

THE AMERICAN OF MEXICAN DESCENT

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There are almost four million persons of Spanish-Mexican descent in southwestern United States, the vast majority of whom are citizens of this country. They began coming here from Spain and New Spain as long ago as the Sixteenth Century, and have continued to come from Mexico. Unlike such groups as the Italians, the Irish, and the Poles, the Spanish-Mexicans of the Southwest are not truly an immigrant group -- for they are in their traditional home. As an Indian, the Spanish-Mexican was here from time immemorial, and his Spanish forbears were in this region long, long before John Smith and his fellows pioneered in Virginia. In other words, historically and culturally he belongs here. That fact has been dramatically attested to by his spectacular loyalty to his country in time of war. There is no need here to document the right of the American of Mexican descent to full citizenship and to an equitable share in the good things of the American Way. There is a vast literature and voluminous records that conclusively support his right to be here and that refute any suggestions that if he doesn't like his treatment here he should go back where he came from.

Forgotten People

It should be unnecessary to have to underscore the perfectly elementary concept that we Americans of Mexican descent have the rights of Americans and that, if historical precedence is to be the criterion, our rights and needs have priority over those of other "nationalities groups". In moments of bitterness over the sad state of affairs among our people, we might well point out that we did not ask the United States to come here -- that we are, in effect, subject peoples for whose well-being the United States has a very special moral obligation, an obligation that has been most pointedly overlooked. The Indian, the Negro, the Filipino, the Puerto Rican, and all other peoples similarly situated to the Mexican-American have been the object of our national solicitude, of our sense of social and moral responsibility. Not so the Mexican-American. He has been, and he continues to be the most neglected, the least sponsored, the most orphaned major minority group in the United States. The conscience of the nation, that of our philanthropic institutions, that of our mass media of communication, that of the very public officials who owe their elections to the Mexican-American has not even barely stirred over his plight. It is wondrous, indeed, that he has not become permanently embittered and thoroughly disillusioned. His faith in ultimate justice and his hopes for the new day attest to his strength of character and to his devotion to his country.

We do not believe that it is necessary to detail here the facts of the disadvantaged state of the Mexican-American. Reference to the reports of the United States Bureau of the Census will reveal that persons of Spanish-surname in the Southwest are at the bottom of the scale on virtually every criterion measuring health, wealth, education, and welfare. Reference to other standard works and we will gladly supply extensive bibliographies, will reveal in interpretative detail what the Census reports in cold, monotonous statistics. We have in mind, for instance, the book

(The Uneducated) by Ginsberg and Bray of Columbia University. In that book the authors analyzed the facts of rejections from the draft of World War II for uneducational reasons. They found that Texas had the second highest rejection rate for non-Negroes: 62 per 1,000 (the highest was 64). A dot-map of these rejections makes the southern third of the state (where the Mexican-American population is concentrated) completely black, while the rest of the state is virtually clear. A similar study by a medical college team found that, whereas Texas had 1/20th of the national population, it contributed 1/4 of the deaths from infantile Diarrhea. Again, a dot-map showed the lower third of the state completely black and the rest clear. Not long ago it was revealed that, in Texas, the deaths per 100,000 from tuberculosis was 40 for "Anglos," 50 for Negroes, and 160 for "Latin Americans." These fantastic contrasts, these shocking facts are duplicated in years of schooling, in housing, in income, From all of these facts one can draw only a picture that is most dreary, most humiliating.

But this is not all. Come to the Capitol in Austin, Texas, and count the number of persons of Spanish-surname who have positions (and we include janitors) there. Do the same in Washington in the offices of the congressional delegations from the Southwest. Do the same for other state and federal appointments. While no one would be so foolish as to ask for proportionate representation in governmental posts for the Mexican-American, surely the current state of affairs where the Mexican-American is almost completely and systematically excluded from governmental appointments is a national scandal. And it is preposterous to suggest that this exclusion is a function of his lack of qualifications!

In San Antonio compare the wages paid to Anglos and Latins for the same services. Then remember that in the last session of the Texas Legislature a measure setting fifty cents as a minimum wage was soundly defeated! School systems still try, by devious means, to segregate "Mexicans," and it took a 1954 U.S. Supreme Court judgment to end the practice in some Texas counties of systematically excluding Americans of Mexican descent from juries. The Colorado Supreme Court has had recently to make such a ruling too. This bill of particulars could be extended on and on to pile fact upon fact documenting beyond any shadow of doubt that the American of Mexican descent has been treated very shabbily by a country to which he is intensely loyal and by governments and governmental officials that he has supported wholeheartedly.

Probably nowhere has the mistreatment of this population group been so flagrant or so devastating as in the field of labor-politics and labor-economics. We have exposed the Mexican-American, time and time again, to the most unconscionable exploitation as cheap labor. During World War I, some of us saw the cattle car trains loaded with peasants from the interior of Mexico brought to work as cheap labor in the beet fields of Colorado, in the mines of Arizona, in the cotton fields of Texas, and in the gardens of California. During World War II, we have seen the hundreds of thousands of "wetbacks" who were permitted to swarm across our southern border to earn as little as 15 cents an hour, to live in the most profound misery and to create misery for those whom they displaced. We see today, the bracero in vastly larger numbers than during the peak of the war emergency con-

tinuing to displace (at 50 cents an hour) his American citizen-cousin and to begat misery for him and for those whom the latter, in turn, displaces. Hundreds upon hundreds of persons commute daily from Mexico to the United States to take jobs that are sorely needed by American citizens who live in the extreme poverty because wages are so depressed along the border by that commuter, by the bracer, by the wetback. Nowhere in the American scene is there such an uncontrolled and inhuman exploitation of the common man. These, indeed, are forgotten people. Millions of them, strangers in their own homes. In comparison to a recital of the woes of the Mexican-American, Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath is cheerful.

