

4-22-2009

# Statehood Era and the Federal Presence, Part 1

David V. Holtby

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/crs\\_nm\\_statehood](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/crs_nm_statehood)

---

## Recommended Citation

Holtby, David V.. "Statehood Era and the Federal Presence, Part 1." (2009). [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/crs\\_nm\\_statehood/4](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/crs_nm_statehood/4)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Regional Studies at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Centennial of New Mexico Statehood by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## Statehood Era and the Federal Presence in New Mexico

### Overview: A Narrative Introduction

By the time historian and essayist Henry B. Adams (1838-1918) privately printed his autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* in 1907, events in New Mexico had long confirmed one of his bitter observations: “Politics . . . has always been the systematic organization of hatreds.” While partisan politics organized across racial lines in the Territory, it also exploited Anglo suspicions of native New Mexicans, the *nuevomexicanos*, especially those speaking only Spanish. In turn, *nuevomexicanos* regularly denounced these racial insults and defended their heritage and honor. The residual hostility between Anglos and *nuevomexicanos*, or the “systematic organization of hatreds,” was epitomized in an incident in mid-1906.

*La Voz del Pueblo*, the Spanish-language newspaper of Las Vegas, squared off against an English-language newspaper of Eddy County, *The Carlsbad Current*, in early June 1906. A *Current* editorial had attacked *nuevomexicanos*' right to vote. In response, the Las Vegas paper translated the offending editorial and refuted what they regarded as “a cowardly campaign of defamation against the native people of New Mexico.” These challenges to suffrage came at a time when New Mexicans anxiously watched the U.S. Congress to see if a statehood bill would emerge, and an article on the status of that legislation appeared along side the one critiquing the *Current*. A few weeks later congress passed, and President Theodore Roosevelt signed, the bill allowing New Mexicans, as well as the citizens of Arizona, to vote in November on becoming a single state.

Set against this background of a pending vote on statehood, the *Current*'s challenge to *nuevomexicanos*' suffrage brought a sharp rebuttal. The *Current*'s attack marked a new tactic in long-standing disputes between English-speakers and Spanish-speakers in New Mexico. For the *Current* the basic issue involved questioning how *nuevomexicanos* could be productive citizens in a country whose language they did not know: "What right or privilege, the *Current* says, do we have to vote when we maintain our attachment to the language of our forefathers." *La Voz del Pueblo* offered indignant, mocking replies, beginning with this one: "Can one imagine a greater crime that merits disqualification of the citizen than having preserved intact the cherished language of our fathers during three centuries of isolation?"

On one level, the conflict between the respective papers originated in their distinct political allegiances. *The Carlsbad Current* aligned with the dominant Republican Party, while the Las Vegas weekly allied with Democrats; however, the racial stereotypes so prevalent in that era magnified and intensified those differences. The Carlsbad newspaper described *neomexicanos* (as *La Voz del Pueblo* often identified its readers) "as a mixture of the descendants of Castilians, Aztecs, Sioux, and Ethiopians." To make their case more graphic, the *Current* gave its readers a brief tour of "the village of San José on the outskirts of Carlsbad. The living conditions present among this gathering of Mexican aborigines would bring shame to savage peoples anywhere else." The challenge to voting stemmed from such starkly racist views:

The *Current* desires to make its position so clear, so evident that there will be no misunderstanding of it . . . . [The *Current*] says it emphatically would remove the privilege of voting from anyone . . . whose moral nature is so low,

whose intellectual capacity is so limited that it cannot exercise this privilege with intelligence, virtue, and honesty, but instead falls under the whip of the [political] party and of a partisan lackey.

Moreover, the *Current* maintained that “there is but one race on the earth qualified by its nature to manage and govern man’s destiny—the pure Anglo-Saxon.” These were the only people, according to the *Current*, who should be voting in New Mexico.

*La Voz del Pueblo* eschewed race-baiting in its reply to *The Carlsbad Current*. While the paper refused to ignore “vile insults and base defamations,” it avoided any personal attacks. It simply reminded readers that “the *Current* speaks only from malevolence, ignorance, and suspicion” and its “preposterous ideas” discredited their author. The Las Vegas paper also realized that combating any attempt at disenfranchisement required more than editorial rebuttal. So, they promised that at the next session of the Territorial Legislature “we will demand [of Democratic Party representatives] that they give their views on the position of the *Current* toward the people of New Mexico.” In pledging to ask the Territorial legislature to rebuff the *Current*’s posturing about barring *neomexicanos* from voting, *La Voz del Pueblo* flexed their readers’ considerable political clout: the vote of native New Mexicans determined the outcome of every Territorial election, including the upcoming one on statehood.

