed to the intrusion of organized labor into the farm labor program and especially the assistance and encouragement that is being given organized labor by the top administration of the Labor Department in charge of farm labor in particular the appointment of an 18-man advisory committee from the CIO and the AFL who now sit in on negotiations of contracts with as much consideration as the farmers' representatives.<sup>29</sup>

Mets did not want the unions to be involved in his fields or to give agricultural workers ideas about the rights that they could have. His main issue with the eighteen-man committee was that it wanted to determine a prevailing wage.<sup>30</sup> He wanted to continue to exploit the cheap labor of Mexico and feared that if the unions had their way, the growers would have to pay far more for their labor. The economic aspect of the issue was again at the heart of his point of view, and it was not just the labor unions he had problems with. He also opposed the Department of Labor, because he thought that the Department had sided with the unions too many times.

Mets made this position abundantly clear when he said, "We denounce the prime objective of the Labor Department to assist and aid in the union organization of farm labor by organizing the Mexican workers to the confusion and detriment of the American farmer's program to grow and harvest his crops."<sup>31</sup> As I have shown, the Department of Labor had to balance different interests that wanted both to help the braceros and also keep them in a position as useful and cheap labor for agriculture. Mets and his organization only wanted the latter. Any effort to help the braceros and work with the unions to improve their conditions on the basis of human rights was against his goal, and he could not accept any action taken against that objective.

Mets did not want the unions or the Labor Department to help the braceros for mostly economic reasons. He said that the program needed to be streamlined and that the cost of returning illegal immigrants to Mexico was too great. He calculated the total cost of returning the illegal immigrants in 1949 to be about \$15,000,000.<sup>32</sup> This cost was far too great for him to accept. The braceros of course were legal migrant workers. What Mets wanted was to redirect attention from the main point of the hearing and scare the committee into believing they needed to be more suspicious of all Mexicans who are entering the U.S.

Significantly, Mets expressed all of his points without being questioned by the Committee. All of his points stood uncontested. For this reason, it appears that the Committee already had accepted his claims. At the very least, it seemed as though the Committee agreed the costs were too great at the time, just as other men had pointed out earlier in the hearing. Most of the congressmen wanted costs to be kept low, and they wanted Public Law 78 to continue in its current form or in a form that was even more beneficial to themselves and their constituents.

Mets' anti-union and anti-Department of Labor sentiment was reinforced by Austin E. Anson, the Executive Manager of the Texas Citrus and Vegetable Growers and Shippers Association, who said that farm labor was being administered by a department that did not actually understand the problem.<sup>33</sup> He said the growers had lost their right to negotiate directly with the Mexican representatives and jointly draft agreements. He found the agreements to just be a wasted effort, because "the law itself will not stop illegals and you gentlemen can pass legislation till hell freezes over."<sup>34</sup> In his mind, Mexicans would come to the United States whenever they saw that they could make a profit by coming. Only when the growers could make their own contracts and hire the people who they wanted could the so-called "wetback problem" be stopped. He believed that the current system was faulty because it brought in workers who felt entitled to their jobs in the United States and who were protected to do their jobs. He wanted to

take away even more of the braceros' rights, so that more profit could be derived from their usage.

The major qualm that Anson had was that bureaucracy interfered with what he believed to be the optimal way of using the Mexican labor force to the nation's advantage. Anson revealed that he preferred a return to a pre-Bracero-Program era, a time when there were no protections for the workers and employers had complete control over contracts. He wanted it to be a completely free market, but he also realized that recruiting Mexicans would be difficult without the Bracero Program after it had already been implemented.

To illustrate his point, Anson gave the Committee an example of what life in a border city was like in the past. He said that in Rio Grande City, the people who were transient between Mexico and the U.S. had been laborers for years and that they would cross the border to work and then go home. That system had ended, though. In 1953 the people from across the Rio Grande had to go through a processing center and a number of other stops along the way just to get to the place that they had gone on their own accord in the past.<sup>35</sup> That was free-market working, and the Bracero Program is an example of government interference. In the past, he argued, Mexicans saw that they could make a profit by working in the United States, and Americans saw that they could use the Mexicans to deal with their seasonal labor problem. To him, there were no illegal immigrants, simply people moving as they wished under a free market. He saw the Bracero Program as the problem, because it wasted money by bringing Mexicans to the United States who would have come with or without the program. Anson wanted to get the greatest profit out of a resource. This could an example of prejudices revealing themselves; but throughout his public statements, he never insulted them or claimed that they are inferior, as might have happened in earlier white statements about African Americans in the American South

Anson did not want to extend the Bracero Program. He preferred to return to how things were in the past, but he also recognized that rapid discontinuation of the program would not work.