Again, we do not believe that it is necessary here to elaborate upon these unfortunate circumstances or to document their existence. We will be happy to supply standard authoritative references that will give the reader the facts in detail and will convince him, if convincing he needs, that the picture has not been overdrawn in this brief statement. It is not pleasant for us to expose the misery of our people, and we prefer not to dwell over-long on the details. We feel under compulsion to make the above statement, however, so that the broad reforms that we propose very briefly below may be placed in proper context.

For a Brighter Tomorrow

1. The Mexican border must be much more stringently regulated. The perennial free-and-easy dipping into the cheap labor reservoir of Mexico is an intolerable burden on the backs of the Americans of Mexican descent. This recommendation is made without prejudice to our desire that the United States do everything possible to aid in the economic rehabilitation of the people of Mexico. It is also made without prejudice to the rights of growers, businesses, and industry in the Southwest to conduct profitable enterprises. The recommendation is made, simply, in a rationale that is based on the premise that we cannot afford to subsidize the progress of Mexico or that of our businessmen with the misery of the Americans of Mexican descent.
2. The plight of the agricultural migrant worker is a great frustrating one, whether he be Anglo, Latin, or Negro. The Mexican-American is a major victim of this unfortunate phase of our economy. Remedial action to relieve him of the consequences of migrancy and seasonal labor is an imperative. Minimum wage laws, the reinstatement of the old authority of the United States Employment Service, and many other procedures need to be scrutinized to see how this very difficult and depressing situation can be remedied.
3. The most tangible features of the easily documented misery of our people should be attached forthwith. It is not possible to give priority to the extremes of the disadvantaged circumstance of the Mexican-American. Health, certainly, ranks high on the list of priorities--infantile diarrhea, tuberculosis, mal-nutrition, . . . The conditions revealed by the statistics in this field are intolerable in an enlightened and well-to-do-society. So are those picturing the status of the aged, of the dependent, of the widowed and the orphaned. The United States Department of Health Education, and Welfare has a ringing challenge in all of these areas.

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4. That same Department has broad challenges in the field of Education. What will it do to capitalize on the Spanish language of our people as a natural cultural resource? What will it do to recruit and train our youngsters for service in foreign parts where their cultural heritage makes their competence particularly significant? Along the same lines, what will our Department of State, and other Federal agencies with programs in foreign parts, do to utilize the talents of our Spanish-speaking citizens who are professionals in various fields of endeavor? It is our contention that the cultural and human resources of the Mexican-American properly cultivated, will redound to the improvement of his people generally as well as to the success of the nation's international program.

5. In mentioning the field of Education, one cannot escape the thought that the Mexican-American child would gain greatly from well-planned federal aid to education in the states. Since, educationally, he is low man on the totem pole, the equalization of educational opportunity, on both state and national bases, would improve his educational status. We are not at all frightened by the dire predictions of "federal control." We are much more frightened by the demonstrated irresponsibility of local control in the education of our children!

6. It cannot be emphasized too much that one of the reasons for the neglect of the Mexican-American in the Southwest has been that his own leaders have not been his spokesmen. That is, decisions as to his needs have been arrived at on the basis of the opinions of individuals poorly qualified to make far-reaching judgments about the Mexican-American -- and that include non-Latin officials whom he helped to elect and some of his own people who are, at best, only incidentally concerned over the crises faced by his fellows. We believe very strongly that to understand this population group -- its needs, its hopes and aspirations, and its very sense of self -- one needs to go to the "grass roots." Those grass roots, however, include not only the common man, but they include the business and professional man who identify with the common man and seek nothing from him but everything for him. The local and state elected official rarely fills either role, and it is they who have been called on to speak for the American of Mexican descent. And they have either not known what the true score is, or it has not suited their individual ambitions to read the score correctly. We could name names, but that is not our purpose here. It is our purpose, however, to underline the fact that only the mexicanos can speak for the mexicanos -- and that it would be well to assess very carefully the claims of any individual, mexicano or otherwise, who would speak for us.

7. We could specify numerous other areas where we think the millions of Americans of Mexican descent warrant consideration, areas in which claims for them could be made very legitimately and in which opportunities that they present for the enhancement of national prestige could be easily substantiated. We will refrain from any such elaboration, and limit ourselves to the perfectly simple statement that, were our nation to think only in terms of enlightened self-interest, it would seek the well-being of her citizens of Mexican descent because that would be intelligent, positive, international good politics. We know that our nation does not restrict its good works to such mean political advantage; but isn't it fine that human decency at home and international good politics go hand in hand as we face the problems of the mexicanos, our forgotten people?