

**THE POLITICS OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS IN TEXAS, 1948-  
1955**

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
April 2008

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To my grandmothers, Juanita and Mary Lou.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My foremost thanks must go to the excellent faculty and staff at Texas State University-San Marcos. I had all the support I needed during the term of my master's program. Paul Hart has been my strongest advocate and closest advisor. Thanks Paul for the lessons in history and everything else. Not everyone can have an advisor who is so committed to their students. Any success I have is also due to the watchful eye of Frank de la Teja. Dr. D expects the most of me and I am better for it. I also appreciate his good sense of humor. Ana Juarez challenged my ideas on race and categorization. Her guidance has led me to understand the constant transition that is crucial to Latino studies. I am convinced the boundaries of history and anthropology should blend more frequently.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Mary Brennan for her excellent work as the history department's academic advisor. Holding the graduate students together is taxing work, but she does it well. I benefitted immensely during my time as a teaching assistant to Alan Atchison, Angela Murphy, Irene Hindson, and Gary Hartman and gained valuable insight during our conversations about academia throughout the semesters. Thanks to Ana Romo, James Pohl, and Pierre Cagniard for excellent seminars. I am grateful to Mary Alice De Leon and Cheryl Davidson who never hesitated to help me with my last-minute requests from the front office.

Tiffany Gill and David Kamper supported me as an undergraduate, kept me fully engaged in my studies, and told me I was cut out for graduate school. Thanks to my peers Beau Steenken, Shaun Stalzer, Jeff Lambert, Tom Alter, Ben Hicklin, Clint Moore, Sandy Pope, Chris Lehman, and Jack Anderson. Thanks to all the other scholars, librarians, archivists, and friends who were willing to hear my ideas.

This manuscript was submitted on April 11, 2008.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The trouble is that there’s not enough knowledge as to what went on [with the G.I. Forum.] People now days have the idea that the Mexican-American movement started with the groups that were active in the 60s, the Mexican-American Unity Council and the La Raza Unida that created so much havoc with all those protests and what have you... but we started way before then. And that’s a story that’s never been adequately told in my opinion.”<sup>1</sup>

– Former American G.I. Forum Texas State Chairman and Executive Secretary Ed Idar Jr. when asked about lack of appreciation for the Forum.

Twentieth- century Anglos and Latinos in Texas maintained a tenuous relationship. Anglo conflict with Mexico and Mexicans, rooted in nineteenth-century United States expansionism, precipitated prolonged racial, ethnic, and nationalist strife. This happened even as the parallel construction of “Mexican-American” identity brought many Latinos and whites roughly into the same political and economic framework. Inter-ethnic cultural exchange facilitated the emergence of distinct “Texan” culture,

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<sup>1</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., interview by Jeff Felts, *Justice for my People*, (Corpus Christi, Texas: South Texas Public Broadcasting Systems, INC, 2007) < [http://www.justiceformypeople.org/interview\\_idar.html](http://www.justiceformypeople.org/interview_idar.html)> (20 November 2007).

perhaps most famously in the creation and rise of the Texas “cowboy” of the 1870s and 1880s. Even so, Anglos dominated the political landscape in the state. An ethnically stratified class system generally placed Texas Latinos in an inferior position in which social mobility eluded all but the most elite of the Tejanos.

Texas Mexican Americans struggled to address issues of discrimination and create substantive change. Several civil rights organizations emerged and each focused on alleviating grievances faced by specific communities of Latinos. Mutual aid societies emerged in the early 1900s that provided internally generated economic and social support for working-class Latinos along the Texas-Mexico border. Middle-class and elite Mexican Americans consolidated many of their organizations in 1929 when they gathered in Corpus Christi to form the League of United Latin American Citizens. LULAC supported both legal challenges to segregation and a program of Americanization for Texas Mexican Americans. Another organization, the American G.I. Forum, formed in 1948 to address the concerns of Latino veterans. Eventually the Forum expanded their emphasis in fighting for the rights of Latino agricultural and industrial workers. Mexican Americans in Texas routinely mobilized in attempts to improve relations with Anglos and alleviate a consistent denial of rights.

As a widely recognized “watershed” in United States ethnic histories, the trials and opportunities presented by the second World War forever changed the tenor of Mexican-American identities and expectations. The scope of the entire country’s involvement in the war allowed these Latinos to experience “Americanism” as they never had before. Thousands volunteered or were drafted into military service, where they

served next to Anglos on the battlefield. In the service, Mexican Americans of all economic backgrounds and ethnicities witnessed significantly less discrimination, as military policy opposed divisive behavior among integrated Anglo-Latino units.

Mexican-American soldiers reacted well in fierce combat and more than a notable few returned with the highest military honors. Latino men and women on the home front found increased opportunities both in the civilian jobs vacated by soldiers and in the industrial work required to support massive military operations on two fronts. The unique conditions of World War II demonstrated to Texas Mexican Americans that equitable treatment in Anglo-dominated society was deserved and indeed possible.

Most Anglos in Texas, however, did not recognize the expanded social opportunities of the war years as permanent or significant changes to the state's ethnic dichotomy. When Mexican-American soldiers returned home from Europe and the Pacific following World War II, a significant change in their expectations for social justice challenged the entrenched practices of ethnic prejudice practiced in Texas. Pre-war patterns of political disfranchisement, exclusion from jury service, and substandard wages continued, leaving average Mexican Americans—overwhelmingly agricultural, industrial, and other low wage laborers—without realistic opportunities for enjoying full and equal citizenship in the United States. Segregation persisted in many school districts, businesses, and other public spaces throughout the state. Despite the valiant military service of Mexican Americans in the war, many struggled to obtain the G.I. benefits promised them by their country. Mexican Americans remained severely underrepresented in state and local governments as well. Generally, conditions in Texas

after the war afforded little opportunity for most Mexican Americans to realize the prospects for change they envisioned.

The dynamic relationship between Anglos and Latinos certainly frames the agenda of post-war civil rights organization, but complex social, political, and economic arrangements render considerations of a generalized brown-white binary insufficient. This thesis explores the distinct class-specific issues of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The events of this period divided, challenged, and drove Mexican Americans of various ideologies to action. As average Mexican Americans became increasingly politicized due to their patriotic service, divergent strategies for progress caused distinct fissures among Texas Latinos. Civil rights leaders found themselves struggling to respond to Anglo impositions of segregation and discrimination while negotiating critics from within the ethnic community.

The first chapter examines how Federal government policies and local agricultural interests placed formal strains on Mexican American workers. The Bracero Program, instituted nationally in 1942, undermined and displaced Mexican-American labor by bringing low-wage Mexican workers into the United States. Although Texas was unable to participate in the Bracero Program until 1947 due to human rights grievances by Mexico, the importation of cheap labor began much earlier. Illegal Mexican workers, labeled “wetbacks,” further complicated the Texas economy by providing an easily exploitable labor alternative.

While domestic agricultural workers were struggling to compete with Mexican labor, agricultural producers benefitted from government policies designed to maximize grower profit. Exclusion from minimum-wage regulations along with limited enforcement of other labor protections allowed growers a substantial and largely unregulated measure of control over the agricultural labor supply. These policies placed Mexican Americans along the Rio Grande Valley in crisis.

Certainly the marginalization and exploitation of Mexican-American agricultural workers began much earlier than the 1940s and has continued beyond the years examined here, but the support of the G.I. Forum for workers signified a shift in Mexican-American activism. With a newly legitimated claim on full citizenship, Latino World War II veterans in Texas fought not only their own G.I. benefits, but also for the rights of working-class Mexican Americans generally. Forum leaders petitioned government leaders, printed expository documents, and testified before the United States Congress in advocacy of Mexican-American labor issues. These initial efforts failed to spark reform, specifically in Rio Grande Valley agricultural practices, but they illuminate the complexity of Anglo business and government policies that assumed and expected cheap, malleable Latino labor.

Though initially unsuccessful, challenges to established labor practices in the early 1950s placed the G.I. Forum at the forefront of advocating working-class affairs for Mexican Americans. Previously, the full balance of United States citizenship had been experienced largely in the elite and upper-middle classes of Mexican Americans. The incrementalist civil rights agenda of these more socially accepted Mexican Americans

focused on the educational and legal efforts necessary for the creation and maintenance of a viable middle class. While certainly beneficial for all Mexican Americans, these policies did not substantially address the daily economic crises and exploitation of the working class.

When the war enabled civilly disfranchised Texas Latinos to gain legitimate social standing as veterans, conflict erupted over the direction and control of the nebulously conceived “Mexican-American movement.” The second chapter analyses the organizational efforts of many of these veterans in the American G.I. Forum as they negotiated established Mexican-American leaders. In the late 1940s and early 1950s LULAC remained committed to the principles of incremental reform and social Americanization of Mexican Americans adopted in 1929. The G.I. Forum’s insistence in aggressively opposing unfair labor practices and confrontational attitude in dealing with racist iniquities charged the post-war atmosphere among Texas Latinos. Though activist and incrementalist factions advocated mutually antagonistic routes for change, the ethnic relationship and similarity of actual goals was enough to inspire a unification effort under the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund in 1952. When the new organization collapsed after a few months, Mexican American civil rights leaders in Texas faced continuing problems of equal citizenship along with an internally divisive ideological struggle.

The utter failure and collapse of the Pro-Human Relations Fund was a major defeat for those advocating ethnic solidarity. Self-identified as “Latin Americans,” Mexican Americans and other Hispanic Americans certainly shared linguistic and cultural traditions, regardless of social class. Despite the close “Latin” ties, rifts between

Texas Mexican Americans arose at the junctures of social class and acculturation. While some institutions, including the Catholic Church, supported both factions, the most decisive organizational alliances of this period for Texas Mexican Americans were those they held with Anglos of corresponding class interests. The G.I. Forum found friends among labor unions such as AFL-CIO's state organization, the Texas Federation of Labor. LULAC incrementalists preferred the company of conservative Anglo politicians and bureaucrats.

The last chapter demonstrates the myriad ways in which class interest transgressed ethnicity in a climate of Anglo social and political dominance. These alliances between Mexican Americans and Anglos showcase the *different* possibilities various Texas Latinos saw for themselves. Racialized social expectations of the 1940s and 1950s in Texas assumed Mexican Americans to hold separate, ethnically defined goals to which Anglos could either be sympathetic or not. Instead, active involvement between Americans of different ethnicities characterizes the nature of Mexican-American organizational emphases. Surely the issues of confronting ethnically defined *de facto* and *de jure* discrimination galvanized an ethnically uniform response. However, in the post-war period Mexican Americans found class issues among themselves to be divisive. Soliciting intra-ethnic support for implementing specific programs for reform proved more complicated and less fruitful than collaborating with like-minded Anglos.

The opportunities and trials of this historical moment ushered in a gritty transition from the old guard to the new. The singular conception of Mexican-American identity underwent reevaluation as underrepresented "Latin Americans" rose up to speak for

themselves. Younger activists established validity in the ethnic community, and the Mexican-American movement in Texas began to reflect the attitudes of activists who not only envisioned a better future, but demanded present reforms.

## CHAPTER I

### **Frozen Fruit: “Wetbacks,” Farmers, Braceros, and the “So Called Latin Americans” in the Rio Grande Valley, 1949-1952**

“Many of the gains made by Texas-Mexicans during the war have been lost as a result of the recent influx of wetbacks... There is little prospect that the Mexican in Texas will ever achieve anything approximating economic and social equality ... so long as low-priced Mexican labor is desired in this nation.”

-Texas Author Hart Stillwell, 1949<sup>1</sup>

“As loyal citizens of the United States of America, we sincerely believe that one of the principles of Democracy is religious and political freedom for the individual and that citizens are entitled to the right of equality in social and economic opportunities and that to produce a stronger American society we must advance understanding between the different nationalities.”

-From the Constitution of the American G.I. Forum of Texas, 1949.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hart Stilwell, “The Wetback Tide,” *Common Ground* 9 (Summer 1949):3-14. in *Major Problems in Mexican American History*, ed. Zaragosa Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 346.

“These farmers are not slave drivers. The (Latin) American labor is far too inadequate. They cannot do this type of labor if they would, and they would not do it if they could. When can we expect to lessen the stranglehold that labor has on the United States?”

-Baptist Minister in Brownsville, 1951<sup>3</sup>

A perceived labor shortage in the cotton fields of South Texas in 1951 brought the divergent interests of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Anglos to the forefront of a national debate on U.S. immigration policy and the government’s Bracero Program.<sup>4</sup> A devastating January freeze destroyed most of the Rio Grande Valley’s citrus yield and Anglo farmers hoped the promising summer cotton harvest would limit their losses.<sup>5</sup> Fearful of a labor shortage, anxious farmers lobbied their representatives in Washington, D.C., to provide legally contracted laborers from Mexico, or *braceros*, to pick what was

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<sup>2</sup> “The Constitution of the American G.I. Forum of Texas Seeks Equal Rights for Mexican Americans in the Post-World War II Era,” in *Major Problems in Texas History*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Cary D. Wintz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 382.

<sup>3</sup>E.G. Gregory, Brownsville, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 11 May 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, Legislative File on Alien Labor, LBJ Presidential Library, University of Texas at Austin. (Henceforth referred to as LBJ papers)

<sup>4</sup> Mexican Americans before the 1960s used the term “Latin American” to describe any Latino (Hispanic) citizen of the United States. The founding of the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1929 popularized the expression, intending to emphasize American citizenship and a “Spanish” heritage in an era of marked ethnic discrimination towards Mexicans. “Mexican American” is used throughout this text as a more accurate ethnic description of Hispanic Americans in Texas.