He wanted to return to a completely free market; but for the time, he proposed the creation of a “workable, concise, and simple plan . . . whereby millions of dollars can be saved” and where “the American farmer can secure his workers when he needs them and on terms that will be satisfactory to all parties and the taxpayers will be saved millions of dollars per year.”<sup>36</sup>

Of course a truly free market is a rare thing. Governments always try to manipulate the economy to some extent. Still, the rhetoric of a free market did play into the discussion from both sides of the debate. Congressman Poage once again spoke here and agreed that the free market was a superior system. He said that “the program immediately grew into a matter not of subsidies but a matter of red tape in which we floundered.”<sup>37</sup> They both agreed that the nation had created a program that was unnecessarily complex that inflated the costs of its administration.

#### *Opposition to the AFL from Congress*

While Mets and Anson spoke out against the AFL and the way that the Bracero Program was being executed, the hearing did actually invite a representative of the AFL to speak at the hearing as well. This man, Walter Mason, gave the AFL a voice and gave the hearing the appearance of being less one-sided. Mason told the congressmen that American farm workers were not receiving a fair wage and that their living standards were subpar. He wanted to see Congress “give these workers the full protection of our labor laws which they deserve” and to fix the key problem that “there has never been a truly equitable procedure for determining what constitutes ‘the prevailing wage rate.’”<sup>38</sup> The other main problem that Mason saw with the law was that it made it more attractive for Mexicans to work on American farms than for Americans to do so. The braceros had a guaranteed job through the Bracero Program, but Americans had to hunt for jobs and compete against the braceros who were willing to work for less.

At the conclusion of his statement, Mason laid out his five recommendations for the future of the program. These included leaving foreign workers out of packing, canning, and other

food-processing operations and leaving Public Law 78 as a temporary measure that would only be extended one year so that it could be reassessed again quickly.

Mason wanted to protect current union members more than anyone else. The support for the braceros—expressed so commonly outside Congress—was largely absent here. Mason revealed the unions’ true goal of ensuring their own jobs. He did not want to see any sort of expansion of the program, and he wanted it to be reexamined frequently so that it could be ended quickly, which would eliminate the threat that the braceros posed as strikebreakers. It was in the best interest of their jobs to stop the braceros from coming; but when that failed, the unions said that the braceros needed more rights and a higher wage, so that the cost of their hiring would go up and so they would no longer pose a threat to the union members.

Mason’s statements were scrutinized to a much greater degree than the views of those who supported extension. Both Chairman Hope and Congressman Cooley from North Carolina said that they did not see “any evidence to indicate that the contracts have adversely affected the prevailing wage on the farm” or that domestic laborers had been hurt by the braceros.<sup>39</sup> By fighting against the AFL’s points, the Committee once again showed that the policy had already gained too much momentum to be stopped easily. It was obvious that Committee members supported the growers over the unions, and so Public Law 78 was extended and this process repeated itself several times until the mid-1960s when congressmen learned that the program was only aiding a small fraction of Americans and when the public sentiment turned against the program.

### *Conclusion*

The hearing examined in this chapter tried to answer the question of whether or not to extend Public Law 78 in 1953. Public Law 78 was only enacted on July 13, 1951. Before that, the Bracero Program had existed as a wartime measure, a few scattered public laws, and a period of

administrative agreements. As Public Law 78, it was still relatively new, even though the program itself was actually over a decade old at the time. Positions were already entrenched, and those positions were clearly evident in this hearing. This hearing also demonstrated that, at least publicly, the debate focused upon the economic interests of the nation and of the nation's citizens. Prejudices were seen, even in a congressional hearing; but those sentiments were never outright stated the way that they had been during Chinese Exclusion in the 1880s. In racial terms, the public debate was now circumspect, and that made the economics of the situation the dominant topic of discussion.

As may have been expected, the growers, who were the majority of the people chosen to speak at the hearing, were overwhelming in favor of extending the Bracero Program another three years. They were the ones who had the most to gain from the program, because the braceros provided them with easily exploitable, low-cost laborers. Many of the representatives also seemed to have already sided with the growers as well. They accepted and perpetuated the argument that United States agriculture could not survive without the aid of the braceros who helped to solve the seasonal labor shortages that the United States may have faced without them. Some of the representatives and speakers mourned the fact that they had to rely upon Mexico; but with no other easy solution available, they accepted it and were prepared to extend the bill.