The spat between the two Territorial newspapers in 1906 reprised several arguments almost tropes in the on-going debates over statehood. The *Current*’s position arose from its narrow definition of Americanism, an exclusionary ideology, widely subscribed to, that posited Anglo-Saxon, English-speakers alone were suited for citizenship. The assertion that *nuevomexicanos* lacked the loyalty, literacy, or language

facility required to fulfill the civic responsibilities conferred by statehood became a pernicious, recurring theme invoked by its foes. The argument had originated decades earlier, but its most recent incarnation had come with publication in December 1902 of a U.S. Senate committee report challenging the fitness of *nuevomexicanos* to enter the Union. The eponymous Beveridge Report, named after Albert J. Beveridge (R-IN) who chaired the Senate Committee on Territories, provided ammunition aplenty to postpone statehood for ten years. (The report is fully discussed in a separate entry.) Senator Beveridge and his report became New Mexico's *bête noire*, and his racist views echoed throughout the *Current's* editorial.

*La Voz del Pueblo*, long an advocate of statehood, understood well the larger purpose of the Carlsbad paper's words, which manipulated racial bias for its own political advantage. The *Current* generalized about all *nuevomexicanos* based on the poverty of nearby San José, which provided all the evidence they needed to poke their finger in others' eyes. But they were so blinded by their prejudices that they never discovered that the two newspapers shared a disdain of fraudulent elections.

For its part, *La Voz del Pueblo* devoted the final twenty-five percent of its response to the *Current* to listing Republican-directed voter fraud in New Mexico. They posed a series of questions, and the first summed up their position. "Why did they [the Republicans] spend millions and millions of pesos contributed by monopolies in the elections of 1896, 1900, and 1904 to buy *Neo-Mexicanos*?" The paper had frequently raised these charges, most recently in 1904 when the Territory's election of a delegate to congress occasioned their ire over matters ranging from buying the election to intimidating voters. After that election, *La Voz del Pueblo* alleged that William H.

Andrews, the victorious Republican, “spent fifty thousand dollars in this Territory to be elected delegate to Congress. The position pays him \$5,000 a year.”

Republican practices of buying elections vexed *La Voz del Pueblo*. On the one hand they roundly criticized electoral fraud, but they also knew that poverty made it possible. The Republican Party’s eagerness to pay voters became so blatant in the days leading up to the 1904 election that the Las Vegas paper wrote that the honest *nuevomexicano* was someone who voted his conscience, especially when he had no money. But *La Voz del Pueblo* also freely admitted *nuevomexicano* complicity. In their rebuttal of the *Current* they candidly acknowledged, “Certainly we do not deny that among our people are found conditions of ignorance, weakness, and baseness, and no one knows better than we do that we have had to fight these in our struggle for the peoples’ rights.”

The paper understood it had two fights on its hands: the immediate one was to attain statehood, but the ultimate goal was to build ethnic and class solidarity and, of course, to attach people to the Democratic Party. In working to achieve the latter, they singled out two “internal” foes. The first were “Mexicans,” who dominated the counties of Valencia, Sandoval, and Rio Arriba. In denouncing them for giving the largest majority of votes in the 1904 election to Delegate Andrews, *La Voz del Pueblo* claimed those county’s electoral tallies were “victories obtained by the force of money.” The paper implied that the “Mexicans” behaved as *peones*, doing whatever their *patrón* commanded.

Their second opponent was Republican governor Miguel Otero, Jr., a presidential appointee. In fact, he was their most frequent target, and among the litany of charges they

leveled against him were corruption, incompetence, and nepotism. As great as were these failings, the worst offense seemed to be that Otero had turned his back on *nuevomexicanos*. The newspaper's masthead proclaimed it to be "Dedicated to the Interests and Progress of the Hispano-Americano People." In their view, Otero had consistently ignored his fellow Hispano-Americans. In an editorial entitled "The Sell-Out of Hispano-Americans by Otero," the paper complained about his lack of allegiance:

We are not motivated by envy or political rancor but by the love of our people and of justice. The Hispano-Americans in this territory provide three-quarters of the vote that has put the Republican Party in power. . . . In view of this, we say once again: Is there any reason in the world that the native sons of New Mexico can not have more representation in the administration of public affairs?