<sup>5</sup> Winston C. Fournier, “Texas Cotton: Top Producing State Expects a Record 1951 Crop, Twice ’50 Output,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 June 1951, p. 1.

to be the “record crop” of 1951. Farm owners predicted disaster if *braceros* were not brought en masse to Texas because, they claimed, local Latino citizens of the “Magic Valley” were too few for the size of the harvest and, in any case, unwilling to do the work.<sup>6</sup>

American agricultural workers in the Valley disagreed with the claims that there was a farm labor shortage. Overwhelmingly Mexican American, they argued that a sufficient labor supply already existed in South Texas but that they simply could not work for wages unbecoming U.S. citizens. They believed foreign labor contracts, with compensation set for much less than the national minimum wage, drove down wages and limited their ability to improve their economic status.<sup>7</sup> Illegal Mexican immigrants, commonly referred to as “wetbacks,” further complicated the Valley labor situation by working for even lower wages. With no oversight for the widespread and illegal practice of employing “wetbacks,” wages and working conditions were largely determined by employers. This informal labor system destabilized the labor “rights” of both the contracted Mexican *braceros* and Mexican Americans, while leaving “wetbacks” vulnerable to unbounded exploitation.<sup>8</sup>

Constrained by expiring labor importation agreements with Mexico and the oncoming harvest, Congress and federal officials forged discriminatory policies that

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<sup>6</sup> “Ginners Say Huge Texas Cotton Crop Doomed without 500,000 Braceros,” *Valley Morning Star*, 25 May 1951, front page headline.

<sup>7</sup> Archbishop Robert E. Lucey, U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations. *Migratory Labor*. 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., part 1., February-March 1952, 6-8.

<sup>8</sup> Stilwell, 346-348.

avored the labor needs of Anglo farmers. Not only did federal authorities authorize contracts for thousands of *braceros* in Texas, they also eased penalties for farmers hiring illegal “wetbacks.”<sup>9</sup> Neglected enforcement of even these softened labor regulations placed power on South Texas farms firmly in the hands of agribusiness.

This defeat for Mexican Americans could have stood as another chapter in a series of futile attempts to gain fair treatment prior to the civil rights era of the 1960s if it were not for the lobbying efforts mounted by a young group of distinguished Mexican Americans from Texas. When Mexican-American veterans returned to Texas from World War II, they used their patriotic service as leverage to demand fair and dignified treatment from the Anglo dominated society. These veterans directly challenged the biased agricultural labor and immigration systems which they saw as the most immediate causes of a low standard of living among Hispanics in the Valley.

Some veterans organized the American G.I. Forum of Texas in 1948. The G.I. Forum, other activist veterans, and like-minded Mexican Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s emphasized issues of legal and educational equality and economic fairness. Giving speeches, sending letters to officials, and offering congressional testimony, Hispanic veterans sought the immediate cessation of foreign labor in Texas, the uniform payment of the federal minimum wage, and improved working conditions for all U.S.

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<sup>9</sup> Manuel García y Griego, “The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964,” in *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States*, ed. David G. Gutiérrez (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996), 56-57.

citizens engaged in Valley agriculture.<sup>10</sup> Their approach contrasted with the policies of pursuing incremental social change as advocated in previous years by the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the primary political organization for Texas Hispanics.<sup>11</sup> The “new” Mexican-American leadership in Texas straddled both the aggressive, yet fledgling G.I. Forum and the established, though evolving LULAC organization.

Hispanics in Texas were no strangers to agrarian conflict with Anglos. During the early nineteenth century Texas Mexicans (*Tejanos*) cultivated corn and cotton and managed an expanding sheep and cattle ranching industry, but their control over Texas land was challenged when serious Anglo colonization of the territory began in the 1840s. By 1845, when Texas entered the Union, the “wholesale transfer of land” from Tejanos to Anglos, largely through “force, intimidation, or fraud,” ensured that control over the agricultural economy was in the hands of the new immigrants. Anglos established agriculturally-based mercantilist towns and enhanced their economic power while many Tejanos endured abject racism that disenfranchised them from the benefits of interstate trade. According to Leobardo F. Estrada, et al., “Mexicans (in Texas) were increasingly relegated to the lower ranks of society. By the end of the century, ethnicity merged with social class, made [average] Mexicans a mobile, colonized labor force.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Hector P. Garcia, Corpus Christi, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 29 Apr 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers; Lucey, 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Leobardo F. Estrada and others, “Chicanos in the United States: A History of Exploitation and Resistance,” in *Latinos and the Political System*, ed. F. Chris Garcia (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press), 31-32.; The internal colonial model for Mexican Americans functions for the nineteenth

Because the border between the State of Texas and Mexico was relatively open in the years before the creation of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the United States Border Patrol in 1924, a clear indication of the citizenship and immigration figures for Hispanic population of Texas is difficult to determine.<sup>13</sup> Anglo employers of Hispanic laborers summarily termed them “Mexican;” citizenship status had limited advantage in an ethnically defined agricultural labor force. Anglos understood that they could gain access to more workers through Mexico. During the 1910s and 1920s Anglo farmers (aided by the U.S. Government) turned to Mexican contract workers in order to supplement the local Hispanic supply. Due to the similarity with the formalized Bracero Program begun in the 1940s, some scholars have termed these contract periods, specifically those coinciding with World War I, as the “first *bracero* program.”<sup>14</sup>

The availability of contracted and illegal Mexican workers depended upon a mix of push and pull factors convincing them to enter into such an arrangement with U.S. employers. Factors in Mexico “pushing” laborers to emigrate, such as adverse harvests, low wages, low commodity prices, and high fertility rates, meshed with “pull” factors in the United States, such as labor shortages and better pay.<sup>15</sup> Following the collapse of the American economy in 1929 the lure of available work and a superior lifestyle were not

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century, but is only partially applicable once large influxes of twentieth century immigrants enter the U.S. population.

<sup>13</sup> Estrada and others, 41.

<sup>14</sup> García y Griego, 46-47.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Redfield, “The Antecedents of Mexican Immigration to the United States,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, (November 1929): 435; J. Craig Jenkins, “The Demand for Immigrant Workers: Labor Scarcity or Social Control?,” *International Migration Review*, (Winter 1978): 515.

realistic options for Hispanics in rural Texas. The U.S. Government actively sought to improve the opportunities for Anglos by discriminating against Hispanics. In a reprehensible effort to rid the Southwest of excess labor, U.S. officials systematically repatriated thousands of Mexican citizens, even illegally deporting Latino U.S. citizens to Mexico.<sup>16</sup> Racism had certainly affected Hispanics since the period of Anglo colonization, but according to David Montejano, “during the 1930s Anglo businessmen and skilled labor in the cities and big towns reproduced the prevailing racial practices of the countryside... [including] refusal of service in public places, real estate restrictions, police brutality, and employment barriers.”<sup>17</sup> Jobs for Hispanics during the Depression often were unavailable due to the policies of labor unions determined to protect the limited supply of employment for Anglos.<sup>18</sup>

Anglo discrimination and disregard for Mexican Americans’ rights as citizens directly contributed to the formation of the League of United Latin American Citizens in February, 1929 by members of several established “Latin American” organizations in Corpus Christi. Men such as Ben F. Garza, Eduardo Idar Sr., J.T. Canales, Louis Wilmot, and Alonso S. Perales decided to consolidate their efforts at improving the opportunities for Mexican Americans. Cynthia Orozco characterizes the initial organization of LULAC as a “response to political disfranchisement, racial segregation,

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<sup>16</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 222.

<sup>17</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 265.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

and racial discrimination. It responded to bossism, the lack of political representation, the lack of a sizable independent Mexican-American vote, jury exclusion of Mexican-Americans, and white primaries... It also dealt with the segregation of public schools, housing, and public accommodations. It attempted to solve the problems of poverty among Mexican Americans and sought to build a substantial Mexican-American middle class.”<sup>19</sup>

This multifaceted platform excited the passions of the new organization’s leadership, most of whom were drawn from the small upper middle-class segment of the Mexican American population. The LULAC officers, all men, were secure enough in their own professional careers to avoid direct distress from the rampant industrial and agricultural labor woes that plagued most working class Mexican Americans in the 1930s. Members spent the Depression years “absorbed in consolidating the group, engaging in political and community activities, and debating the fine points of the group’s philosophy.” Despite one member’s assertion that with the founding of LULAC, “the great march of human progress among the Latin Race has started,”<sup>20</sup> the depression, repatriation, and discrimination of the 1930s thwarted any true progress in the Mexican American cause.

The dramatic global conflicts of the 1940s provided the impetus for reevaluation of Mexican-American and Anglo-American coexistence. More than any previous event,

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<sup>19</sup> Cynthia E. Orozco, “League of United Latin American Citizens,” in *Handbook of Texas Online*; available from <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/LL/wel1.html>; Internet; accessed 11 December 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Márquez, 17.

World War II reshaped the expectations that working-class Mexican Americans had for themselves in Texas. Many Mexican American women took jobs in the defense industry processing munitions, aircraft, and rations.<sup>21</sup> In large part, Hispanic workers found that during World War II the informal agreements that had previously kept them out of industrial jobs had been relaxed to account for the labor shortage of the war.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, thousands of young Mexican American men enlisted or were drafted and, more often than not, fought and bunked alongside Anglos.

Most beneficial to the self conception of Mexican Americans, however, was the distinguished war record of these Hispanic soldiers. Mexican-American troops served throughout the world and died for their country at a higher rate than Anglo soldiers. Most pointedly, out of fourteen Texas soldiers who received the Congressional Medal of Honor, six of them were “Latin Americans.”<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly Mexican Americans had served with distinction, and when they returned to the United States, their expectations for an improved stake in the American economy and society increased dramatically.<sup>24</sup> Their increased expectations were manifested, not from the position of already successful businessmen, like the founders of LULAC in the 1930s, but from the experiences of average, largely under-educated Mexican Americans who believed their economic

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<sup>21</sup> Richard A. Santillán, “The Contributions of Mexican American Women Workers in the Midwest to the War Effort,” in *Major Problems in Mexican American History*, ed. Zaragosa Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 327.

<sup>22</sup> Estrada and others, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Congress, Senate, Committee of Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., part 1., February-March 1952, 131.

<sup>24</sup> David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 141.

prospects should be as fair, equal, and indiscriminate as their draft numbers had been. The emergent soldier-activist formed the strongest voice for labor reform in the post World War II Rio Grande Valley.

Despite their substantial patriotic contributions during wartime, Mexican Americans' economic prospects were imperiled by improved relations and new labor agreements between Mexico and the United States. Following a downturn in relations during the depression years, the countries united in the 1940s. Originally preferring to remain neutral in the war, Mexico hesitated to commit to either side in the conflict. But, when two Mexican tanker ships were sunk in May 1942 by German submarines in the Caribbean, sentiment for neutrality abruptly vanished. Enjoying full Mexican support, the United States appointed members to a joint-defense board and relied heavily on Mexican exports of raw minerals to supply the massive U.S. defense industry.<sup>25</sup> Though not particularly capable as a modern military power, Mexico managed to contribute a productive aerial combat contingent, *el Escuadrón 201*, to the war effort, displaying a measure of blood solidarity with their northern neighbors.<sup>26</sup> Even so, the most significant contribution by Mexico to the United States war effort was to send inexpensive labor (*braceros*) to the fields of Anglo farmers.

By 1941, the United States began contracting some "emergency" farm laborers under a presidential agreement and in 1942 a regular, documented influx of contracted Mexican workers began. Public Law 45 formalized the Bracero Program in 1943,

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<sup>25</sup> Michael C. Meyer, William L. Sherman, and Susan M. Deeds, *The Course of Mexican History*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 606.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen I Schwab, "The Role of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force in World War II: Late, Limited, but Symbolically Significant," *The Journal of Military History* (October 2002), 1140.

although it had already begun in practice.<sup>27</sup> The mass drafting of young American men into military service created a labor shortage, and left U.S. employers willing to negotiate for mutually set terms attractive to both their interests and to those of Mexican labor.<sup>28</sup> Though organized American labor protested what they foresaw as a challenge to the U.S. workforce, the appeal of returning to a transnational labor system reminiscent of the 1910s and 1920s enticed both Mexicans and U.S. farm interests. Low industrial pay in Mexico, combined with the military disruption of Mexican labor union activity and low pay for agricultural laborers ensured that chronic push factors in Mexico encouraged migration northward into the 1950s.<sup>29</sup>

The 1942 agreement initiated a system of labor recruitment, screening, and contracting by corresponding Mexican and U.S. agencies. Mexican officials conferred with American employers and government representatives to determine labor quotas, which were then distributed throughout the Mexican states. Aspiring *braceros* gathered at predetermined recruitment centers where they were screened for work aptitude by their government. After approval by Mexican authorities, *braceros* faced a U.S. Department of Labor evaluation to determine labor suitability. Once documented by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and approved as generally healthy by the U.S. Public Health Service, *braceros* were available to work for U.S. employers.<sup>30</sup> This

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<sup>27</sup> García y Griego, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer and others, 619; "Low Picker Pay In Mexico Called Cause of Wetbacks," Valley Morning Star, 22 Jul 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

<sup>30</sup> García y Griego, 47-48.

arrangement required heavy bureaucratic processing and resulted in guaranteed written contracts. Frequently though, Mexican workers and Anglo farmers avoided the formal system altogether and established extralegal work arrangements to avoid regulation.

Due to repeated discrimination against Mexicans, Texas employers were “blacklisted” from the Bracero Program through most of the 1940s. If Texas growers wanted Mexican labor they hired “wetbacks.” The Mexican government, noting widespread abuse of their citizens in Texas, refused to send any *braceros* to the state from 1943-1947. Though the United States exerted tremendous pressure against Mexico to certify *braceros* for work in Texas, the Mexican government declined to subject workers to rampant discrimination. Texas Governor Coke Stevens formed the “Good Neighbor Commission” to investigate and alleviate concerns about injustice suffered by foreign workers in the state. Even so, the ban on Texas was not lifted until after the war.