Some of the people present were ready to push the Mexican government even harder economically and administratively in order to get more out of the program. Economic considerations were paramount. The growers were only concerned with their profit, but some politicians and other speakers were concerned with improving the United States' relative economic advantage over Mexico. They wanted to change the way the program was administered to save the United States money and to get a better deal than they had in the past. Congressman Poage from Texas had helped to guide Public Law 78 through Congress, and he remained one of

its fiercest supporters throughout this 1953 hearing. He spoke of the merits of the free market and of how the braceros could help to increase profits.

Others at the hearings were already resisting the labor unions and the groups that were trying to help the braceros secure their rights. Prejudices may have played a role in this position, but it was not an obvious and overt point. Most people did not want to have braceros work in skilled jobs, but that could have actually shown that there was concern about some domestic laborers. Again, if the braceros were given access to education and training they could have become more effective workers and could have become qualified to do skilled jobs. However, that would have been more expensive and would have forced the employers to lower their profits for a time. People like Mets saw the labor unions as a threat to their economic gains. Mets himself believed that if the AFL and other labor unions had their way, he and those like him would need to pay more for the bracero labor. It seems as though the representatives were concerned about this as well, since they accepted Mets' arguments without questions but then cross-examined the AFL representative, Mr. Mason.

There were many different voices present at this hearing. The dominant voice was that of the growers and the congressmen on the Committee clearly sided with them. The main line of reasoning for that support was overwhelmingly about costs and benefits. Never did the public dialogue talk about exploiting a lesser people. The government officials were concerned with producing enough crops and keeping the nation strong and self-sufficient. The growers were concerned with having the cheapest labor they could possibly get. In the end, it was these voices that won out over the small farmers and the labor unions like the AFL, but that was just in 1953. In hearings that followed and in discussions that still had yet to occur, the tide of public opinion would start to turn, and on December 31, 1964, the Bracero Program was discontinued.

## Chapter 5

### **The End of the Bracero Program: The Final Extension and the Aftermath of the End**

The end of the Bracero Program came on December 31, 1964. The program received its last one-year renewal in 1963. After the program ended, there were calls to bring it back; but when the Hart-Celler Act, otherwise known as the Immigration Act of 1965, was passed the Bracero Program had no hope of returning. The immigration policy of the United States was fundamentally changed by this new law, and the Bracero Program now seemed unnecessary. The quota system that had been in place since 1921 was eliminated and replaced by a preference system that focused on an immigrant's skills and preexisting family relationships with citizens already in the United States. There was also a renewed emphasis placed upon equity that seemed ethically at odds with the old system that used the law to exploit the braceros.

#### *The Last Extension*

The Bracero Program had been extended routinely since it was first established as Public Law 78; in 1963, however, the program did not receive its typical level of support. In a hearing on the "Continuation of Mexican Farm Labor Program" before the Committee on Agriculture, a rising minority opinion against the Bracero Program demonstrated its newfound strength. A congressional minority was willing to stand against the program. This House of Representatives document examined here is a report of the respective majority and minority opinions on the hearing and on how to proceed with the Bracero Program. The majority still argued that the program had more benefits than drawbacks, but the minority countered many of those claims and presented its own economic arguments about why the program should end.

The fading majority once again used economic arguments to justify the need and the benefit of the program. Its partisans said that Mexican workers benefited from the program, because people in the United States provided them with employment. They also claimed the program was good for Mexico as a nation because of the amount of money the braceros sent home. Only tourism dollars beat out the amount of money that Mexicans sent home from their employment in the United States.<sup>1</sup> The money that Mexicans sent home also helped America by increasing consumer demand for American products within Mexico. During the Bracero Program, these advocates proposed, Mexico became one of the United States' most important trade partners and customers.

Helping another nation's economy was fine, they continued, but it was the boon the program provided to America that was the real advantage of the program and the reason the sustaining it. The majority said that the program was "almost entirely self-supporting," because the costs of the program had been paid by the employers of the braceros since 1947.<sup>2</sup> In order to prove their point, the majority elaborated on how funding for the program worked. The majority members described how the fund compensated the Department of Labor for nearly every facet of the program. It reimbursed the Department for transportation, food, and medical costs, while moving the braceros from Mexico to the United States. The majority group made this point about the finances of the program so that people would understand that the government was not actually paying many of the expenses. The government oversaw the program, but the employers financed it. Of course, it was also economically advantageous for large growers to use the cheap labor and pay these costs upfront costs.

