

# **The New Civil Rights Movement: Economic Empowerment**

**By George Rodriguez**

**My** comments today are my personal thoughts based on personal experience and study. I do not pretend to speak on behalf of any political party, or agency, or group. I want only to propose some ideas that may lead to further discussion and analysis.

My talk is regarding what I view to be the evolutionary nature of the civil rights movement as it relates to Hispanic Americans, and more specifically, Mexican Americans. It is my opinion that the movement toward equality and full participation in the United States by Hispanics — Mexican Americans — is one which has undergone a series of adjustments in relation to the barriers that prevented, intentionally or not, the full participation of Hispanics in American society.

It is important that we determine certain points as a base from which we can proceed. First, it is important that we acknowledge the existence of racism, prejudice, and discrimination. Prejudice can manifest itself in many ways, and discrimination can be both active and passive. Indeed, the racism, prejudice, and discrimination that was encountered by my parents and Hispanics of past generations was different from what I and others of my generation encounter. Let me elaborate a little on this point from my own experience as a Mexican American.

My older brothers and sisters back in my home town of San Antonio remember the days when Mexican Americans were overtly discriminated against. These were days when Mexicans were denied admission to swimming pools, denied seating at restaurants, or as in the case of World War II Medal of Honor winner Felix Longoria, denied burial in "certain" cemeteries. These were days when Hispanics had a difficult time participating in the basic freedoms of American society.

**Background of Violence.** Prior to World War II, conditions had been even worse. My father, who was very involved in civil rights issues in Laredo, Texas, used to talk about the violence against Mexican Americans that was almost a normal part of life. Racial lynchings and shootings not only are part of the documented history of Texas, but also of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. I mention these points not to dwell on the negative, but to give the background for understanding the response of Mexican Americans during that period.

In 1929, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) was created as an answer to the open exclusion of Mexicans in the U.S. It stressed being American, learning English, self-determination, and defending the community against all forms of discrimination. LULAC was founded at a time when the U.S. seemed to show little tolerance for Mexicans in its political, social, or economic arenas.

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George Rodriguez is Special Assistant to Secretary Jack Kemp and Deputy Director of the Office of Small Business at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

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After World War II, a new period arrived. Mexican Americans felt more American than Mexican, but were still excluded from mainstream American society. It was during this time in the late 1940s that the American G.I. Forum was organized. This organization, and LULAC, addressed issues in the context of a post-World War II America, in which new political opportunities for Hispanics were beginning to emerge. In Texas, for example, South Texas Anglo politicians openly courted Hispanic votes, and yet, manipulated them as well.

**New Direction.** The 1960s brought a new direction for Mexican Americans. Much in the same way the civil rights movement mobilized black communities and captured the hearts and minds of black young people, the same emotion and vision stirred Chicano youths. I personally remember this period because it was part of my own experience.

The Chicano experience was necessary to validate Mexican Americans to themselves as a group. It was to Mexican Americans what “black power” or “black is beautiful” was to the black community. For all the good, or bad, that can be said about the “Chicanismo” (the Chicano experience), it was important for Hispanic Americans to feel a sense of worth and pride as individuals and as a community.

Several important things that occurred during this time affected Mexican Americans and other Hispanics profoundly. The first was the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This opened certain doors which long had been closed, offering new opportunities that older generations had only dreamt of.

The second important occurrence for those of my generation was the 1975 Voting Rights Act. With this Act, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans could more fully participate in the political process of America. The Act allowed Mexican Americans a greater degree of political self determination, and has led to the election of Hispanics to local, state, and federal offices from Hialeah, Florida, to Cotulla, Texas, and from Denver to Chicago.

In 1989, the National Association of Latino Elected Officials (NALEO) identified 3,783 Hispanic elected officials nation-wide. There are states with amazing numbers, such as New Jersey with 53, Illinois with 41, New York with 71, and Texas with over 1,600.