Economic uncertainty and ethnic tension marked the post-war environment in the Rio Grande Valley. Returning Mexican American World War II veterans not only found that their expectations for improved civilian economic and social relations were unrealized, but that some of the benefits relating to their war service were denied to them as well. Just north of the Rio Grande Valley, in the organizational hotbed of Corpus Christi, Dr. Hector P. Garcia founded the American G. I. Forum of Texas in March 1948 to help Mexican American veterans receive their previously “earned benefits through the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944.”<sup>31</sup> The organization rose to national attention in 1949 when a

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<sup>31</sup> V. Carl Allsup, “American G.I. Forum of Texas;” available from <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/voa1.html>; Internet; accessed 20 December 2006.

funeral home in Three Rivers, Texas, refused to bury the remains of Mexican American veteran Félix Longoria. After securing the assistance of Senator Lyndon Baines Johnson, the G.I. Forum was able to arrange for the burial of Longoria at Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.<sup>32</sup>

Even with such a high-profile accomplishment on record, the G.I. Forum was unable to significantly affect the most pressing issue for Mexican Americans in the Valley: the influx of “wetbacks” who continued to stream into Texas, displacing local labor. Many Mexican Americans opposed formal foreign labor agreements between Mexico and the United States, even though they technically should have been protected from agricultural job displacement by provisions in official *bracero* agreements. The failure of these provisions to be fully implemented reinforced the anti-*bracero* stance of “Latin American” organizations, while the situation with “illegals” further exacerbated conditions. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, “a steady flow of undocumented workers paralleled the importation of *braceros*” as farmers’ labor needs became apparent. These “wetbacks” were unprotected by the terms of the official transnational labor agreements that promised, among other things, U.S. underwriting of Mexican travel expenses, institution of a defined minimum wage, and just and equitable treatment of workers, determinable by Mexican government inspections on the U.S. side of the border.<sup>33</sup> Although not initially, *braceros* had the support of their government’s negotiators, possessed official sanction, and supposedly benefited from Mexican

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<sup>32</sup> Gutiérrez, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Estrada and others, 48.

oversight of the program. Illegal workers, however, were left without a voice to protect them from common discrimination and exploitation in Texas.

Because Texas was excluded from the official Bracero Program throughout most of the 1940s, the “wetback” situation left Mexican Americans in Texas particularly vulnerable. Foreign labor during the Texas *bracero* moratorium was “wetback labor.” During this time then, all Hispanic agricultural laborers in the Valley (and Texas in general) were either “wetbacks,” non-*bracero* legal immigrants, or Hispanic U.S. citizens who were working under discriminatory conditions Mexico deemed unfit for their own *bracero* contractors. The United States and Mexico eventually negotiated terms in 1949 for the official inclusion of Texas into the Bracero Program. The Mexicans won a major concession when the U.S. government agreed to negotiate all contracts rather than allow private employers to manage them.<sup>34</sup> In exchange, the Mexican negotiators agreed that all areas of omission from the program would be determined bilaterally.<sup>35</sup> When legal agricultural workers from Mexico began to arrive, they joined “wetbacks” in the fields. The result was that white farmers may have solved some of their labor issues in the wake of World War II, but the influx of foreign laborers undermined the goals of Mexican Americans for greater equality.

Mexican Americans did achieve some legal victories during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Longtime leader in “Mexican” desegregation efforts, LULAC successfully led the charge for an airtight judicial decision forcing the end to *de jure* grade school

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<sup>34</sup> García y Griego, 52.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

segregation of Hispanics in the 1948 district court ruling on *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District*. This case eliminated the *legal* basis for the separation of Hispanic and Anglo schoolchildren, but segregation persisted. The Texas State Department of Education “recognized the illegality of segregation, but it asserted the right of local districts to handle the complaints and grievances of local citizens alleging discriminatory treatment.”<sup>36</sup> In another case, *Hernández v. The State of Texas*, a laborer named Pete Hernández stood accused of murdering another Hispanic in Jackson County. A white jury found Hernández guilty and sentenced him to life in prison in 1951.<sup>37</sup> G.I. Forum and LULAC lawyers used the opportunity as a test case in a successful attempt to have all-white juries for Mexican American defendants declared unconstitutional.

Legal discrimination combined with competition from Mexicans to dilute the status of Mexican Americans in the Valley. LULAC denounced the contracting of *braceros* and tolerance of “wetbacks” in Texas as robbing “the Mexican American farm worker of a living wage,” and demanded that the importation of both be stopped.<sup>38</sup> The G.I. Forum decried the ongoing perception of insufficient local labor. They did not feel

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<sup>36</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., “The Struggle Against Separate and Unequal Schools: Middle Class Mexican Americans and the Desegregation Campaign in Texas, 1929-1957,” in *En Aquel Entonces: Readings in Mexican-American History*, ed. Manuel G. Gonzales and Cynthia M. Gonzales (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 214.

<sup>37</sup> Mario T. Garcia, “LULAC, Mexican American Identity, and Civil Rights,” in *Major Problems in Texas History*, ed. Sam W. Haynes and Cary D. Wintz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 391.

<sup>38</sup> Márquez, 49-50.

there was a “critical labor shortage” and believed that it was a grower excuse to justify the importation of cheap *braceros*.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, the personal ties between “Latin Americans”, *braceros*, and “wetbacks” did not reflect the contentious political climate or their diverging economic interests. A University of Texas study by sociologists Lyle Saunders and Olen Leonard discussed relationships between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in the early 1950s and found that:

There is a certain affinity [between them] which comes about partly because of the fact that they share a common language and have many other cultural traits in common and partly through the fact that they tend to be thought of as one group by the English speaking people of the Valley... In a strange land whose customs and language are much different from those of his own country, the wetback naturally establishes contacts with those most like himself. He does his shopping in the “Mexican” section of town;... he rents a shack on the back of one of the lots owned and inhabited by a Spanish-speaking family; he turns to Spanish-speaking truckers for employment; when he has money he patronizes cantinas and pool halls in the “Mexican” area; he attends social affairs and *bailes* [dances] with the Spanish-speaking people; he may go out with or even marry the daughter of Spanish-speaking citizens.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “The American G.I. Forum and the Texas State Federation of Labor Condemn Undocumented Mexican Immigration, 1953,” in *Major Problems in Mexican American History*, ed. Zaragosa Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 348-349.

The depressed position of all Hispanics in the Valley, U.S. citizen or otherwise, involved in a “certain class” of unskilled labor allowed for cultural solidarity vis-à-vis an Anglo population ready to set all “Mexicans” to work in the field for as cheaply as possible.

The failure of the 1951 citrus crop in the Rio Grande Valley due to a January freeze caused a particularly acute panic by farmers because it ruined a whole season of produce. Out of thirteen million Valley citrus trees in 1951, only five million escaped unharmed. This natural destruction caused turmoil in the Valley as farmers sought to recoup the losses in an already tense agricultural environment. The fears of Valley residents were heightened by the impending expiration of the farmer-friendly 1949 *bracero* agreements with Mexico. When the two countries met to renew the agreements, any aspect of them had the potential to be continued, changed, or eliminated.

Farmers sought their redemption in the summer cotton crop, and planting soared to record highs. Some farmers “couldn’t get the [citrus] trees out by cotton planting time, so they put rows of cotton between rows of trees.” Having experienced a record cotton harvest as recently as 1949, Valley producers knew the cash crop potential of cotton.<sup>41</sup> To ensure a recovery from the January setback, farmers in the Rio Grande Valley predicted five hundred thousand *braceros*, would be needed; according to farmers, the

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<sup>40</sup> Lyle Saunders and Olen Leonard, “Tentative Report,” (a draft version of “The Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas”), 52, Box 38, George I. Sánchez Papers, Benson Latin American Library, University of Texas at Austin, quoted in David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995), 159.

<sup>41</sup> Winston C. Fournier, “Texas Cotton: Top Producing State Expects a Record 1951 Crop, Twice ’50 Output,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 Jun 1951, p. 1.

available Mexican American labor simply could not get the job done.<sup>42</sup> All across the Valley, farmers and concerned white citizens launched an aggressive campaign to convince elected officials not to backtrack from the commitment to Texas agricultural prosperity made two years prior when Texas was finally allowed to contract *braceros*. The distressed mayor of Donna, Texas, emphasized to U.S. Senator Lyndon Johnson that as of July 1951 his city had been unable to collect the *ad valorem* tax due to the citrus freeze and that he expected the balances to be paid from the cotton crop.<sup>43</sup> Without sufficient labor, the resources his city needed to function would ostensibly rot, unharvested in the field.

Several farmers offered candid reflections on the illegal labor market, and argued that a continuation of the 1949 *bracero* provisions would be the only way the government could check the completely unregulated “wetback” laborers so familiar to Texas employers. The president of the American Agricultural Council argued that without immediate labor relief, farmers would return to the practices of illegal hiring prevalent throughout the first half of the century. Furthermore, any increases to the *bracero* pay structure would result in circumventing legal avenues of employment.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Ginners Say Huge Texas Cotton Crop Doomed without 500,000 Braceros,” *Valley Morning Star*, 25 May 1951, front page headline.

<sup>43</sup> Mayor, Donna, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 3 July 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 233, LBJ Papers.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Griffin, Mission, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 5 Apr 1952, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

The extant *bracero* regulations in 1950-1951 stipulated that the foreign contract workers received payment according to terms directly negotiated by Mexico and U.S. employers along the border. Texas agriculture and other specific industries around the country seemed unable and completely unwilling to pay the seventy five-cents per hour minimum wage that had been passed in 1949. To pacify large-scale employers of unskilled laborers, a loophole existed in the federal wage law for the payment of a “prevailing wage” rather than the actual minimum. For the “class of work” being done, farmers decided what they would pay based on the rate at which they could hire laborers of whatever variety. Local labor boards carried the burden of actually determining the wages to be paid to non-contracted workers, but the boards relied on the advice of the Anglo farmers. The “prevailing wage” determined the price of *braceros* during contract negotiations. The people who performed this “class of work” received the same wages, whether they were “wetbacks,” *braceros*, or U.S. citizens.<sup>45</sup>

Farmers enjoyed the support of local and state government and benefited from a racialized legal system tailored to their needs. Mexican Americans relied on civil rights organizations for leverage in Valley affairs. Illegal workers were essentially invisible to the machinery of government that regulated labor practices, while *braceros* at least could count on the Mexican government to negotiate on their behalf. When U.S. Representative W. R. Poage (D-Texas) and U.S. Senator Allen Ellender went to Mexico in 1951, they encountered steadfast resistance to the practice of private contracting of Mexican laborers that took place along the border. After reviewing repeated reports of

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<sup>45</sup> W.A. Mitchell, Harlingen, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 29 January 1952, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

poor conditions for *braceros*, Mexico issued an ultimatum that all further contracting of Mexican workers was to be done directly through the U.S. government in an effort to curtail abuses of the system. Employers were to pay *braceros* no less than the “prevailing wage,” though this would only obviate the most dramatic abuses.

Explicit protections for U.S. citizens arose in legislation as well. Public Law 78, passed in 1951, stipulated that for the contracting of *braceros*, a labor shortage must actually exist, that the importation would not adversely affect local labor, and that employers of *braceros* had previously attempted to hire domestic labor.<sup>46</sup> Even with these well-intentioned provisions, Mexican Americans suffered from a disconnect between the passage and implementation of legislation. Growers’ concerns over the increased regulations and “undue burden” of the 1951 legislation faded as they discovered the “protections [for labor] built into the Bracero Program came to naught in the absence of rigorous enforcement.”<sup>47</sup>

Public Law 78 momentarily laid to rest contentions over official *bracero* policy, but a comprehensive federal “wetback” policy remained at the forefront of public debate. Illegal aliens in the Valley formed a highly flexible labor supply, able to adapt to changes in the market without much risk of agitation, for, after all, “wetbacks” were in violation of the law and subject to deportation. With no significant voice of their own in 1952, illegal aliens received constant attention. Intense debate both in South Texas and in

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<sup>46</sup> Kitty Calavita, “The U.S. Government’s Unofficial Role in the Bracero Program,” in *Major Problems in Mexican American History*, ed. Zaragosa Vargas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 364-365.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 374-375.

Washington D.C. aligned labor unions, Mexican American civil rights organizations, and American nativists against agricultural interests who benefited from the highly exploitable type of labor “wetbacks” offered.

Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations in 1952, Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio highlighted the dire circumstances of Mexican Americans amidst the increasing “wetback” population. Lucey emphasized the low moral standards that prevailed in South Texas regarding treatment of agricultural workers:

Shall we permit low standards to continue in agriculture because so many of these agriculturalists are depending on children of misfortune to do the work? We believe that this is a false foundation for any segment of industry or agriculture in our country. We believe that they should not depend on children of misery and poverty to do their work. That is not a good standard<sup>48</sup>

The archbishop described the familiar trend in Texas for thousands of local Latin American families to leave the state to find a living wage. This stood in contrast to Anglo assertions of a broad labor shortage. Lucey continued:

For most of us who think in terms of a real labor shortage, we would say if you have a lot of jobs to do and you do not have enough men to do the

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<sup>48</sup> Lucey, 6.

jobs, you have a real labor shortage. But we have been able to create artificial labor shortages, created by reason of the fact that the terms of employment offered to American citizens are such that they cannot live on the wages and under the conditions of labor and so they cannot take the jobs.<sup>49</sup>

While Anglo citizens required at least seventy-five cents an hour to earn the minimum subsistence wage, the racialized agricultural workforce existed as a separate class of exploitable person, whether citizens or not. For the prevailing wage of fifty cents per day in some areas, Latin Americans could not support even the most basic American lifestyle.<sup>50</sup>

Though laws confirming the illegality of “wetbacks” existed and had been enforced periodically, the reality of a growing “illegal” population in Texas demonstrated the broad potential for manipulation of the immigration system. Illegal immigrants most actively manipulated the system by physically eluding Border Patrol officials and seeking employment. Lax and selective enforcement of immigration laws left many farms and ranches unaccountable to U.S. Immigration and Nationalization Services officers or Border Patrol agents. These agencies operated under the precept that they had the authority to permit agricultural workers to remain in the United States “whether they are

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>50</sup> John Tuttle, Seguin, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 14 July 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

here legally or not.”<sup>51</sup> In a July 1951 meeting between Lyndon Johnson, Lloyd Benson, and INS Commissioner Argyle Mackey, the Texans implored Mackey to stop aggravating agricultural interests with periodic immigration raids in their state and to devote full INS resources to processing legal *bracero* entries.<sup>52</sup> In 1951 Senator Paul Douglass of Illinois, along with other northern senators, had attempted to amend Public Law 78 by including a felony penalty and stiff fine for any person who knowingly employed a “wetback.”<sup>53</sup> Though the amendment passed the full Senate, the measure was removed by a conference committee after objections from Valley farmers who claimed egregious violations of their Fourth Amendment rights.<sup>54</sup>

Appearing before the same committee as Archbishop Lucey, G.I. Forum members Gus García and Ed Idar Jr. lamented the lack of Valley farmers’ legal accountability. “As to the argument that [Rio Grande Valley farmers] should not be penalized,” García testified, “I don’t think that is too valid when you consider the fact that people are penalized for dealings in contraband goods, and here we are dealing in contraband human

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<sup>51</sup> García y Griego, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum of Meeting between Lyndon Johnson, Lloyd Benson, and Argyle Mackey, 6 Jul 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 233, LBJ Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Calavita, 373.