The shrinking majority also tried to clarify why seasonal labor could not economically handle a harvest without the braceros by citing the issues of mechanization and seasonal labor. The majority group reported that the number of hired farm workers had declined from about 2,329,000 to 1,827,000 in the thirteen years between 1950 and 1963.<sup>3</sup> They brought up this small

decrease in laborers to demonstrate that while mechanization had diminished the number of laborers needed, there was still a great need for manual labor to do operations such as weeding and harvesting.<sup>4</sup> The majority said that the braceros did this necessary mandatory labor, and that no one else could fill in for them. The braceros came at the time when the labor need peaked each year. In 1962 there were still nearly 200,000 braceros who were assisting with harvests and other manual labor tasks.<sup>5</sup>

The majority report also did its best to explain why the small growers would be the ones to suffer the most from the loss of the Bracero Program. They claimed three points. First, “large farmers are already mechanized to a greater extent than small farmers.” Second, “in a critical labor shortage large farmers could mechanize more rapidly and more completely than small farmers.” Third, “large growers could in an emergency, carry out distant and costly worker recruiting and transportation programs, completely beyond the means of small farmers.”<sup>6</sup> The majority view tried to turn attention away from larger growers and put it on the hypothetical everyman farmer who would appeal to more people. Few people would want to hear about how the Mexican braceros kept labor costs low so that the massive agribusiness employers could profit more. But when Congress said that the braceros helped the middle class and poor then more people were willing to accept their claims.

The majority view questioned the effectiveness of the Department of Labor. The majority believed that there had been dubious departmental actions recently, but that in the past there had been “a reasonable balance between overly liberal and overly restrictive certifications, and that the Department has reasonably accomplished the objective of providing preference to domestic workers.”<sup>7</sup> However, the Secretary of Labor had recently set a wage rate for Mexican nationals to be equal to that of domestic laborers. This established wage rate changed the way that agricultural firms could hire under the law. The growers claimed that the Secretary of Labor had effectively created a minimum wage for agricultural labor.<sup>8</sup> The increase in the wage helped to drive up costs

and lowered the agricultural firms' interests in continuing the program, which also meant that there was less pressure on Congress to keep extending the program. The program had lasted so long because it brought in cheap labor. If it were to continue and employers now had to pay as much for a bracero as they had to pay for a domestic laborer, then there would be no economic incentive for the growers to continue to fight for the law or to extend it any longer.

Significantly too, the rising minority group made economic arguments to explain why it believed that the Bracero Program needed to end. Most of these arguments focused on domestic laborers. While the majority report claimed that the program was good for average farmers, the minority report refuted these claims. Nearly six per cent of the labor force was jobless at this point in American history, and the greatest number of unemployed persons came from agriculture, where unemployment was at 7.3 per cent.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the majority was claiming that there was no one who could fill the labor gap in American agriculture. The minority said that the majority opinion was wrong. There were millions of Americans who would be willing to do the jobs that the braceros did.

The minority report stated that the Bracero Program was not a program benefiting all Americans. It was "actually a subsidy for less than 1 percent of America's growers-generally large, corporate-type farms."<sup>10</sup> The minority said that Public Law 78 "negates the free enterprise system because it does not permit the laws of supply and demand to operate. Its extension would continue a great moral wrong."<sup>11</sup> While every program has winners and losers, the minority report believed that Public Law 78 made far too many people the losers for it to continue on.

The minority report claimed that Public Law 78 failed to follow its own requirement not to cause an adverse affect on American farm workers. They said that the foreign workers were chosen because of their "brawn and stamina" and because "they are specially docile and fear being sent back to their homes before completing their work." They also must work where they are told and cannot move to find better conditions.<sup>12</sup> This system allowed growers to pay as little

as 60 cents an hour to braceros. The wage was too low for Americans to live on and so American left these regions for places where they could earn a higher income. The Bracero Program was good for the employers, but it clearly had an adverse effect on American farm workers' ability to get a job. The consequence was that the law was not being followed.

The minority view also called the current changes to the program inadequate and called for greater reform going forward. The reforms that had been enacted by the Department of Labor in 1961 and 1962 were to better enforce the law and implement new regulations. The change in wage regulation was a provision that the majority wanted to strike down, but it was one of the favorite reforms of the minority.<sup>13</sup> Congress wanted to help domestic workers achieve an average life in America. Doing that meant that they would need to either change or end the Bracero Program.