This call for "more representation in the administration of public affairs" had profound consequences that reverberate to the present day. Entries in later sections will address how and why *nuevomexicanos* shifted their allegiance from Republicans to Democrats in the decades between 1900 and 1940, but a precursor voice was provided by the aptly named *La Voz del Pueblo* ("The People's Voice"). The newspaper consistently advocated on behalf of *nuevomexicanos* and championed their equality and rights in a political order dominated by Anglo Republicans. The paper also raised high the banner of the Democratic Party, and in so doing undoubtedly influenced the course of New Mexico's history by helping break Republican dominance following the Territorial era. One of the paper's editors, Ezequiel C. de Baca, served as lieutenant governor (1912-16)

to a Democratic governor, and then became the state's second governor, though tragically he succumbed to a long-term illness within seven weeks of his inauguration. A prominent Las Vegas resident in this era—A. A. Jones—headed the Democratic Party and went on to defeat Thomas Catron and become New Mexico's first Democratic U.S. Senator (1917-1928). Moreover, a future generation of Democratic leaders surely had their political orientation reinforced by the paper's unceasing call for a new order directed by Democrats. Included in this emerging generation of leadership was Dennis Chávez, elected to the House of Representatives in 1930 as the fourth New Mexico Democrat since statehood to serve in Congress, and who became U.S. Senator in 1935.

*La Voz del Pueblo's* editorials and reporting remained true to its pledge on its masthead to advance the “interests and progress” of Hispano-Americans, and this model of civic engagement was anchored in ethnic and political consciousness. This manifested itself when delegates gathered in the fall of 1911 to write the Constitution of New Mexico. In the six weeks of the constitutional convention, Hispano-American ethnic consciousness had sufficiently coalesced to permit this group to play a pivotal role in creating the cornerstone document of statehood. (That contribution is discussed in one of the final essays in this section.)

*The Carlsbad Current* called for voting to be done with “intelligence, virtue, and honesty” and free of partisan manipulation, positions perfectly aligned with those of *La Voz del Pueblo*. But good-conduct expectations regarding voting behavior never took hold in federal elections in that era. In fact, the brazenness of Republican irregularities in the November 1906 elections even prompted a congressional inquiry. Delegate Andrews seemed to lose a close re-election race to the Democratic challenger, Octaviano

Larrazolo; however, in the final canvassing, the results swung to Andrews. Allegations of fraud reached such a volume that the U.S. Congress stepped in to review more than a thousand pages of testimony about electoral fraud. Afterward, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives awarded the election to Andrews. But a pattern had been set: formal inquiries into allegations of vote tampering became a staple of New Mexico's political history for much of the twentieth century.

What are we to make of the narrative exchange from these two territorial newspapers? On one level we can look at the charges and countercharges in these articles as a way to take the temperature of the Territory early in the twentieth century. Much heat is evident: bitter partisan politics, racial bias directed at *nuevomexicanos*, and an ingrained culture of corruption all roiled the Territory. *The Carlsbad Current's* attempt to contest the voting rights of *nuevomexicanos* is an example of biased perceptions fanning ill-conceived schemes. The *Current's* negative views and attitudes epitomized the ill-will too often faced by *nuevomexicanos*. But the stereotypes also adversely impacted the struggle to join the Union because the opposition seized on such biases to undermine New Mexico's pursuit of statehood.

The opponents of statehood—in Washington, D.C., as well as in New Mexico—exploited deep fissures along political, racial, and ethnic lines to delay the Territory's entry into the Union. By using divide-and-conquer tactics, they succeeded in creating embittered and contentious factions. Statehood divided people, and the cause got caught in the crossfire between opponents and proponents. On one level, many of the trenchant attacks against Governor Otero in the pages of *La Voz del Pueblo* were examples of this

tendency for politics to become vituperative and even—as will be seen—physically violent.

Divisiveness and violence in politics were not unique to the Territory of New Mexico. The final years of the struggle for statehood in New Mexico, from 1898-1912, coincided with a major turning point in the nation's history. Drawing to a close was an epoch known as the Gilded Age, in which Republican corruption coupled with oppressive, monopolistic business practices channeled the nation's political and economic activity toward unbridled corruption and greed. But the excesses of this period also stimulated a desire for change. By 1900, powerful reform movements stirred throughout much of the United States, and these coalesced into the two decades of the Progressive period.