<sup>54</sup> C.F. Spikes, Texas, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 6 February 1952, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

beings who are being exploited. So it seems to me that they ought to be penalized... [T]he only real answer to the problem ... (is to) get at the man who hires them.”<sup>55</sup>

Instead, Texas farmers achieved a monumental victory against the interests of Mexican Americans. When the highly discriminatory McCarran-Walter Act passed in 1952, the expanded terms for deportation of unnaturalized Hispanics left Mexican Americans in a precarious condition. The communities in which average Mexican Americans lived invariably included illegal immigrants. Furthermore, in an environment where many Anglos branded all Hispanics as simply “Mexican” in sentiment and ethnicity, Mexican Americans faced deportation unless constantly carrying proof of citizenship. The infamous “Texas Provision” to the law, engineered for Valley farmers by Texas legislators, allowed a loophole for farmers in the intensified anti-illegal immigrant legislation. While harboring, transporting, or concealing illegal immigrants were affirmed as illegal, the Texas Provision ensured that “for the purposes of this [legislation], employment... shall not be deemed to constitute harboring.”<sup>56</sup> Already the beneficiaries of customized enforcement, the Texas Provision ensured that Anglo farmers in the Magic Valley completely controlled their sources of labor.

Despite the high expectations of Mexican Americans following World War II and a few high profile legal victories, the continued Anglo dominance of the prevalent industries, legislators, and law enforcement agencies limited the effectiveness of

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<sup>55</sup> Gus García, U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. Subcommittee on Labor and Labor-Management Relations. *Migratory Labor*. 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., part 1., February-March 1952, 143-144.

<sup>56</sup> Calavita, 374.

Mexican-American activists to achieve real change in either Anglo attitudes or Mexican American living standards in the Valley. The implications of living next to a gigantic foreign labor supply, loosely regulated by law and hardly at all in practice, rendered any Mexican-American negotiating points ineffective. Though they failed to effect immediate changes, Latino activists in the early 1950s laid the foundations for future action on Mexican American civil rights in Texas.

## CHAPTER II

### **The Texas Pro Human Relations Fund Committee and the Movement for Mexican-American Unity in Texas, 1950-1952**

*“En la union está la fuerza.”*<sup>1</sup> - J.T. Canales

The end of World War II signified a major turning point in the lives of Mexican Americans in Texas. Though Latino soldiers served with distinction and held high hopes of increased social equality upon return to Texas, they found pre-war patterns of discrimination and segregation still prevalent throughout the state. In South Texas, Anglo agricultural interests secured post-war legislation allowing them to pay Mexican-American workers significantly less than minimum wage.<sup>2</sup> Latinos still found themselves segregated from Anglos at schools, movie theaters, and parks. Poll taxes and “white

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<sup>1</sup>J.T. Canales to Ed Idar, Jr , 11 March 1952, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 4, Eduardo Idar, Jr. Papers, Benson Latin American Library, University of Texas at Austin (Henceforth referred to as Idar Papers.)

<sup>2</sup>“Information Concerning Entry of Mexican Agricultural Workers to United States,” Public Law 78, 82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, Approved August 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 232, LBJ Papers.

primaries” hindered political participation. Legal justice also eluded many Mexican Americans, for they were excluded from serving on juries in many places throughout the state. Many Mexican-American veterans recognized the unfortunate return to normalcy when unsuccessfully attempting to collect the G. I. benefits promised to them by the federal government.<sup>3</sup> Motivated by their wartime experience, patriotic Mexican Americans joined existing civil rights organizations and created new ones in order to present legal and social challenges to the racist establishment in Texas.

The extant civil rights organizations, the most significant being LULAC, had ceased normal operations during the mid-1940 due to the military mobilization of its member base.<sup>4</sup> Since several “Latin American” advocacy groups combined to form LULAC in 1929, the organization had served as the primary voice for Latino U.S. citizens in the state. Following World War II, a flurry of additional nationwide Mexican-American Organizations debuted. LULAC had focused on a conservative plan of cultural assimilation into mainstream America for Latinos and functioned as a macro-level organization with general goals for the betterment of Mexican Americans as an ethnic minority. The newer organizations usually held more specific objectives aimed at immediate direct action. Dr. Hector P. Garcia organized the American G.I. Forum in 1948 and it became the most significant Texas organization born out of World War II. Dr. Garcia initially intended to assist Mexican-American veterans in attaining their

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<sup>3</sup> Carl Allsup, *The American G.I. Forum. Origins and Evolution* (Austin, Texas: University Printing Division of the University of Texas at Austin, 1982), 33-35.

<sup>4</sup> Márquez, 39.

military benefits, but the G.I. Forum soon branched into other civil rights activity including efforts in school desegregation and the fight for fair labor practices.<sup>5</sup>

Increased politicization and organizing of Latinos encouraged Mexican American leaders, but raised concern over unification and control of “the movement” as a whole.<sup>6</sup> For older Latino activists, many veterans of World War I, the apparent fractionalization of Mexican Americans among civil rights groups reminded them of the late 1920s, prior to the formation of LULAC. LULAC co-founders such as Judge J.T. Canales, Alonso Perales, and J. Luz Saenz had endured difficult negotiations to unite Mexican-American organizations and leaders under the LULAC banner in 1929.<sup>7</sup> LULAC and its founders prescribed a program of cultural Americanization for Latinos and took a conciliatory and incremental approach when opposing Anglo discrimination. Following the rise in influence of other Mexican-American groups in the late 1940s, more conservatively oriented leaders under J.T. Canales appealed to all Mexican Americans and organizations statewide to unify under the Texas Pro Human Relations Fund Committee. This attempt at unification initially received broad support from all sectors of Mexican American leadership, but ultimately failed over irresolvable issues of strategy for opposing Anglo racism practiced by more aggressive liberal activists.

The entrenched system of discrimination and segregation practiced in Texas provided strong resistance to social reform efforts. Official recognition of the rampant

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<sup>5</sup> Allsup, 63.

<sup>6</sup> Executive Committee, Texas Pro Human Relations Fund Committee, (Organizational Pamphlet), Box 436b, J.T. Canales Papers, South Texas Archives, James C. Jernigan Library, Texas A&M University-Kingsville. (Henceforth referred to as Canales Papers.)

<sup>7</sup> García, *Mexican Americans*, 29.

prejudice against Latinos had come in the 1940s when Mexico excluded Texas from participation in the Bracero Program. Texas agricultural interests had hoped to use inexpensive labor from Mexico during the war, but were denied participation due to widespread reports of abuse of Mexican citizens. In response, Texas developed the Good Neighbor Commission to help facilitate good relations between Texas and Mexico, largely for the purpose of overturning Mexico's prohibition of *braceros* in Texas. The Good Neighbor Commission held little actual authority and it was often criticized as a "glorified tourist agency." Attempts at substantive change in the social order were not well received.

Texas Good Neighbor Commissioner Pauline Kibbe forcibly resigned her position in 1947 after releasing a report on the low wages paid to the agricultural workers of the Rio Grande Valley. Texas Lieutenant Governor Allan Shivers announced that he "doubted Mrs. Kibbe's report lied within the 'proper realm' of the commission secretary's duties."<sup>8</sup> Despite the initial reasons for the Commission's appointment, Lt. Governor Shivers "was curious to know why it was Mrs. Kibbe's business 'to meddle in the affairs of the federal and Mexican governments.'"<sup>9</sup>

Incidents such as this stressed the need for Mexican Americans to present a strong and unified front for the advancement of their cause, because any victories won would be hard fought. An influx of Mexican citizens into the lower echelons of the Texas work

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<sup>8</sup> "Shivers Flatly Denies Deal in Texas Senate to Fire Good Neighbor Official," *Austin American*, 03 September 1947, Box 214.15, Dr. Hector P. Garcia Papers, Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi. (Henceforth referred to as Garcia Papers.)

<sup>9</sup>"Shivers Charges Mrs. Kibbe Meddled in Other Affairs," *Laredo Times*, 04 September 1947, Box 214.15, Garcia Papers.

force following World War II exacerbated Anglo discrimination of Latinos as well. Though Mexican-American civil rights groups uniformly opposed both legal and illegal foreign workers at this time, the fate of Mexican Americans relied on the treatment of Latinos generally because they were all subject to discrimination and segregation.

LULAC supported filing civil rights lawsuits as a proper course of action that would challenge racist elements in the Anglo establishment, but not alienate Anglos entirely. As their goal was full inclusion into “mainstream” America, LULAC avoided categorical condemnation of their fellow citizens. Anglo racism existed as a temporary evil for LULAC, and was capable of correction through education and the democratic process.<sup>10</sup>

Upon formation of the American G.I. Forum, Dr. Hector Garcia and his organization joined LULAC in the legal fight for public desegregation. In late 1947, prominent Texas civil rights lawyer Gus García began work on *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District*, a planned lawsuit challenging the segregation of Mexican Americans in public schools. Former LULAC national president and University of Texas professor Dr. George I. Sanchez chaired the fundraising committee for the case. Hector Garcia met these two men and along with LULAC, the G.I. Forum raised the necessary funds for the case to proceed. Gus García won the suit, and the final ruling of the court

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<sup>10</sup> Márquez, 26-28.

set September 1949 as the date of compliance for desegregation of Mexican-American pupils in Texas public schools.<sup>11</sup>

While the American G.I. Forum had a modest start in securing benefits to veterans and contributing to civil rights efforts initiated by others, the organization rose significantly in power and influence during the 1948-1949 "Félix Longoria Affair." The United States Army planned to return the body of Private Félix Longoria to his family in Three Rivers, Texas after his body was recovered in Luzon, Philippines. Longoria was killed on a volunteer mission and died honorably for his country. When his family went to the funeral home in Three Rivers to make arrangements, they were told the facilities were not available to "Mexicans."<sup>12</sup>

Félix Longoria's sister-in-law worked with a girl's club sponsored by the G.I. Forum and was familiar with Dr. Garcia through her involvement in a women's auxiliary of the G.I. Forum. The Longoria family contacted Dr. Garcia and asked for assistance in securing use of the forbidden chapel in Three Rivers, or for arrangements to be made in Corpus Christi. Dr. Garcia became involved and upon confirming the refusal of service from the Three Rivers funeral home, he contacted George Groh, a reporter from the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* who publicized the incident.<sup>13</sup> The G.I. Forum mobilized their entire organization for the cause and significant publicity followed. Messages of

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<sup>11</sup> Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr., "Let All of Them Take Heed." *Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981*(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 123-125.

<sup>12</sup> Allsup, 40.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 41.

support came to the Forum from throughout the state. Dr. Garcia also wrote Senator Lyndon B. Johnson outlining the clear instance of discrimination. Senator Johnson responded with a sharp condemnation of discrimination and secured a tremendous public relations victory for the G.I. Forum. On January 11, 1949 the Senator wrote:

I deeply regret to learn that the prejudice of some individuals extends even beyond this life. I have no authority over civilian funeral homes. Nor does the federal government. However, I have today made arrangements to have Felix Longoria buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery here at Washington where the honored dead of our nation's war rest. Or, if his family prefers to have his body interred nearer his home, he can be reburied at Fort Sam Houston National Military Cemetery at San Antonio. There will be no cost. If his widow desires to have reburial in either cemetery, she should send me a collect telegram before his body is unloaded from an army transport at San Francisco, Jan. 13<sup>th</sup>. This injustice and prejudice is déplorable. I am happy to have a part seeing that this Texas hero is laid to rest with the honor and dignity his service deserves.

Lyndon B. Johnson, USS<sup>14</sup>

The interment of Pvt. Longoria at Arlington National Cemetery established the American G.I. Forum as a significant force in the Mexican-American civil rights

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<sup>14</sup>Lyndon B. Johnson to Hector P. Garcia, January 11, 1949, quoted in Carl Allsup, *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution* (Austin, Texas: University Printing Division of the University of Texas at Austin, 1982), 43.

movement and widespread publicity brought issues concerning Texas Latinos to the forefront of public debate. Although the Forum succeeded in the Longoria Affair, the methodology they employed signified a shift from the conciliatory politics of the older, more conservative LULAC founders. J. T. Canales had served in the Texas Legislature as a conservative Democrat with Senator Lyndon Johnson's father, Sam Johnson in 1919. Canales, like most of the LULAC founders, was a financially successful and politically active member of the Mexican-American upper class. Their personal stake in American society coincided well with the Anglos in the state, and the LULAC position was to increase awareness of that fact without drawing a label as ethnic extremists or rabble-rousers. As a conservative Southern Democrat, Canales opposed the liberal policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and strongly protested Lyndon Johnson's support of Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s. Writing to Lyndon Johnson in the late 1950s Canales asserted:

You're a greater man, politically speaking, than your good father; but your father was a better man than you. The late Hon. Sam Johnson, your father, *was a better Democrat* (Canales's emphasis) than you are and have been... you are quoted as saying: "I was one of President Roosevelt's (F.D.R.) favorites." This is true, but you did some things your father would not have done... When your friend F.D.R. wanted to stack the Supreme Court and this invaded the Judicial Department you supported F.D.R. ... When F.D. R. wanted to destroy the checks and balances provided by the Constitution founded by our forefathers, and you backed

him because you were his “pet”...I can tell you many other things that you have done contrary to Democratic principles, but I do not have the time and I do not want to tire you. Your father, if he were now living, would agree with me; I believe he was a true-blue Democrat; and a better man than you.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly no Mexican-American civil rights activists opposed Longoria’s burial in Washington, D.C., but the manner of resolution posed serious concerns for Canales and like-minded conservatives. In conducting the publicity campaign for the Longoria Affair, the American G.I. Forum and the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times* publicized the names of Anglos in Three Rivers who were connected with the incident, including the funeral home director and the mayor of the town. Despite overwhelming evidence, many Anglos in Three Rivers denied any discrimination had taken place.<sup>16</sup> By waging a vigorous media campaign and allying with liberal politicians, the G.I. Forum took the Mexican-American movement in Texas in a new direction that achieved a major public relations victory, but caused a relative increase in tensions between Anglos and Mexican Americans.