The minority group argued that large farms were the only ones being aided by the Bracero Program. It shifted focus of the discussion to American farmers and their difficulties. There was no prejudice that needed to be addressed. The minority stressed that Americans were not benefiting economically from this program, and that that lack of economic advantage hurt the country. The minority group cited figures from the 1959 Census of Agriculture that said that 51.9 per cent of United States farms used no hired labor whatsoever.<sup>14</sup> Another 36.5 per cent of farms spent less than \$1000 a year on hired labor. Small farms would barely notice the primary effects of the program ending. Additionally, the minority group explained that "the cheap bracero labor permits sharp increases in production and the consequent lowering of price to all farmers."<sup>15</sup>

The Bracero Program hurt small farmers within the states that used braceros intensively, but the minority report claimed that other states were hurt as well. The report stated that the growers in "Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Oklahoma have painfully learned the effect of Public Law 78. These growers use U.S. farm labor."<sup>16</sup> Growers in the Southwest had greatly increased their production in the past decade. California alone had doubled its production

of strawberries in the ten years before this 1963 report; but in Tennessee, the second most productive state of strawberries, production had dropped by fourteen per cent in the same decade of time.<sup>17</sup> While much of the debate focused on the individual braceros and the economic benefit they could give the United States, this side of the debate was present as well. The states that used braceros were interfering with the free market by exploiting a people and paying them far less than any other person would accept. The states that did not use the braceros could not compete against the agribusinesses in the Southwest that had a steady supply of the braceros. The states instead used domestic labor and paid them a fair wage, but that meant they could not compete as well against bracero-using states.

These states also provided a perfect counterexample to the claim that Americans refused to do the labor on the southwest farms that had been a main pillar of the Bracero Program's defense. Farms throughout the nation used American labor, and they were suffering because of it. However, the minority contended that there were still many Americans who were willing to work on American farms. Americans were willing to hold agricultural jobs, but the Bracero Program prevented them from getting those jobs. Arkansas provided a perfect example of this. In 1962 cotton chopping domestic employment rose from 88,000 to 97,000, and bracero employment dropped from 18,000 to 8,000.<sup>18</sup> American workers stepped in to fill the purported insurmountable labor gap that only the braceros could fill.

Finally, the minority group disputed another one of the pro-Bracero Program camp's key arguments. The minority group said, "Another favorite argument of growers is that if the Mexican farm labor importation program were stopped then consumers would have to pay sharply higher prices."<sup>19</sup> To contest this allegation, the minority said that it assumed that consumers did not want to have a strong economy with high wages and low unemployment rate. These spokesmen also explained what would happen if a 20-cent-an-hour increase happened throughout agriculture.

A 20-cent-an-hour increase in return for all labor, hired, or family, involved in cotton production would increase the average family's expenses for all of its cotton goods by \$1 a year. A 20-cent-an-hour increase for sugar beet workers would increase sugarbeet costs about 80 cents a ton – an amount too small to affect the retail price. A 20-cent increase in farm labor costs by one-fifth of a cent a head. Ending the travesty of Public Law 78 would raise farm wages, but the cost to the consumer would be infinitesimal.<sup>20</sup>

The minority group used numerous macroeconomic agricultural arguments to try and bring about an end to the Bracero Program. At the time, the minority position was defeated, and Public Law 78 was extended for one final year. That was the last extension, however. The economic arguments had clearly changed. The 1953 hearing had used economic arguments as well; but those arguments all came from the side of the large agricultural growers who benefited from the Bracero Program and their allies. In the 1960s, the voices of American workers who wanted to work and who wanted a fair wage found expression in this rising minority assessment of the program. While the minority was defeated this year, its members could not be stopped going forward, though there was dissension as the end of the program neared.

### *Reaction to the End*

The House was split on what to do about the Bracero Program in 1963, but it actually decided not to approve the proposed one-year extension in a 174 to 158 roll call vote on May 29, 1963. Representative John Fogarty (D-RI) spoke directly on behalf of this newly fashioned anti-Bracero majority remarking that “if there was ever a slave labor piece of legislation adopted by the Congress, this is it.”<sup>21</sup> Fogarty implied that there was prejudice and mistreatment in the program. For Fogarty, the program was immoral and harmful to the United States' relationship with Mexico.

But in states that were seeing the economic benefits of the program such as California, representatives had different views. Representative Bernice Frederic Sisk (D-CA) said that farmers in the Southwest and West still needed the braceros to do “stoop labor...which frankly,

Americans generally have refused to perform.”<sup>22</sup> Despite the compelling case being made in the Committee minority report pointing to plenty of examples of states operating without bracero labor, in 1963 those from the Southwest had grown too accustomed to the cheap bracero labor. Although it was a close vote, 174 to 158, the minority had become the majority, and the reformed, more economic-centered message of the anti-Bracero Program groups prevailed.