**Obstacles to the American Dream.** This puts Hispanics in a new position to participate in the American Dream. And although overt racism, prejudice, or discrimination have not disappeared completely, they exist now in new and more subtle forms. To confront these new obstacles, Hispanics now must focus on overcoming economic barriers to opportunity.

Economic concerns, rather than political empowerment, are the issues which confront my generation. Where sitting at the front of the bus may have been the issue to my parents, having the money to purchase a ticket for a plane ride – or buying the bus company – is the issue to my generation.

America is a capitalist democracy, and in such a society having political power must be complemented by economic power. Otherwise, Hispanics will be running the race on one leg. Hispanic communities across the country offer tremendous “purchasing power” in the economy. But what is lacking is “capital” – money, business ventures, and the economic power to ensure full participation in the 1990s and beyond.

Economic opportunity should be the new civil rights focus of Hispanics. This will require innovative thinking and leadership. While the years of struggling against political and public sector barriers have taught us how to influence city hall, we are just now learning about business and finances.

**Educating the Business Community.** Organizations such as the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Latino Business Association of Los Angeles, and the National Hispanic Corporate Council have sprouted in the past ten years, focusing on business and economic empowerment. These organizations attempt to sensitize and educate the business community to Hispanics as employees, consumers, and partners in the business sector.

As consumers, Hispanics spend billions of dollars annually on various products. Public relations firms have shown how loyal Hispanics can be to brands, and how they respond to special targeted advertising such as Spanish language ads. Telemundo and Univision are national Spanish language networks that reach into every major city in the U.S. and where every national brand name can be found advertising.

These companies have not overlooked Hispanic markets, and many have reinvested in the Hispanic community. Franchises and distributorships which are granted to Hispanics, for example, are some ways in which companies have directed profits back into the Hispanic community.

A growing number of Hispanic workers, meanwhile, are seeking positions of authority in the business community. In a world where the U.S. is forced to compete in international markets, individuals with bilingual, bicultural abilities and sensibilities are becoming highly prized assets.

Capital from public or private sources has never been available in large amounts to the Hispanic community. To combat this, banks and loan institutions increasingly should be required to cease red-lining activities. A recent study by Pan American University in Edinborough, Texas, showed that Hispanics in the low- to moderate-income brackets were extremely punctual on payments of their loans. The problem is that no one has given them the opportunity to secure loans from larger institutions, rather than from "loan sharks." There is also a need to free up small amounts of capital for aspiring entrepreneurs. Most banks and lending institutions typically do not want to handle the small loans necessary to start a business.

**Success Story.** Just as the countries behind the Iron Curtain have begun to stir, so has the Hispanic American community. Hispanics want to build their future with the political and economic tools available to all Americans. Let me share with you the success story of a friend.

Her name is Yolanda Hernandez. She works at the Department of Housing and Urban Development and she is from San Antonio. Yolanda was valedictorian of her high school back at a time when barriers to education were many and strong. Although she graduated at the head of her class, because she was Mexican American and female she was awarded a scholarship to the local junior college for only one semester. Undaunted, she did her best to inspire her family and husband, and she went on to law school.

Yolanda eventually opened her own small business, operated it by herself, and sold it to a man who had been released from prison who was trying to rehabilitate himself. He has

been successful and employs several Hispanics from the neighborhood who are working to build their own future.

Yolanda embodies the spirit of the Hispanic community. She never gave up, and is currently working on a management training internship program. Her successes will be many.

**Economic Centerpiece.** To achieve true civil rights in the 1990s Hispanics must move toward making themselves "whole" in this society. The centerpiece of this civil rights strategy is economic empowerment. Political solutions will not suffice for economic shortcomings. In the days of political exclusion, political responses were appropriate, but in today's world, those approaches and responses are not relevant. They meet with limited successes.

We, as Hispanics, as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans, must look for economic stability in our communities. We must look to solutions that bring money into our neighborhoods. We should seek to end red-lining by banks, remove bureaucracies that prevent small business development, and look for any creative way that encourages enterprise and economic development for our people.