When LULAC initially formed, the founders imagined they had achieved a substantial measure of control over the direction of Mexican-American civil rights activity, but the post-war developments proved the LULAC monopoly had been broken. Organizationally, LULAC now competed with the popular G.I. Forum, but also with

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<sup>15</sup> J.T. Canales to Lyndon B. Johnson, 21 January 1959, Box 435, Folder 9, Canales Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Allsup, 42.

many smaller organizations such as Dr. George I. Sanchez's American Council of Spanish-Speaking People.<sup>17</sup> Ideologically, these more liberal activists and organizations challenged the status quo in Mexican-American activism, but not due to lack of indoctrination of the conservative LULAC perspectives. Dr. Hector Garcia had served as president of his local LULAC council in Corpus Christi and Dr. George I. Sanchez served as National President of LULAC from 1941-1942. The new ideas emerging from progressive Mexican-American leaders following World War II emphasized results in anti-discrimination struggles over the desire to merely fit into Anglo society.

The American G.I. Forum expanded rapidly in Texas following the Longoria Affair and the organization began to work with other like-minded activists on a variety of issues concerning Mexican Americans. In the fall of 1950 Ed Idar, Jr., Texas State Chairman of the American G.I. Forum worked under advisement of George I. Sanchez on school desegregation efforts in the city of Kyle. Members of the Kyle G.I. Forum solicited the aid of the state organization in desegregating public schools and Idar spearheaded the effort. The Kyle school board wrote to Ed Idar and claimed they "were in substantial agreement with all suggested changes, but feel that they should be made in an orderly and businesslike manner."<sup>18</sup> Dissatisfied with the lack of urgency and the condition of a successful school bond passage set by the board, Idar wrote to Sanchez asking for direction:

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<sup>17</sup> García, *Mexican Americans*, 253.

<sup>18</sup>Kyle School Board President A.A. Hale and Kyle School Board Secretary J.M. Strawn to Ed Idar, Jr., 09 November 1950, Correspondance and Subject Files, G.I. Forum –Ed Idar 1950-1952, George I. Sanchez Papers, Benson Latin American Library, University of Texas at Austin. (Henceforth referred to as Sanchez Papers.)

In view of the Kyle letter I am advising Romulo Garcia of Kyle to proceed with the (G.I. Forum) meeting tomorrow and to hold in reserve any funds collected. These can be used to cover costs of an appeal if such action is deemed necessary. I have also had the assurance of Arturo Vasquez, the Forum's executive secretary that funds from our Civil Rights fund will be made available if legal action will be required to straighten the Kyle school...I will check with you in a day or so once you have had time to think the matter over, to seek your advice on what our next step should be...Our Forum in Kyle has gained the respect of the Latin population there by its determined action on this matter. Its usefulness and influence will increase in great measure if we can conclude the matter satisfactorily to them before next September—or at any rate if we try every means possible to do so. For this reason I am recommending to Hector (Garcia) that we proceed with this matter as far as we can go.<sup>19</sup>

The model of direct and frequent action on the local level garnered grassroots support for the organization, but the objectives for greater equality of opportunity for Texas Mexican Americans still generally joined Mexican-American activists of all varieties together for a common goal.

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<sup>19</sup> Ed Idar, Jr., to George I. Sanchez, 12 November 1950, Correspondance and Subject Files, G.I. Forum –Ed Idar 1950-1952, Sanchez Papers.

As an organization focused on results, the G.I. Forum welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with any interested parties, as they had during the *Delgado* case. In the summer of 1951, J.T. Canales sent out a proclamation requesting a meeting of all Texas “Latin American” leaders to discuss issues of unification and “modern progress.”<sup>20</sup> After a preliminary organizational meeting in Austin, a large group of Mexican-American leaders gathered at the White Plaza Hotel in Corpus Christi on July 29, 1951 to select state officers and a name for what was to be an organization combining their various efforts at social reform. The group consisted of the most prominent Latinos in the state, including J.T. Canales, Professor Carlos Castañeda, Louis Wilmot, Ed Idar, Jr., and Dr. Hector P. Garcia. The most notable absence was that of liberal activist George Sanchez, who could not attend due to illness.

In calling the convention, Canales stressed putting order to the myriad directions of the Texas Mexican-American civil rights movement. He envisioned the creation of “not a new group or organization, but simply a meeting group for the already functioning groups of Latin Americans, joined for a common purpose, and dedicated to the uplifting, in every way, of Citizens of Latin American extraction of Texas.”<sup>21</sup> With such a broadly stated purpose, no one could reasonably object in principle to the motives of Canales. Enthusiasm and a spirit of unity enveloped the conference. After debating names such as “Texas Civic Foundation, Inc.” and “Latin Anglo Relations Fund Committee,” the group

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<sup>20</sup> Executive Committee, Texas Pro Human Relations Fund Committee, (Organizational Pamphlet), Box 436b, Canales Papers.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

decided upon the “Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee” as the name for themselves.<sup>22</sup>

The group selected Dr. H. N. Gonzales, J.T. Canales’s nephew, as Chairman of the State Executive Committee and Dr. Hector Garcia as First Vice-Chairman of the State Executive Committee. In turn, Dr. Garcia nominated J.T. Canales as Chairman over the convention, and Canales was unanimously approved.<sup>23</sup> Canales asked that Gus Garcia, the victorious attorney from the *Delgado* case to give the opening address. The eloquent speech outlined the sentiments of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee organizers:

We, the so-called Latin-Americans, or Mexican-Americans, or Texas-Mexicans- take your choice as to terms because it really does not matter- I say we are here now because we were here first. We have nowhere else to go, and regardless of the wishes on the part of some of our fellow citizens, here we shall remain. Since the birth rate has no respect for the desires of a finicky few, you can expect us to be here in increasingly greater numbers as the years roll by...Specifically, the problem of Anglo-Latin relations in Texas can be reduced to its lowest denominator- if at all- on the basis of better educational and job opportunities for the minority- and of a more understanding and less unbending attitude on the part of the majority...Let

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<sup>22</sup>“Minutes of the Latin American State Convention Held at the White Plaza Hotel, Corpus Christi, Texas, on Sunday, July 29, 1951,” 7, Box 436b, Canales Papers.

<sup>23</sup> “Minutes of the Latin American State Convention Held at the White Plaza Hotel, Corpus Christi, Texas, on Sunday, July 29, 1951,” 5, Box 436b, Canales Papers.

there be no mistake about this: we are not here to form a new organization. If anything, we have too many organizations already-many of whose leaders have grown indolent and sedentary- who assume stuffy poses and bask in the glory of lofty title, while the world around their ivory towers is on fire... I believe that it is high time you and I assumed our full responsibility and that, working together unselfishly in a spirit of harmony and mutual respect, we raise our fellow men, and ourselves, to the position to which we are entitled in a truly democratic society.<sup>24</sup>

Immediately following the convention at the White Plaza Hotel, Judge Canales and the Executive Committee of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund publicized their organization throughout the state. In the initial statement of the Fund to the state's "Latin-American component" the Executive Committee outlined the three purposes agreed on at the convention:

- I. To support and promote to the extent of its ability, all efforts to bring about a better understanding between the citizens and residents of Latin and Anglo-American descent
- II. To aid and promote any movement which has for its purposes the improvement of the social, economic, educational or political welfare of citizens and residents of Mexican descent.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 11-16.

III. To render financial aid to any organization or group of citizens for the defense and protection of the Constitutional rights of all American Citizens.<sup>25</sup>

Canales urged Latinos throughout Texas to unite under the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund and to “face the crisis” and “confusion” in the Mexican-American community and to take necessary measures to end the “chaos.”<sup>26</sup>

The leaders of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund set out to promote their organization with a series of meeting around the state. At one such meeting at the White Kitchen in Brownsville, J.T. Canales, H.N. Gonzales, Hector Garcia, and Gus García addressed about thirty “Latin Americans.” The group consisted of “city and navigation district commissioners, doctors, lawyers, businessmen, (and) ranchers.” Gus García emphasized many of the same points he had in the introductory address before the convention at the White Plaza hotel and the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund members imparted their aims and purpose to the group.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the exuberant start of J.T. Canales’s brain-child organization in the summer of 1951, the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund began to fall apart by the end of that year. In large part, the “chaos” feared by Canales was the operation of Mexican-

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<sup>25</sup> Executive Committee, Texas Pro Human Relations Fund Committee, (Organizational Pamphlet), Box 436b, Canales Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Texas-Americans Urged to Stand Up and Fight For Civil Rights Due Them,” Newspaper Clipping, Box 436b, Canales Papers.

American civil rights activists outside the conservative *modus operandi* he helped establish with LULAC. Certainly nothing in the aims and purposes of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund spoke to the methodologies to be employed by the groups the Fund oversaw. Likewise, there was no official definition of the “chaos,” what constituted it, nor how the group planned to alleviate it, beyond vague assurances of “unity.” For any such group to prove effective, the ideals held must be realized in the implementation of actual problem solving. For the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund, the core agreements were in rhetoric and the general acknowledgement of discrimination against Latinos.

Prior to the organization of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund, the G.I. Forum took an increased interest in the affairs of working-class agricultural laborers, overwhelmingly Latinos, in South Texas. Hector Garcia himself had migrated to the United States and saw firsthand the low standard of living for Latino workers along the border. Following Garcia’s service as a field doctor in World War II, he treated many Mexican American and Mexican agricultural workers in his Corpus Christi clinic.<sup>28</sup> Dr. Garcia carried his ideas on the issue to the national stage in August, 1950 when he testified before President Harry Truman’s Commission on Migratory Labor. The Commission studied the effects of foreign migrant labor on the Mexican-American population and made recommendations to congress on extension of the Bracero Program. Speaking on the detrimental effect of inexpensive foreign labor in physically displacing domestic Mexican-American workers, Garcia asked, “Would 30,000 Americans migrate

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<sup>28</sup> Allsup, 105.

out of this area if they did not have to? Would they expose their children to sickness and death if they did not have to? Would they leave their homes and schools to migrate to uncertainty if they could make a living at home?”<sup>29</sup>

LULAC, in contrast, traditionally focused on creating opportunities for the middle class, especially through a strict program of cultural Americanization. The LULAC founders largely had access to Anglo education and many received organizational training from the United States military in World War I.<sup>30</sup> With limited resources and an ideology emphasizing capitalism, democracy, and progress, LULAC activists placed a relatively low priority on the plight of the mostly unAmericanized Mexican Americans who worked on South Texas farms.

Mexican Americans picking fruit, vegetables, and cotton in the Rio Grande Valley faced difficult living in the late 1940s and early 1950s. When then Good Neighbor Commissioner Pauline Kibbe issued her report on Valley Agricultural labor in 1947, she claimed that the prevailing wage laborers earned 25 cents per hour, which was 50 cents lower than the national minimum wage. Valley Farmers replied that she was misinformed; the prevailing wage was actually 20 cents per hour.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>“Statement on Health and Welfare Condition Among the Underprivileged Migrant Workers of Texas”, for President’s Commission on Migratory Labor by Dr. Hector P. Garcia, 01 August 1950, quoted in Carl Allsup, *The American G I Forum Origins and Evolution* (Austin, Texas: University Printing Division of the University of Texas at Austin, 1982), 106.

<sup>30</sup> Craig A. Kaplowitz, *LULAC. Mexican Americans and National Policy* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>31</sup> “Kibbe Answered by Claim 25 Cents not Prevailing Wage,” *Austin American*, 05 September 1947, Box 214.15, Garcia Papers

In addition to the “official” reports on Valley labor made by government officials such as Kibbe, academic researchers began to take interest in the labor crisis that had developed since World War II. Sociologists Olin Leonard from Vanderbilt University and Lyle Saunders from the University of New Mexico released a study titled “The Wetback in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas” in 1951. The report was published by the University of Texas at Austin and faculty member George I. Sanchez supervised the project. Like previous studies, the “Wetback Report” elaborated on the poor conditions in which Valley agricultural workers lived. The report initiated controversy, however, due to intense criticism of Anglo discrimination in South Texas. Leonard and Saunders used anonymous interviews with prominent Anglos in the Valley to emphasize their point.<sup>32</sup> The anonymous interviews contained openly racist statements about Latinos that elicited an emotional reaction.

The aggressive techniques of Leonard and Saunders immediately set some Mexican-American leaders to work in an effort to condemn the “Wetback Report.” The content of the interviews certainly disturbed critics of the report, but the open condemnation of the Valley Anglo population in general conflicted with the fundamental principles of the LULAC generation. Alonso Perales wrote to Hector Garcia in December 1951:

I see by the local press that you are having a State Convention in Edinburg tomorrow. I sincerely hope that your Organization will continue to press

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<sup>32</sup> J.T. Canales to Ed Idar, Jr., 18 January 1952, Box 436b, Canales Papers.

for the names of the individuals who insulted our people on pages 65 to 88 in the pamphlet entitled : THE WETBACK IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY OF TEXAS. Don't give up under any circumstances. Keep up the struggle until you get the names of the offenders. I wrote to Dr. George I. Sanchez requesting the names, but he declined to give them...I sincerely hope also that your organization will not, under any circumstances, give anyone a clean bill or OK in connection with the preparation and publication of said pamphlet. To do so would amount to placing the stamp of approval upon the utterances of those who stated that.. . all Mexicans have syphilis, lice, and are stupid and cowards. Sanchez never should have approved the pamphlet much less made possible its publication..."<sup>33</sup>

George Sanchez, who despite being invited, had never participated in a function of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee, increasingly came under attack for his role in the "Wetback Report." Criticism of Sanchez increased when he openly defended both the substance and methodology of the study. Amidst the controversy, Texas State Chairman of the G.I. Forum Ed Idar, Jr., wrote to Sanchez, asking him to clarify the contention from his perspective. Sanchez responded to his detractors with a vigorous defense:

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<sup>33</sup>Alonso Perales to Hector P. Garcia, 06 December 1951, Box 436a, Canales Papers.