Even though the House was prepared to end the Bracero Program in 1963 with this vote, the program did receive one final extension on December 4, 1963, after the Senate voted 50 to 36 to approve the House’s version of the extension.<sup>23</sup> While the Senators agreed to give the program one more year of life, they did so because they wanted to let American employers adjust to the fact that the program would not be available in the near future. Senator Spessard Holland (D-FL) said that he supported the one year extension of the bill so long as there would be no further extensions.<sup>24</sup> Holland believed that it was too late to get domestic workers to fill in the gap that 200,000 Mexicans filled for the 1964 harvest. However, he and a majority of other congressmen were content to end the program after that.<sup>25</sup>

The Bracero Program had become controversial in Congress, and support for it quickly faded after that. In the past, momentum carried it quickly through hearings, and there was not a strong public opinion outside of unions and labor activists about how to handle the program and so the debate in government was mostly one-sided. Now that it had entered the public eye, though, there was no incentive for congressmen to fight for a program.

While Congress was becoming more aware of the implications of the Bracero Program, growers had started to readjust their production to compensate for the potential loss of bracero labor. One common practice was to locate the food-processing plants in Mexico. While these plants did not use braceros when they were in America they were easier to relocate than farms.<sup>26</sup> The logic seemed to be that if the agricultural side of production would start to cost more than it would be beneficial to decrease the industrial portion of production to offset this new cost

structure. If this was the logic they used then it showed that some firms did believe Mexicans could do skilled labor jobs in industry, at least when it was profitable. J.J. Miller, the manager of the Agricultural Producers Labor Committee, said that big United States food producers such as Campbell Soup, Heinz, and the California Packing Corp had all built large Mexican plants before 1964.<sup>27</sup> Each of these firms recognized that if one aspect of production would cost more that they could offset that cost by changing another aspect of production.

Miller was worried that if production costs did increase the end-aggregate-result would be Americans working in such agriculture-related industry could actually lose jobs by ending the Bracero Program. Jack Bias, the Executive Vice President of the Grower-Shipper Vegetable Association of Central California, called the plants in Mexico insurance for a situation where there was not sufficient labor in the United States either from braceros, domestic laborers, or illegal immigrants.<sup>28</sup> American growers had taken the necessary financial steps to handle an end to the Bracero Program. They were prepared for the program to end if they needed to be, and they were completely ready to use Mexican labor going forward without the aid of the United States government. There was no stated element of prejudice here, simply economic incentives. The growers were willing to move to Mexico and continue to employ Mexicans, even at the risk of employing fewer American laborers, so long as it kept their costs low and production high.

There is nearly always resistance to a major change, and that is what happened when the Bracero Program was not renewed past December 31, 1964. Several newspapers and other writers tried to use their influence to bring the program back. Some of these pieces phrased the issue in ideological terms and declared that the liberals had used faulty claims of exploitation to appeal to people's emotions.

In a piece from 1963 called "Faulty Liberal Reasoning Ends 'Bracero' Program," from the political science journal *Human Rights*, Allan Ryskind wrote about the condition of agriculture in California after the Bracero Program ended and tried to convince his readers that

the program ended due to misinformation and propaganda. Ryskind said that “the constant hemorrhaging of the liberal heart” had stopped Mexican nationals from bringing \$35 million in savings to Mexican banks.<sup>29</sup> Ryskind believed that the Mexicans were paid a fair wage in America, and that they filled an important role for America. Ryskind thought that the free market existed when braceros were allowed to enter the United States and that his opponents stood in the way of the economic freedom of America.<sup>30</sup>

Ryskind attacked the Department of Labor, Congress, and the AFL-CIO for their opposition to the Bracero Program. He put these groups alongside of the socialists in an attempt to stir up communist fears. Throughout his piece, Ryskind claimed that the Bracero Program was killed by “the strange cult of liberalism” which had put California and the rest of the Southwest into a time of crisis.<sup>31</sup> He believed that the program was fair to both nations, especially the Mexicans who participated in the program. Americans were being tricked by the liberals. He cites the Secretary of Labor, Willard Wirtz, when he said, “The program has benefited Mexico in many ways. Statistics reveal that it has been a substantial aid to the Mexican economy.”<sup>32</sup> Ryskind said that the Department of Labor was swayed by the unions and bleeding-heart liberals. He thought that the unions and labor activists had caused the Department of Labor to ignore their reasoning. He ends his piece by saying, “The point, of course, is that Congress might do well to revive the old bracero program which really made just about everybody except a few liberals and AFL-CIO officials very happy.”<sup>33</sup>

