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Book Review

Book Review – William Hanson and the Texas-Mexico Border: Violence, Corruption, and the Making of the Gatekeeper State

George T. Díaz

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John Weber's book provides a focused examination of the development of state and federal policing along the Rio Grande border in the early 20th century. In particular, the book follows the career of William Hanson, who worked for the Texas Rangers, the U.S. Immigration Service, and as a fixer for powerful interests over the course of his career. Although Hanson's name appears in the title of the book, the author informs readers this is "not a biography" (p. 5). Instead, the book uses Hanson's illegal activities to reveal the corruption and violence within the policing agencies he used for self-gain. As a foot soldier and then as a bureaucrat for the state, Hanson perpetuated fears of a dangerous and violent border to justify white supremacy and state border enforcement efforts. In revealing how Hanson perpetuated the image of a dangerous Mexican border to advance his interests, Weber provides an illuminating case study of the development of the gatekeeping state.

The book begins with an examination of Hanson's time as a Texas Ranger during the state's deadliest decade of anti-Mexican violence. Without minimizing law enforcement attacks on ethnic Mexicans during the 1910s, Weber considers how Texas Rangers figured into the politics of white supremacy and anti-Mexican enfranchisement. Where once political machines provided Mexican Americans limited access to the ballot box, Anglo farmers new to South Texas imagined a political order more like the Jim Crow south and utilized Texas Rangers to kill, drive out, or silence those that opposed them (p. 37). Though Hanson himself avoided direct participation in Ranger led atrocities such as the Porvenir Massacre in January 1918, during his time as a captain in the service he embraced mob and vigilante violence as a "model" (p. 52).

While the violence and racism of the Texas Rangers is well documented, Weber's greatest contribution is revealing the depths of corruption within law enforcement. While working in the Immigration Service in the 1920s, Hanson engaged in a "kidnapping and murder for hire plot" unlawfully deporting enemies of the Mexican government (p. 132). Namely, Hanson accepted a platinum watch inscribed with his initials for his "willingness to cooperate" in the removal of political refugees residing in the United States (p. 128). Demetrio Torres and Abelardo Hinojosa both died in Mexican custody following their extralegal extradition. Although Hanson returned the watch after his supervisor learned of the lavish gift, he continued to use his office for crime. For instance, Hanson used his position to hide a smuggling network he organized with his son Mortimer who worked in the Border Patrol. The scheme involved officers allowing Prohibition era liquor smugglers and *coyotes* guiding Mexican migrants to enter without arrest in exchange for turning over unauthorized European migrants in prearranged "frame-ups" (p. 141). In setting up the scheme, Weber demonstrates that Hanson "fabricated and defined the problem, then pretended to solve it" (p. 141). Though investigators uncovered Hanson's illicit enterprise and he subsequently lost his job, the "bureaucratic fiction" that migrant apprehension gave him provided the state with the illusion of effective border policing (p. 150). The book's epilogue traces how the "numbers game" Hanson pioneered endured (p. 133). Though subsequent border enforcement spectacles such as Operation Wetback, Operation Intercept, and Operation Blockade, are not known to have relied on corruption like Hanson's scheme, border enforcement agencies rely on numbers of apprehensions and seizures to argue for greater funding for border security.

John Weber's examination of William Hanson provides an illuminating history of policing and corruption in the borderlands. Criminal activity, and corruption in particular, are notoriously difficult subjects of historical scrutiny and Weber should be applauded for his investigations in US federal, state, and Mexican archives. While some critics may ask if Hanson's corruption extends to the agencies he worked for, Weber's decision to focus on him gives the book depth and a narrative throughline which readers will appreciate. Illustrated with five images and a map, the book will be of great use for undergraduate and graduate courses in borderlands history as well as scholars of policing.

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None.

Authors

George T. Díaz, Ph.D

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Center for Mexican American Studies

George T. Díaz is the Director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where he serves as an Associate Professor of History. He teaches U.S. History, Borderlands, and Mexican American History. His award-winning book, [Border Contraband: A History of Smuggling across the Rio Grande](#) (University of Texas Press, 2015), is a social history of smuggling in the borderlands. Díaz is co-editor of the collection *Border Policing: A History of Enforcement and Evasion in North America* (University of Texas Press, 2020). His current book project, *Mañana Land: Life and Death in a Mexican Prison in Texas*, examines everyday life on Texas prison farms and how ethnic Mexican prisoners utilized their cultural practices as a means of resilience and resistance. Dr. Díaz's research is informed by investigations in Mexican and U.S. archives, as well as a lifetime of living on the border.

E-mail: george.diaz@utrgv.edu