The question the critics raise about those four pages are : (1) Are the statements attributed to (the anonymous Anglos) true reproductions of interviews with those men? (2) Should those anonymous opinions be publicized...As to the first of these questions: emphatically “yes!”...These statements were in formal interviews, to two highly trained and widely experienced sociologists...As to the second of the questions: it is difficult to answer this question to the satisfaction of laymen; that is , to the satisfaction of those unfamiliar with what is common procedure in sociological research...before a malady can be cured it must be identified- whether that malady be a disease, ignorance, or prejudice...The facts must be faced *for our own good*.<sup>34</sup>

Gus García, a liberal reformer who straddled both organizations, supported the academic perspective on the issue taken by the report and wrote to LULAC co-founder Alonzo Perales expressing his views:

I do not agree with you when you say that is cowardly because the authors do not give a source of quotes. If you will look into the ethics of social researchers you will learn that they, like us lawyers, have certain restrictions placed upon divulging information as to sources of material... I know you do not like George Sanchez because you classify him as an

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<sup>34</sup> George I. Sanchez to Ed Idar, Jr., 18 January 1952, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 4, Idar Papers.

atheist. You might as well put me in the category of a non-Christian since I am not eligible to partake of the Sacraments...<sup>35</sup>

Fault lines within the Texas Mexican American community began to divide more conservative from more liberal-minded reformers. Organizations and chapters of Mexican Americans around the state faced a difficult decision when deciding to endorse or condemn the report. LULAC, prodded by its conservative founders, rejected the study while the American G.I. Forum of Texas endorsed the entire report. When local chapters questioned or strayed from the official position of the state organizations in regards to the “Wetback Report,” they were quickly castigated, as in the case of the dissident McAllen G.I. Forum in January, 1952.<sup>36</sup> The controversy over the tactical soundness of the report threatened the future of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee and its mission of unity for Mexican American activists. Both J.T. Canales and Hector Garcia pled for a calm and measured debate that would not be divisive. Hector Garcia initially viewed the debate as a personal dispute between George Sanchez and Alonso Perales, but the implications of the “Wetback Report” proved more severe.<sup>37</sup>

Hector Garcia had offered support of Sanchez and the “Wetback Report” in a December, 1951 letter to the editor of *La Prensa* newspaper, while J.T. Canales consistently opposed the report’s methodology. Despite their difference of opinion, both

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<sup>35</sup>Gus García to Alonso Perales, 06 December 1951, Box 214, Folder 15, Canales Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Ed Idar, Jr. to Trinidad Gonzales, 12 January 1952, Box 214, Folder 15, Garcia Papers.

<sup>37</sup> Hector Garcia to the Editor of *La Prensa*, 13 December 1951, Box 214, Folder 15, Garcia Papers.

leaders attempted to follow through on their obligations to the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee until an ad hoc convention in Mission, Texas further escalated hostilities. Conservative Mexican Americans in the Valley, including Alonso Perales and J. Luz Saenz met at Mission on March 9, 1952 and passed a harsh resolution that was publicized throughout the state in both Spanish and English.

...BE IT RESOLVED by the Mexican people of the Lower Rio Grande Valley as well as of other sections of the State, in general convention assembled in the City of Mission...FIRST: that (Olen Leonard, Lyle Saunders, and George Sanchez) as well as the University of Texas be and they are hereby publicly condemned by the Latin American citizenry of the Lower Rio Grande Valley...SECONDLY: That all individuals and organizations who have gone on record as approving and praising the publication of said insults to the Mexican people of the Lower Rio Grande Valley generally be and are likewise hereby condemned...<sup>38</sup>

J. T. Canales had preached unity and calm for months, but he played an active role in designing the harsh condemnations of other Mexican-American leaders when he showed up at Mission. Alonzo Perales wrote to Canales, "Those guys have it coming. You gave them a good blasting at Mission and I congratulate you, Prof. Saenz, Mr. De la Paz and all others who helped. You all did a grand job indeed."<sup>39</sup> The desire for pan-

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<sup>38</sup>J. Luz Saenz and Santos De La Paz, "Draft of Resolution Adopted by Leaders of the Latin American Citizenry of the Rio Grande Valley", Box 215, Folder 4, Garcia Papers.

Latino unity in Texas all but disappeared among the conservative LULAC founders. These men would not put ethnic solidarity above their political and social ideologies. LULAC co-founder J. Luz Saenz wrote to J.T. Canales in early April, 1952, “Yes, indeed, echoes and re-echoes are still resounding over there in the north, east, and west about our convention at Mission...why are we to invite everybody, including *bolsheviks* who do not approve our doings to our meetings when we are still in an effervescence [sic] state? I think it is our duty to consolidate our lines first and then attack or resist outside attacks.”<sup>40</sup>

Soon after the release of the Mission resolution it became clear several influential members of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee were leaving the group. Gus García and Ed Idar, Jr. had worked with George Sanchez in the American Council of Spanish Speaking People.<sup>41</sup> They, Hector Garcia, and the American G.I. Forum had been publicly attacked in the Mission resolution. J.T. Canales and other prominent Texas Pro-Human Relations Committee Fund members had orchestrated the condemnations in Mission, but claimed nothing more than a desire for unity. With no productive discussion on resolving the debates, it became clear within weeks that the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund would dissolve. Hector Garcia, Gus García, Ed Idar, Jr., and J.T. Canales

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<sup>39</sup>Alonso Perales to J.T. Canales, 29 March 1952, Box 436a, Canales Papers.

<sup>40</sup>J. Luz Saenz to J.T. Canales, 02 April 1952, Box 436a, Canales Papers.

<sup>41</sup>George I. Sanchez, “Membership Letter”, American Council of Spanish Speaking People, Box 436b, Canales Papers.

himself had all left the Fund by the spring of 1952.<sup>42</sup> With no effective mechanisms for problem solving, the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee failed to achieve the aims which were set out in their opening convention at the White Plaza Hotel in Corpus Christi. Although originally intended to promote unity, the organization essentially functioned as an attempt of the older generation of Mexican Americans who founded LULAC to rein in younger activists who had advocated more liberal strategies for success.

Controversy over the “Wetback in the lower Rio Grande Valley” ostensibly centered on the use of anonymous quotes and the “insults” printed about people of “Latin-American extraction” in South Texas. The divide among Mexican-American leaders in the early 1950s though, ran along strict lines of social and economic class interest. As successful businessmen from the middle and upper classes who had worked towards cultural assimilation with Anglos for over twenty years, the conservative LULACers identified more with the Anglo establishment than with working-class agricultural labor. Despite many recently released reports on the reprehensible conditions for Latino laborers in the Valley, J.T. Canales sympathized with Anglo farmers. In a letter to State Senator Rogers Kelley, Canales addressed Anglo concerns over the “Wetback Report.” “It was inspired by Dr. George I. Sanchez of the University of Texas. He is a native of New Mexico and he has an extreme left psychology...I personally told Dr. Sanchez that his investigation and cases that he cited were misleading; that for every case of injustice and mistreatment of our Latin Americans by Anglo Americans in the

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<sup>42</sup>J.T. Canales to H.N. Gonzales, 21 March 1952, Box 436a, Canales Papers.; Alonso Perales to J.T. Canales, 11 December 1951, Box 436a, Canales Papers.

Valley, I would mention ten cases where Anglo Americans have been both kind and generous to the Latin American laborers.”<sup>43</sup>

The established Mexican Americans in the Valley who organized against the “Wetback Report” at the Mission convention had little to gain from supporting working-class Latinos. Indeed, they had much to lose in the way of social standing amongst their Anglo peers in the middle and upper-class ranks of mainstream American society. Clashing methodologies as well as divisive class politics ensured that the spirit of unity emphasized by the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee was short lived. The desires of these few Mexican Americans to maintain their level of social and economic progress in the early 1950s prohibited the formation of a unified Mexican-American movement.

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<sup>43</sup>J.T. Canales to Rogers Kelley, 17 November 1951, 436a, Canales Papers.

## CHAPTER III

### LULAC, The American G.I. Forum, and the Politics of Trans-Ethnic Alliances

“Ill fares the land, to hastening ill a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay.”

-Oliver Goldsmith<sup>1</sup>

By the end of World War II, a relative boom in opportunities for class mobility among Texas Mexican Americans confounded perceptions of a strict ethnically focused impetus for social activism. Accelerated Americanization and manifestation of middle-class expectations among many Mexican Americans challenged prevailing social expectations. Seizing upon the aperture in U.S. society opened by the war, overwhelmingly working-class Mexican American veterans encountered class conflict with elite and established middle-class Latinos in addition to Anglos. Latino U.S. workers also casually crossed lines of ethnicity while struggling to secure economic salience, in forging alliances with similarly interested Anglos. Mexican-American elites likewise collaborated with Anglo elites to pursue the interests of their economic class.

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<sup>1</sup>R.N. Jones to Harry Truman and Lyndon Baines Johnson, Washington, D.C., 12 July 1951, Senate Papers 1949-1961, Box 233, LBJ Papers

Socioeconomic class divisions among Texas Latinos were nothing new. Speaking to class divisions among Tejanos, former G.I. Forum Texas State Chairman Ed Idar Jr. described the Mexican-American elites he encountered during his tenure in the organization:

Well, in South Texas...take my own home county, Webb County. We always had people there that had inherited land... they had oil in their land, they had cattle, what have you...in fact they worked (Mexican-American) laborers, paid them whatever they could, as little as they could. It was the old caste system in a way, you could say. We didn't (always) have social discrimination, but we had economic discrimination. The wealthy kind of looked down their nose at the poor people. It was part of the culture. I mean, you go to Mexico you find the same thing over there, or at least you did... It was inherited from the Spaniards you might say, the whole idea that those at the top ran the show and were not concerned with the fortunes of the ones that had to work hard to make a living.<sup>2</sup>

The economic concerns of these large Tejano landowners differed dramatically from average Mexican Americans, and certainly undermined the abstract concept of ethnic solidarity. As capitalist agricultural producers, these landed elites, or *patrones*, sought to maximize profits and gain favorable political influence to secure their positions.

According to Ignacio García, "... these *patrones* needed alliances with Anglo-American

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<sup>2</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., interview by Jeff Felts, *Justice for my People*, (Corpus Christi, Texas: South Texas Public Broadcasting Systems, INC, 2007) < [http://www.justiceformypeople.org/interview\\_idar.html](http://www.justiceformypeople.org/interview_idar.html) > (20 November 2007).

bosses, who in turn were allied with state politicians, such as the governor or even the U.S. senators.”<sup>3</sup> This established order ensured more effective access to power for upper-class Mexican Americans than those without requisite financial holdings.

The inception of the League of United Latin American citizens in 1929 brought together “Latin Americans” from the upper and middle classes. Already salient in mainstream Anglo society, these Mexican Americans supported cultural Americanization for all U.S. Latinos and legal challenges to ethnically based discrimination. LULAC envisioned a process of incremental change in American society that would slowly uplift Mexican Americans while avoiding antagonism of elite Anglo allies who tolerated Latino capitalists.<sup>4</sup>

By the end of World War II, the dominance of elite “Latin Americans” in the Texas Mexican-American movement began to wane. *Patrones* and successful middle-class Mexican Americans found social viability through their economic class and willingness to accommodate Anglos. This “accommodation” specifically refers to the tendency to accept a measure of Anglo discrimination towards the working class in exchange for social inclusion of elite Latinos by those same Anglos. Prevailing social arrangements severely limited the ability of working-class Mexican Americans to gain social traction for class-based reform until the war enabled a fundamental renegotiation of worker’s patriotic identity. Julie Leininger Pycior describes the significance of average Mexican Americans as they participated in the war effort:

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<sup>3</sup>Ignacio M. García, *Hector P. García In Relentless Pursuit of Justice* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002), 141.

<sup>4</sup>Ignacio M. García, 141.

Unlike LULACers, they did not have to emphasize their knowledge of English and their professional status in order to prove their U.S. citizenship to skeptical Anglos. No matter how poor or dark-skinned, a veteran had the best possible U.S. pedigree. “We were Americans, not ‘spics’ or ‘greasers’,” [G.I. Forum founder] Hector García recalled, “because when you fight for your country in a World War, against an alien philosophy, fascism, you are an American and proud to be in America.”<sup>5</sup>

The American G.I. Forum, founded in 1948, embodied the hopes of working-class Mexican Americans who had new leverage in their quest for social justice. The organization didn’t emphasize the strict program of Americanization or Anglo accommodation that LULAC did, but in many ways LULAC and the G.I. Forum collaborated. Mexican Americans uniformly opposed segregation as it could affect Latinos regardless of economic class. Both organizations supported legal challenges to segregation by jointly funding court cases such as *Delgado v Bastrop ISD* (1948) and *Hernández v Texas* (1954).

The Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund discussed in the last chapter crumbled when the G.I. Forum began to expand beyond its initial goals of supporting veteran’s interests specifically. J.T. Canales in particular faced agonizing decisions. He was a descendant of General Juan Cortina and his family had been given the *Espiritu Santo* land grant in South Texas by Spain in the late eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Canales earned a law

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<sup>5</sup>Julie Leininger Pycior, *LBJ and Mexican Americans* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Espiritu Santo Land Titles*, Box 432c, Folders 16, 17, 21, 22, Canales Papers.

degree from the University of Michigan and served in the Texas Legislature with Lyndon Johnson's father.<sup>7</sup> As an elite landholding "Latin American" he had many allies among upper-class Anglos. Canales's friend James Hart, the Chancellor of the University of Texas expressed the overwhelming sentiment of Texas Anglos when he wrote to Canales in March, 1952, "The 'Wetback' pamphlet has caused me great concern and distress. In many respects it is a scholarly report on a matter of considerable importance to the people of Texas, but the beneficial effect of the pamphlet is, in my opinion, practically destroyed by the very unwise inclusion of anonymous statements reflecting upon Latin Americans. On other occasions, I have expressed unequivocally my deep regret that the statements were included in the pamphlet."<sup>8</sup>

Though the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund had proven ineffective, Mexican Americans across the spectrum recognized J.T. Canales as a central figure among organized "Latin Americans." Writing to Canales amidst the controversy that ended up folding the Fund, Ed Idar Jr. of the G.I. Forum wrote:

Our organization respects your friendship for the GI's. We look to you as the principle leader [of the "Latin-American" movement.] ... This respect is accorded to you because in the many years you have been at the forefront you have proven to be above petty bickering and carping and above involvement in personalities... The young leadership that is coming forth will always look to you as an example worthy of duplicating and

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<sup>7</sup>J.T. Canales to Lyndon B. Johnson, 21 January 1959, Box 435, Folder 9, Canales Papers.