### *Immigration Policy after the Bracero Program*

The end of the Bracero Program was quickly followed by a change in the United States immigration policy. While the quota system had been in place since 1921, it was about to be replaced by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. The law was ushered in by Emanuel Celler (D-NY) in the House and by Phillip Hart (D-MI) in the Senate. Senator Ted Kennedy (D-

MA) also was a strong proponent of the bill. That all three of these men came from the northeastern part of the United States is unsurprising. They wished to replace the existing immigration system with one that would be fairer to people of all nations. Most politicians from the South and Southwest were happy to see the old system continue, because their states profited from it. The South wanted to maintain the Jim Crow laws that allowed them to continue to comprehensively exploit African Americans, and those in the Southwest benefited from the Bracero Program itself, which provided cheap labor to the fields. However, as public and private sentiments changed, the Immigration Act of 1965 became the new reality for the nation.

The new system of immigration was meant to give preference to immediate relatives of citizens already in the United States. It set the numerical restriction of visas at 170,000 per year. The Civil Rights movement was helping the nation to become more progressive in many ways. The end of the Bracero Program and the creation of these new immigration policy seemed part of a new national concern with minority rights. The Bracero Program had only been one facet of immigration and labor inside the United States. The quota system had been the larger system that permitted and encouraged the Bracero Program. The new immigration policy would change the way immigration could occur, and the way all Mexicans, not only the braceros, could enter the United States.

When the Johnson Administration prepared to reform immigration policy, it—tellingly—used racial arguments and sentiments of equality to bring about that change. These were not the arguments of the Bracero Program; they were the new arguments for more open immigration. Secretary of State Dean Rusk called for reforms to the program to end discrimination and make it easier to carry out the nation's foreign policies. Anthony Celebrezze, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare said, "Let us judge a man by his deeds rather than by the accident of his birth."<sup>34</sup> Still, while testifying before a Senate judiciary committee, Celebrezze said, "It matters little where someone was born... What does matter is what he does with his life after birth, for this

alone he is accountable for.”<sup>35</sup> He also said that the end of the quota system would improve the economy and diplomacy by bringing in new citizens from more varied backgrounds and experiences.

President Johnson had a long personal history of interacting with Mexicans. Johnson began his working career as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas, in which 80 per cent of the population was Mexican.<sup>37</sup> From that point in his young manhood, until he assumed the presidency, Johnson dealt with the question of where Mexicans fit into American life. His position was similar to that of the Department of Labor, because he felt pressure both from the Mexicans in his native Texas as well as the wealthy ranchers and growers who benefited from the cheap cost of the braceros and illegal immigrants who they hired.

However, when Johnson became president, the Bracero Program was not as popular as it had been in the past. Johnson had always been a savvy politician, and he capitalized on the opportunity to show the nation that he was a president who would work with minority groups like Mexicans, as well as African Americans who had caused such a stir with the Civil Rights movement.

Johnson addressed the question of immigration and his desire to help create more equality at two key times during his presidency. The first of these came on March 15, 1965, when he spoke on the Voting Rights Act before Congress. In his speech Johnson described his time teaching in Cotulla, Texas, and the trials that those children went through because of their poverty. Johnson said that he never forget the hardships those families had to endure, and that now he would use his power as president to aid them. He addressed Congress and said, “Now I do have that chance – and I’ll let you in on a secret – I mean to use it. And I hope that you will use it with me.”<sup>39</sup> Johnson did speak about prejudice in this speech, but his main focus was on creating a system of equality that would eliminate the type of poverty that programs like the Bracero Program had created. Johnson said, “I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry and

prepare them to be taxpayers instead of tax-eaters.”<sup>40</sup> Johnson stated that he wanted to bring about change and equality, and a large part of his reasoning came from his desire to improve America both economically as well as morally.

Johnson’s second speech was delivered at Liberty Island, New York, on October 3, 1965. Johnson chose the location of European immigration and the symbol of the flow of people into America that most people knew about. Today it is still recognized as the location that welcomed millions of immigrants each year to America. Many people crossed the Rio Grande and came to America from Mexico, both legally and illegally. Liberty Island, however, was a powerful symbol. While the location was not significant to Mexicans, its message was. Johnson’s message was one of equality and fairness in immigration. American policy, he argued, would not be one of exploitation. He said, “The bill says simply that from this day forth those wishing to immigrate to America shall be admitted on the basis of their skills and their close relationship to those already here. This is a simple test, and it is a fair test. Those who can contribute most to this country – to its growth, to its strength, to its spirit – will be the first that are admitted to this land.”<sup>41</sup> Johnson contributed to the end of the program by giving it his support. After the law was signed American immigration did change. However, the question of Mexican immigration still loomed ahead. Even today it is an unanswered question.