At the turn of the twentieth century, forces of the old and new order in America vigorously competed for power. It was against this volatile background that New Mexico pursued statehood. In important ways, the narrative of statehood is simply a small part of a national story, a carry over to the dawn of the twentieth century of a lingering, blood-stained triad of "isms": sectionalism, racism, and colonialism. While sectionalism had been defanged in the Civil War, it still remained capable of poisoning political discourse by injecting states' rights claims into all exercises of federal authority—including granting statehood. Racial bias was part of an epidemic of antipathy aroused by each new wave of immigrants. The influx of more than ten-million immigrants over the previous several decades added its own explosive mix of class consciousness and ethnic hatred. American colonialism, for most of the nineteenth century, meant planting the flag across the continent in pursuit of a Manifest Destiny. In this westward expansion, newly

organized territories would eventually become states. But until these territories entered the Union, they were internal “colonies” within the continental United States. Devoid of self-rule, the people in the territory soon realized that their value resided primarily as a place where political patronage could be dispensed to outsiders.

Sectionalism and racism were pernicious burdens, but these were compounded by the twin failures of decades of colonial, partisan rule—factionalism and corruption. Too many appointed officials fell under the sway of one or another local clique, and such influence invariably spawned corruption. In New Mexico, the Santa Fe Ring encapsulated all the sins of the Territorial system. The Ring utterly corrupted party politics in New Mexico for more than thirty years, injecting an intense combativeness from the late 1870s until well into the first decade of the twentieth century. In the minds of many influential people in Washington, D.C., in the 1880s and 1890s, New Mexico’s Territorial politics indelibly soiled its reputation. When the push for statehood resumed in the early twentieth century, the stains of public corruption persisted—until cleansed by presidential intervention.

The suspicion, fear, and resentment bred by these legacies of sectionalism, racism, and colonialism came to a head when sentiment for statehood quickened in New Mexico and Arizona (as well as in Oklahoma and its Indian Territory) around 1900. The Territories’ aspiration collided with doubt and distrust that had built up in much of the nation during the second half of the nineteenth century. Long-standing questions persisted over New Mexico’s fitness to join the Union. In 1889 and 1890, when five new states entered the Union, New Mexico’s appeals were met with skepticism and disdain in congress and in the pages of the nation’s leading newspapers. *A New York Times*

editorial claimed “New Mexico is utterly unfit for Statehood, and is likely to remain so for some time.” The *Chicago Tribune* derided New Mexico as “the unAmerican Greaser Territory,” a slur that dogged it for two decades.

The weight of the past visited much delay and unfairness on the Territories, especially in the firm opposition to statehood exhibited by many Republican senators from the East and Midwest. For all of its twists and turns, New Mexico’s rough road to statehood paralleled the ups and downs that America endured in defining itself anew at the turn of the twentieth century. The struggle for statehood became a pawn in the nation’s search for a new, dominant collective national identity. New Mexico, as well as Arizona and Oklahoma and its Indian Territory, sought to join the Union at the very time when a debate raged over America’s identity. Across the country, but especially in congress, questions abounded over such fundamental issues as national purpose, citizenship, economic development, and party politics.

So, New Mexico remained apart for another decade, its star absent from the nation’s flag, its statehood held hostage by forces mostly outside its own control—sectionalism, racism, and colonialism. As long as these issues remained unsettled in the nation’s life, they would undermine efforts to attain self-rule in the Territories. But between 1898 and 1912, New Mexico waged a Sisyphus-like uphill fight to secure statehood. Unlike the tragic figure in Greek mythology, though, New Mexico prevailed and triumphed. In doing so, it also helped bring a brief hiatus to some of the nation’s darker, atavistic instincts—but only for five years. In 1917 America’s entry into The Great War unleashed a new urgency to defining Americanism.

“The Statehood Era and the Federal Presence, 1898-1912” will delineate in the following nine entries how the dual quests for statehood and national identity became entwined in the years between 1898 and 1908. Each accounts offers a narrative built around description and interpretive summary. But the ultimate purpose in looking at New Mexico between 1898 and 1912 is to uncover the fundamental principles amid a pile of details. In such an account, history becomes a meta-discourse critically probing events of a century ago in a quest to find transcendent meaning. In that endeavor, current theoretical perspectives serve as a means to understand statehood in the context of American life in the early twentieth century. The following essay is just such an analytic investigation.

© 2008 by David V. Holtby. All rights reserved