<sup>8</sup>James Hart to J.T. Canales, 19 March 1952, Box 436b, Folder 34.020a, Canales Papers.

above all we hope to learn the lesson of not bickering among ourselves and thus making a laughing stock of ourselves in the eyes of the people who would continue to hold us down.<sup>9</sup>

The G.I. Forum continued to embrace the cause of Mexican American workers by exposing racist sentiments and unjust labor conditions. In 1953 the Forum partnered with the Texas State Federation of Labor, and American Federation of Labor organization, to produce an extended and approachable version of the academic report on Rio Grande Valley labor by Saunders and Leonard. They titled the publication “What Price Wetbacks.” The first page of the pamphlet explained why the study took place, saying, “This report has two goals: To re-emphasize the importance of the wetback problem and to refute those who contend that the stories about wetback wages and housing and health and exploitation are untrue.”<sup>10</sup> For working-class Mexican Americans, the allowance of “wetback” exploitation underlie their own economic problems as they were replaced by cheaper illegal labor on the farms of South Texas.

The Forum’s alliance with working-class Anglos, particularly through labor unions provided funding for publications, poll tax drives, and publicity campaigns. For “What Price Wetbacks?” the Texas State Federation of Labor provided eight thousand dollars in publishing costs, ensuring the project’s completion.<sup>11</sup> The problems of both

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<sup>9</sup>Ed Idar, Jr. to J.T. Canales, 15 January 1952, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 4, Idar Papers.

<sup>10</sup>“What Price Wetbacks,” Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 6, Idar Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Allsup, 108.

Anglo and Mexican-American workers coincided, specifically in relation to inexpensive Mexican labor. Ed Idar Jr. explained the situation that forged the alliance:

Illegal immigration along the Mexican border was important for the reason that most of the people who came over were agricultural workers. In the Valley, they grew a lot of cotton and they would come on over here and pick cotton and take jobs away from our own people that were either legal immigrants already well-documented and everything or our citizens. As a result of that, our own people had to migrate away from South Texas and go up north to pick cotton, follow agricultural crops of different kinds. And the wetback, or the illegal alien, took their place in the cotton fields around the Valley and so forth. They were paid anywhere from 15 to 20 cents an hour, and our people couldn't live for that kind of money...Now, the AFL-CIO were concerned because, obviously a lot of the illegals also managed to get into the urban areas in San Antonio and other cities and would compete for carpentry plumbing or other vocational trades. They would work their way in there and they would lower the wages, and the unions were, of course, concerned with that.<sup>12</sup>

The G.I. Forum did not hesitate to involve themselves with labor unions even though the organizations were unpopular with most Anglos in the state. The prevailing anticommunist sentiment of the Cold War was unsympathetic to organizing the “proletariat.” Tensions over “What Price Wetback” and labor union alliances generally

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<sup>12</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., *Justice for my People*

pitted the leadership of the more conservative LULAC organization against the G.I. Forum at this time, but there are significant exceptions to this pattern. The G.I. Forum lost traction in the Rio Grande Valley itself over the “wetback” affair when the local Forum in McAllen defected from the organizational endorsement of “What Price Wetback” in 1952. The McAllen Forum was led by a renegade state officer of the Texas G.I. Forum, Luis Alvarez. Though with the Forumeers in name, this group joined the ranks of more conservative “Latin Americans” in the Valley. Alvarez and his followers began endorsing the views of LULAC founders Alonso Perales and J. Luz Saenz, who criticized of the statewide G.I. Forum’s programs.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the difficulties in embracing working-class issues, some in LULAC were willing to take up the cause. In January 1952 some LULACers at a regional conference in Galveston followed the lead of the G.I. Forum and unanimously approved a resolution endorsing the original “wetback” report by Saunders and Leonard.<sup>14</sup> Certainly embarrassing for the leadership both factions, the undependable reactions of their members underscored the dynamic relationships in the Mexican-American community. Gus García, the most prominent Mexican-American civil rights lawyer of the time, straddled both organizations as both funded his legal efforts. Amidst the heated controversy, he resigned his official positions with the G.I. Forum in a telegram to Dr. Hector Garcia:

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<sup>13</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., to A.H. Cardenas, 28 April 1953, Box 215, Folder 4, Garcia Papers.

<sup>14</sup>Ed Idar to J.T. Canales, 28 January 1952, Box 436a, Folder A1990-34.23, Canales Papers.

EFFECTIVE MARCH 1<sup>ST</sup> RESIGNING COUNSEL AND DIRECTOR  
REGRET ACTION BUT MY FIRST RESPONSIBILITY TO FAMILY  
AND SELF – GUS GARCIA<sup>15</sup>

The situation truly challenged internal Mexican-American relationships. Neither LULAC nor the G.I. Forum managed to win a clear majority of support in the “wetback” controversy.

Though veterans in the G.I. Forum had served their country heroically, challenges to their record of patriotism continued to plague reform efforts. Continued union ties throughout the mid-1950s garnered criticism of communist sympathy and unAmericanism. Speaking to the American Federation of Labor in Corpus Christi during the summer of 1954, Ed Idar Jr. presented the G.I.’s response to their critics:

During the First and Second World Wars, our Spanish-speaking citizens did their part as well. For example, during the Second World War out of fourteen Congressional Medals of Honor awarded to Texans, six of them went to heroes with a Spanish name. In the Korean War we are proud of the fact that among the few turn-coat Americans who went over to Communism, there was not a single Spanish name...Finally, if we take the field again on a worldwide battlefield, I can predict with firm conviction that our Spanish-speaking citizens will again be at the forefront doing their part. Because of their long tradition as a freedom-loving people coupled with their great Catholic culture and heritage, the Spanish-speaking

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<sup>15</sup>Gus García to Hector P. García, 04 February 1952, Box 214, Folder 15, Garcia Papers.

citizens form one of the major bulwarks against Communism in our own State and in the Southwest.<sup>16</sup>

He framed the G.I. Forum's credentials on the records of all Mexican American veterans, not just Forum members. Likewise Idar and the Forum did not present their response to criticism organizationally, but rather as a defense of the larger Mexican-American community. At a Ft. Worth convention of the G.I. Forum, an anti-communist resolution was passed, and quickly became an often quoted defense for the organization:

RESOLVED, That this convention of the American G.I. Forum of Texas urge all officers and members of this organization to ever be alert against the menace of Communism; to fight it with all their might; and to be among the first to volunteer their blood and lives if it becomes necessary to take the field again, this time against the despicable forces of Communism marshaled by the Soviet Union and its satellites.<sup>17</sup>

Another series of incidents reignited political differences between Texas Mexican Americans in the fall of 1955. At this time Texans were required to pay a poll tax prior to voting. This practice directly affected working-class Mexican Americans who voted in low numbers. The G.I. Forum organized a poll tax drive in the Rio Grande Valley for the purpose of qualifying Latino citizens to vote who had previously been disenfranchised. Unable to support such a large operation alone, the Forum again teamed up with labor

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<sup>16</sup>Address by Ed Idar Jr. to the Texas State Federation of Labor Convention, AFL, Corpus Christi, Texas 22 June 1954, Box 214, Garcia Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Address by Ed Idar Jr. to the Texas State Federation of Labor Convention, AFL, Corpus Christi, Texas 22 June 1954, Box 214, Garcia Papers.

unions. The newly united American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) eagerly supported American workers and joined the poll tax drive.<sup>18</sup>

As Executive Secretary for the American G.I. Forum of Texas, Ed Idar Jr. coordinated the major organizational programs in the state. In 1955, while completing his law degree at the University of Texas, Idar appointed his friend, Valley attorney R.P. (Beto) Sanchez to coordinate the poll tax drive. Five thousand dollars were budgeted for the drive, the cost of which would be shared by both the Forum and the AFL-CIO. The drive operated under the auspices of the Rio Grande Valley Democratic Club, specifically organized for that purpose. With great personal sacrifice, including “letting his law practice go for three months,” Sanchez led a stunning program that directly challenged the conservative establishment in South Texas.<sup>19</sup>

By the time of the poll tax drive sociopolitical fault lines had already been clearly delineated among the Mexican-American leadership in the state. After the fiasco of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund Committee and the controversies over the “wetback” publications, a measured *détente* of sorts settled over LULACers and G.I. Forumeers. The organizations jointly sponsored the successful *Hernández v. Texas* case in 1954 that ensured Mexican American’s right to serve on juries, but generally they avoided close interaction. However, the politics of the poll tax drive reignited ethnic conflict.

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<sup>18</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., to Jerry R. Holleman, Executive Secretary Texas State Federation of Labor, AFL, Austin, 07 November 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

<sup>19</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., to Jerry R. Holleman, Executive Secretary Texas State Federation of Labor, AFL, Austin, 07 November 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

In December 1955 Texas State Senator Rogers Kelley addressed a LULAC chapter in his McAllen district. Kelley charged the G.I. Forum with initiating “class and racial warfare” motivated by “divisive, selfish, and misguided interests, pitting “race against race” and “group against group.”<sup>20</sup> Kelley reasserted the anticommunist sentiment permeating Anglo culture in Texas and perpetuated the popular assumptions of an emasculated and powerless Mexican-American underclass. Though LULAC and the G.I. Forum had their methodological differences, the opposition to Mexican-American voting rights opposed the basic principles of both organizations. Without condemning Senator Kelley directly, LULAC National President Oscar Laurel answered G.I. Forum protests by mentioning LULAC’s history of conducting its own poll tax drives. Though varying alliances entangled LULAC and prohibited much active support, the organization was not opposed to the G.I. Forum’s Valley initiatives in 1955.<sup>21</sup> LULAC preferred not to become embroiled in the growing hostility between the Forum and Valley Anglos. The Anglo press throughout the Rio Grande Valley condemned the poll tax drive with the same rhetoric as Senator Kelley. In a letter to the Executive Secretary of the Texas State Federation of Labor Jerry R. Holleman, who represented the AFL’s interest in the poll tax drive, Idar related some of the response from Valley media:

You have probably been given reports concerning the organization of the Rio Grande Democratic Club for the purpose of conducting a poll tax drive in the three counties of the Valley and of subsequent developments

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<sup>20</sup> H.P. Sanchez to Sen. Rogers Kelley, 12 December 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

<sup>21</sup> Allsup, 71.

thereto, including the most recent ones wherein the Valley press has launched an intensive and vicious campaign against the Forum...by virtue of the Forum's "political" affiliation with labor organizations in the poll tax drive.<sup>22</sup>

Many of the leading Anglo attorneys and powerbrokers in the Valley favored the antiunion and anticommunist policies of Texas Governor Allan Shivers. They attacked the G.I. Forum through their AFL-CIO ties as well. Writing to Ed Idar in Austin, Beto Sanchez reported on the "smear campaign" being waged by these groups as well:

The leading Shivercrats like the Edinburg law firms of Kelly, Looney, McLean & Littleton; Rankin, Kilgore, & Cherry; Hendrickson, Bates, & Hall are already rallying their forces to open up at us with the famous CIO smear, a familiar and devastating weapon in the Valley. Carl Brazil, a strong union man, liberal democrat but practiced politician, is in tears. He thinks this will kill the Forum, the last of the liberal Democrats in the Valley, and anything else that is anti-Shivers. But I had a good talk with him yesterday here in my office and in the end he walked out feeling not near as bad as when he walked in.<sup>23</sup>

Ed Idar and Beto Sanchez expected sharp resistance from conservatives in the Valley, including accusations of un-American sympathies. Even so, the leaders of the G.I. Forum's poll tax drive had to defend criticism that cut at the core of the G.I. Forum's

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<sup>22</sup>Ed Idar, Jr., to Jerry R. Holleman, Executive Secretary Texas State Federation of Labor, AFL, Austin, 07 November 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

<sup>23</sup> R.P. Sanchez to Ed Idar, Jr., 07 October 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

values. Their member's unfailingly patriotic military service to the United States was the key element of the Forum's credibility as a civil rights organization. Idar took particular offense to a series of columns in the *Valley Morning Star* newspaper that discussed the Forum and the Valley poll tax drive of 1955. This newspaper, and many others like it called themselves "freedom newspapers," and adamant opposed changes to the socioeconomic order in the Valley.<sup>24</sup> Against charges of instigating class warfare, Idar revealed his ideological underpinnings in a letter to the editor:

You print in your masthead the face that the so-called "Freedom" Newspapers believe that one truth is always consistent with another truth, and that your newspapers endeavor to be consistent with the truths expressed in such great moral guides as the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, and the Declaration of Independence. This sounds fine, but did your papers ever hear of the saying that you are your brother's keeper, that you should do unto others like you would have them do unto you, that participation in government was the cornerstone of the Jeffersonian philosophy in contrast to the discredited Hamiltonian philosophy that only the aristocratic classes were qualified to govern, ant that every man is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness including Mexicans or Latins as well as members of organized labor...p.s. Before you start hollerin' "outside influence," I might caution you that I was born and raised in South Texas, the third generation of my family to

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<sup>24</sup> Allsup, 71.

do so; that my roots in the Southwest go back prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Saxon colonists from the North.<sup>25</sup>

Idar and the Forum not only felt they had a defensible position in regards to their poll tax drive, but also a strong sense of geographical and ideological entitlement in the Valley specifically.

Perhaps the most personally offensive developments of the Rio Grande Valley poll tax campaign surrounded a parade. For Veteran's Day in 1955 the American G.I. Forum had been scheduled to march alongside the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and a National Guard Unit in McAllen for the Hidalgo County Veteran's Day observance.<sup>26</sup> First Lieutenant Doug Werner, who led the National Guard unit, withdrew his soldiers' participation in the parade due to the presence of the G.I. Forum. Werner stated that because they met with labor unions and organized a poll tax drive, the G.I. Forum was a political organization, and he did not want to "confuse a patriotic issue with a so-called political movement and that political involvement with the organizations participating with the G.I. Forum in the poll tax drive had no place with Veteran's Day Observance."<sup>27</sup> As the Executive Secretary of the American G.I. Forum of Texas, Ed Idar Jr. oversaw the tactical responses to attacks on his organization. His unyielding strategy dismissed the political critiques of antagonists while reframing the debate in

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<sup>25</sup> Ed Idar, Jr. to Editor of the Valley Morning Star, 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Henry A.J. Ramos, *The American G.I. Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Houston: Arte Público-University of Houston Press, 1998), 83.