### *Epilogue*

Immigration in the United States is still an issue that has not been dealt with completely, particularly immigration from Mexico. The efforts of the border patrol and plans to build a wall to keep illegal immigrants out of the United States have heightened the debate about how best to handle the question of Mexican immigration. The Bracero Program is best seen as a way to control the flow of migration. From 1924, when the border patrol was created, until today, the United States has tried to determine the an effective way to handle migration from Mexico. There

has always been debate about whether immigration should be free-flowing or regulated to some degree. All nations must deal with this issue, and the United States is no exception. However, before attacking the question head on, I believe it is best for people to understand the issue and the economic incentives that pull the Mexican people into migrating to the United States.

There is a near-constant pull by America to bring in cheap labor to this day, simply because the pay is higher and the working conditions are better. Yet discrimination exists throughout much of the nation, because people see Mexicans as taking the jobs of Americans or because they might drive down the wages that Americans can be paid. These are the same issues that existed during the Bracero Program, and they have existed before it and will continue to exist in the foreseeable future. There is no magical panacea for this problem that will satisfy everyone. However, this is still an economic issue at its core, not one of race or ethnicity.

Race and ethnicity cannot be ignored when looking at an issue that involved people from two different home nations. As this thesis has argued, however, it was not the dominant motive behind the creation and continuation of the Bracero Program. The problem arose because different parties had different economic goals that they wished to fulfill.

The growers had a constant desire for cheap labor that would allow them to be the most productive. To keep that labor flowing, they were willing to craft a strong argument for why legal and temporary migration from Mexico should persist. They said that Americans would starve if they did not have access to the braceros, workers who made America's agricultural production possible. They argued that Americans were not willing to do the jobs that Mexicans did. As attitudes toward the program changed, other states disputed this claim in Congress, and soon afterwards the Bracero Program ended. However, the reason that the program ended was not strictly because Americans opened their eyes to the poor conditions that Mexican braceros had to endure.

One powerful economic reason for the end of the program was that the growers had made adjustments such as shifting production to Mexico. This strategy allowed them access to Mexican workers, with or without the Bracero Program. Increased technology also played a role in decreasing the need for the program. It was the economics of the situation that sustained the program for so long, and it was economics that also served to contribute to its end. Of course, Mexicans continued to come to the United States illegally, just as they had before and during the Bracero Program. Now, however, it was not as easy for large growers to recruit Mexicans as they had when those Mexicans were braceros.

The agribusiness growers also competed with labor unions and the Department of Labor. The unions had their own economic interests in mind when they sided with the braceros. Publicly, they sent a message of helping the braceros because of human rights; but their objectives were more likely self-interested. They did not wish to help a minority that was being exploited. They wanted to provide insurance that the braceros would not work against them and move into union jobs in the factories.

The Labor Department for its part had to balance all of these varied economic interests. It was tasked with administering the program, and this meant that all of the relevant groups tried to influence its decisions. The unions used the Labor Department as a means to start enacting a system of gradual reforms in the conditions that the braceros had to endure while in America. Meanwhile, agribusiness tried to block these reforms and to prevent anything that would force them to increase the costs of their production. The Labor Department had no way of easily winning this fight, but did its best to implement slow and steady change which eventually accelerated into an outright end to the Bracero Program.

All of these groups were pushing their agendas for economic reasons. Prejudices and ethnicity had an effect, but it was not at a level that I believe the scholarship claims. Before prejudice influences a historical situation, there must be another reason for it. In the case of the

Mexican braceros, it was because they could be easily controlled and exploited through the Bracero Program. Agribusinesses were constantly involved in the program, even being a part of the reason why the program initially began. Today Mexican immigration is still an unresolved issue. Knowing about the root of the problem and the beginnings of the modern issue in the Bracero Program, however, perhaps a workable solution will be found.

Matters such as immigration, slavery, or migrant labor, where one ethnicity or race interacts with a second race, normally have a winner and a loser. The easy thing is to say that it is because of prejudices that that system of exploitation arose. I truthfully expected to hear people talk about prejudices and to view Mexicans as a lesser type of person. However, that rarely happened. What I found was an intellectual debate at different levels of society that dealt with the economic incentives of the relevant actors. Prejudices were present, and they may have been the true motivation behind the program. However, that is not what my sources showed me. In this thesis, I have tried to get a handle on the public debate and to show that the debate, at least on the surface, every party was mostly concerned with its own economic well-being.

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