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Opinion: Latter day secessionists signal a new American civil war

By Marcela Davison Aviles
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This essay was supposed to be a look at 2010 from the perspective of the arts -- a commentary on cultural events and maybe a new vegan New Year's recipe for menudo (use tofu tripe).

But life has a habit of interfering with the best-laid prose. Over the holiday, my mom was hospitalized -- she is still there, taking her life back one day at a time -- and on New Year's Day, the Latino community discovered via The New York Times that we are "resigned and on the defensive" while our constitutional rights are attacked by latter-day secessionists.

The recipe is out. A call to action, inspired by my mother's fierce determination to live, is in.

I believe we are at the dawn of a modern American civil war. This new battle in states' rights vs. federalism occupies much of the same territory -- the southern border -- but also involves new ground, such as Wisconsin, where the U.S. census reveals high growth rates in ethnic communities.

The new secessionists seek to repeal the rights established under the 14th Amendment, which provides that all persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens.

My mother is the child of a foreign national and an

American citizen. She was born in Mexico and moved here with my American grandmother. President Barack Obama, the son of a U.S. citizen and an African national, was born in Hawaii. Under the 14th Amendment, both are accorded American citizenship. If some of the new secessionists have

their way, both could be deported.

This modern civil war is being waged through the use of state ballot initiatives financed through special interest groups. As reported by NPR, Arizona's SB 1070 was financed by the private prison industry, which has a profit motive to incarcerate as many people as possible.

Now, several states are coordinating efforts to pass similar laws to take over two areas of federal oversight: immigration and U.S. citizenship.

The rationale is cloaked in the vintage language of states' rights. The new secessionists' cry uses a clever mix of patriotic branding (the tea party, the Minutemen) and jingoistic fear-mongering: We must "secure our borders," stem the tide of "illegal invaders," and protect our communities from "anchor babies."

However, data from numerous reports and studies reveal that the national security risks and negative economic impact from undocumented immigrants are myths.

The libertarian Cato Institute has one of the most comprehensive studies on the issue at www.cato.org. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce strongly endorses reform. Why? Maybe because the positive economic impact from immigrants is in the trillions of dollars. And reports from law enforcement are nearly unanimous that the states' prospective oversight over national security critically interferes with local police efforts.

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Faced with the truth, one can only assume that the secessionist rebel yell circa 2011 is not about states' rights. It is a primal cry about race and national identity. And votes.

Our nation was built on the back of slave labor, then cheap labor. Now it relies on the ingenuity of us all.

Immigrants -- whether they come armed with Ph.D.s from U.S. universities or mops from a U.S. hotel chain -- earn trillions of dollars for U.S. businesses. These are facts, not propaganda.

The reports from The New York Times are greatly exaggerated. Latinos are not resigned. We are determined. And we'll continue to speak the truth about immigration reform because not only do we know the facts, but we also remember a different rebel yell, taught to us by our parents, one that hasn't changed in two millennia:

Love thy neighbor.

MARCELA DAVISON AVILES is CEO and executive producer of the Mexican Heritage Corp. She wrote this article for this newspaper.

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