<sup>27</sup> Statement by Ed Idar Jr., Executive Secretary, American G.I. Forum of Texas, 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

terms of civil rights. Idar refused to acknowledge a direct political debate of the Forum's activities, rather he emphasized the enfranchisement of Mexican-American workers who were free to determine their own politics. The fact that most average Mexican Americans would not support the traditional conservative Anglo politicians stood as testament to the atmosphere of political subjugation in the Valley. For conservative Anglos, Idar and Sanchez's plans were truly threatening to the political status quo, no matter how they couched the voter registration campaign. When Lt. Werner refused to march with the G.I.s, he challenged their legacy as proven soldiers-the most effective leverage the Mexican Americans had in their favor. Idar painted Werner's reaction as political and the Forum as a patriotic organization furthering the ideals of America:

Speaking for my organization, I can only say that we have come out a sad day in Texas Democracy when an organization of veterans cannot join in efforts to promote – of all things- the sale of poll taxes to citizens in an area where the record shows that the majority of the citizens have never qualified themselves to vote...Apparently Lt. Werner ignores the fact that the members of the G.I. Forum paid for the right to participate in poll tax drives with the blood, the guts, and the lives of many of their comrades left overseas. And only a warped and twisted logic can come out with the principle that National Guardsmen who are subject to pay the same price in the future must not march shoulder to shoulder with men who already have done so...The G.I. Forum makes no apologies to anyone for the

patriotism of its members...Members of the G.I. Forum will march in McAllen on Veteran's Day because they have paid for the right to do so.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the attempts by the Forum to strictly focus on citizen rights, highly politicized goals and techniques continued to influence alliances. State Representative Eligio (Kika) de la Garza, with whom the G.I. Forum sought (and expected) an alliance in dealing with the Veteran's Day parade incident, refused to participate. Many in the Forum stood by de la Garza when he ran for office, and as the only "Latin American" in the legislature, he occupied a significant symbolic role as well. After several attempts by Idar and the Forum to utilize their supposed ally's office for civil rights work, de la Garza wrote them a letter saying, "As to a statement from me concerning this controversy (Veteran's Day parade) which you explain in this letter, all I can say is that I was not involved in it in any form or manner and that I do not want to be involved in it now."<sup>29</sup>

The strong faction of more conservative, incrementalist Mexican Americans and their leaders, like de la Garza, had been resisting the political implications of the G.I. Forum's aggressive policies for several years. Regardless of their rhetoric, the Forum did aggravate class relations in Texas with advocacy of worker's rights and they did challenge the established alliances between Mexican Americans and Anglos. The Forum aggravated many older Mexican-American activists with their refusal to accept eventual

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Eligio de la Garza, II, to Ed Idar, Jr., 10 November 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

or partial progress, but in the Valley poll tax drive the G.I.s began to find important friends within the ethnic community who were willing to embrace their tactics.

In December 1955 the G.I. Forum asked United States Senator Dennis Chavez of New Mexico to come to the Rio Grande Valley and support the poll tax drive. The only Latino in the Senate, Chavez both commanded respect as a Senator and as one of the most distinguished Mexican Americans in the country. After being informed of the political situation in the area, Chavez readily agreed to participate in the Forum's campaign:

I fully agree with the drive that you boys are making to get the American citizens of Mexican descent to express their opinion on election day. I would be glad to address three of your gatherings on the border during the month of January. Voting is a duty. I happen to know that in certain areas, including Australia, it is compulsory by law. Of course qualifications must be met, including that of the payment of poll taxes if necessary. Between you and me, poll taxes as such in national elections will be a thing of the past in the not too distant future. I had a short talk with our mutual friend, Lyndon Johnson, leader of the majority in the Senate and like you a fellow Texan. He thought your program was grand and that you should carry it out. He wants you boys to register and vote. How you vote is your business, but nevertheless vote.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Senator Dennis Chavez to Ed Idar, Jr., 29 December 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

The patterns of excluding basic rights from working-class Mexican Americans were entrenched in the Valley, but average “Latin Americans” now had powerful friends invested in changing the status quo.

The Valley poll tax drive made people question what they truly believed about citizen’s rights, ethnicity, and class. For many Mexican-Americans, particularly those of the more conservative LULAC ilk, the strategies of incremental progress and Anglo accommodation conflicted with the focus on the most basic citizen’s rights advocated by the Forum. As LULAC President Oscar Laurel reiterated to the Forum, LULAC itself had conducted many poll tax drives itself. More liberal activists often accused conservative Anglos of employing a “divide and conquer” strategy among Mexican Americans by allying with the small middle and upper classes at the expense of the large working-class of “Latin Americans.” Now the G.I. Forum began to see the same success in dividing some of the traditional LULACers from tenuous conservative Anglo alliances.

The Rio Grande Valley had been a hotbed of conservative LULAC resistance to Forum efforts just a few years earlier during the controversy over the “wetback” publications. LULAC founders organized a protest convention against Forum policies at Mission in 1952 and the McAllen chapter of the G.I. Forum defected from the state organization in favor of more conservative practices in the same year. Nevertheless, the course of affairs in the Valley poll tax drive elicited such a harsh response from conservative Anglos that many solid LULACers reevaluated their position on the G.I. Forum. Prominent Houston attorney John J. Herrera served as President of LULAC

during the turbulent years of 1952 and 1953 and witnessed these incidents as well as the breakdown and collapse of the Texas Pro-Human Relations Fund that created so much animosity within the Latino community. Herrera had been instrumental in preparing briefs for both the *Delgado* and *Hernández* civil rights cases, and he certainly advocated the full exercise of such rights by the whole Mexican American community. In a letter to Ed Idar marked "CONFIDENTIAL!" Herrera elaborated on the growing rift within the LULAC leadership as well as his personal solidarity with the G.I.'s Valley campaign:

I read with interest your letter to Oscar Laurel (regarding State Senator Kelley's comments) on December 12, 1955. Of course, you have always understood my difference of opinion with the Laredo Clique of Lulac and myself, in that they have always rode along with the status quo and the so-called conservative element of Lulac...I have always maintained along with yourself and Dr. Hector Garcia that Shivers has never given our people the representation that they merit in considering us for state jobs such as the state highway patrol, the Texas rangers and all of the different state boards which carry with them both honorary and remunerative jobs...The recent American G.I. Forum poll tax drive in the Valley naturally was bound to arouse alarm among those politicians who have used the "divide and conquer" strategy among our people. Potentially, the Valley is a great source of political strength for our pole and if the G.I. Forum can cause a civic awakefulness in our people in the Valley it will

be the greatest contribution toward the liberation of our pole in the history of Texas...Personally Ed, I think all of the Hullabaloo is caused by the basic fear that the Valley Farmer-Rancher-Politico has always had of the labor unions and the possibility of a strong liaison between the Latino and the basic benefits that unionism will grant them.<sup>31</sup>

Herrera, like fellow civil rights attorney Gus García, straddled both LULAC and the G.I. Forum, but stood most firmly with the LULAC membership. The League was a well established voice for Mexican Americans, even if it was weighted towards the more elite elements. Rather than abandon LULAC or publicly crusade for the G.I. Forum exclusively, these more moderate activists sought to soften the LULAC position and bring the organizational leadership out of the conservative “clique” that had been defining the LULAC mission in terms of elite, exclusionary objectives. Furthermore, as the G.I. Forum gained more traction in their efforts, LULAC conservatives and moderates found a growing hostility among Anglos for Mexican Americans in general.

In fact, LULACers and Mexican Americans had not benefitted politically in their incrementalist strategy under Governor Shivers. With a poor record of Latino political placement and persistent discrimination, the system of alliances for upper-class Mexican Americans had not proved to be productive. In one of his frequent reports on the Valley poll tax drive, Beto Sanchez outlined the tenuous position of many more conservative Mexican Americans, “One last word- The conservatives are scared, and the Mexican-American conservatives, after the treatment they got from the conservative Anglos in the

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<sup>31</sup>John J. Herrera to Ed Idar, Jr., 21 December 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

last major campaign, are beginning to line up with us; the bastards have nowhere else to go.”<sup>32</sup>

The G.I. Forum’s role in rallying the Mexican-American vote in 1955 did not result in the immediate repeal of poll taxes or the mass-election of Mexican Americans to public office. They did, however, initiate a shift in the pattern of alliances and expectations of Mexican American leaders in Texas. Though they had exerted considerable effort, LULAC’s leaders had failed to rein in the Forum in the early 1950s. By the middle of the decade, the fiercely independent-minded G.I. Forum reformed the focus of the larger “Mexican American” movement to concentrate on the impediments to basic civil rights for average, working-class Mexican Americans. The rise of liberal and moderate reformers signaled a change in the way Mexican-American leaders conducted the business of civil rights in Texas.

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<sup>32</sup> R.P. Sanchez to Ed Idar, Jr., 07 October 1955, Activities and Organizations Box 5, Folder 1, Idar Papers.

## CONCLUSION

On October 28, 1948 Hector P. Garcia and a young union representative named James DeAnda came to San Marcos, Texas to organize a local chapter of the American G.I. Forum. A young World War II veteran named Augustin Lucio became the first treasurer of the San Marcos Forum, and along with 107 other new inductees, Lucio engaged the local political establishment to press for the rights of Mexican-American citizens in their town. He grew up sharecropping with his parents and siblings before he dropped out of school in the tenth grade and joined the military. After returning home a decorated war hero, Lucio's prospects for social and economic improvement in San Marcos were bleak. Blatant prejudice continued to relegate Mexican Americans to the bottom of the social order, and basic rights were not protected by the local authorities. While LULAC was concerned with "protecting themselves," Garcia and DeAnda promised Lucio and the others a new way of creating their own opportunities through the Forum.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Augustin Lucio, interview by author and Paul Hart, digital recording, San Marcos, Texas, 20 February 2008.

Together, Augustin Lucio and San Marcos Forumeers challenged inequitable law enforcement, school segregation, and restrictive housing practices.<sup>1</sup> “It took five or ten years for things to change for Mexican Americans here,” recalled Lucio, who became Chairman of the San Marcos Forum, “but we did change things in San Marcos.” They mobilized the local Mexican-American vote and began to elect Mexican American Sheriffs and city council members. Lucio himself served for nineteen years on the San Marcos school board.<sup>2</sup>

World War II afforded thousands of Mexican-American veterans and their families an opportunity for substantive political, social, and economic improvement. The strategy offered by LULAC encouraged acculturation that would eventually lead Mexican Americans to equality as Anglos became more comfortable around “Americanized” Latinos. The G.I. benefits available to veterans, along with the sense of social and civil entitlement they felt caused the “Mexican-American Generation” to raise expectations and reject incrementalism. This directly challenged pre-war organizational models. Elite “Latin Americans” no longer offered the loudest voices in the movement for social equality. The inability for many of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “Latin American” civil rights leaders to embrace policies advancing the specific economic interests of working-class Mexican Americans stands at the center of the ineffective strategy of Americanization they practiced. The simple expectation for average Mexican-Americans

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<sup>1</sup>Augustin Lucio to San Marcos Housing Authority, 27 February 1952, Box 214, Folder 15, Dr. Hector P. Garcia Papers, Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi.

<sup>2</sup>Augustin Lucio, interview.

to join LULAC, learn English, embrace American cultural mores, and become a contributing middle-class member of mainstream society was naive at best.

With government and agribusiness collusion to import inexpensive Mexican labor, Mexican-American workers struggled to find viable political advocates. The American G.I. Forum cemented the most significant post-war alliances for working-class Mexican Americans in Texas. Even so, younger, more aggressive Mexican American activists failed to achieve most of the goals they set for themselves in the 1950s. The federal government's exploitative Bracero Program continued until 1964. Widespread use of illegal labor has been continuous to the present. Even after significant post-war Civil Rights victories for Latinos, such as *Delgado v Bastrop ISD*, *Hernández v. Texas*, or *Brown v. Board of Education*, the prevailing discriminatory practices against Texas Mexican Americans continued.

Success mediated by entrenched prejudice left much to be desired by the even younger activists of the 1960s Chicano movement, but in the 1950s it was the American G.I. Forum that created social space for the evolution of the movement. The Forum challenged classism within the ethnic community and displaced incremental strategies of strict Americanization and Anglo accommodation. Through peaceful, yet firm and direct confrontation with entrenched conservative interests, the G.I.s dispelled notions of unAmericanism while fighting for their basic American rights. Instead of trying to demonstrate their suitability as acceptable middle-class capitalists like LULAC, the G.I.

Forum demanded rights they already were promised and deserved.

For working-class Mexican Americans to better their deplorable conditions, they had to be empowered to advocate their own interests. The G.I. Forum afforded able, yet underrepresented Mexican Americans the organizational format to leverage their patriotic military service on the local, state, and national level in the struggle for equal rights. As in the case of Augustin Lucio, the tangible benefits and focus of the Forum at this time elevated the organization above all others in regards to the advocacy for the majority of Mexican Americans, the working class. The American G.I. Forum challenged the status quo of Mexican-American leadership in Texas and initiated a shift in activist ideology that brought the movement as a whole out of a stagnant cycle of Anglo appeasement and incrementalism.

The study of socially and politically disenfranchised minorities in the United States is usually conducted with ethnicity framed as the crucial categorical element. This approach proves useful in highlighting the binary inequities in power between such groups as African Americans and Anglo Americans or between Latinos and Anglos. Periods of overwhelming racial oppression clearly opposed ethnic factions- evident in legal definitions and exclusionary social practices- allow assumptions of ethnic solidarity, ostensibly in reflection of Anglo racism. Even so, a purely ethnocentric understanding of minority civil rights struggles ignores the variegated ways different social classes-in this case Mexican Americans- imagine themselves within the whole. This thesis demonstrates the importance of considering cross-ethnic class interests in the post World

War II period in Texas.

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## VITA

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