

*R. P. (Bob) Sanchez*

ATTORNEY AT LAW

321 S. 12TH ST. - P.O. BOX 2128

MCALLEN, TEXAS 78501

(512) 686-9591

June 13, 1988

Hector P. Garcia, M.D.  
1801 S. Staples, Suite 309  
Corpus Christi, Texas 78404

Dear Hector:

Enclosed herewith you will find a tear sheet from our local newspaper, The Valley Evening Monitor, which, as you can see, carried the beautiful story on your numerous accomplishments throughout your life. Thanks to you, I consider this a vindication and a feather on your cap and on the caps of all the rest of us who have sacrificed with the American GI Forum. By the way, the local veterans organizations invited me to be main speaker at Memorial Day Services in one of the local cemeteries, and as I addressed the gathering I proudly wore my American GI Forum cap. It carried on TV! I hope to see you at the State Convention of the Forum coming up in Houston soon. Regards.

Sincerely,

*Bob*

R.P. (Bob) Sanchez, J.D.

RPS:tmt  
Enclosed (1)

cc: Xico P. Garcia, M.D.  
1801 S. Staples, Suite 309  
Corpus Christi, Texas 78404

# Garcia's GI Forum going

By LAURINE MILLER  
The Dallas Morning News  
CORPUS CHRISTI (AP) — It

may have been preordained that a Mexican-American physician with a hero's name, a classical education and a profound sense of social justice would spend his life working for political, educational and economic equality for Hispanics in the United States.

Dr. Hector P. Garcia has been marching for those goals for 40 years — since March 26, 1948, when he founded the American GI Forum, a Hispanic veterans organization dedicated to addressing problems of discrimination.

Like the mythical Trojan warrior for whom his father named him, Garcia always marches in the forefront of battle, usually helmeted in the envelope-shaped cap of the GI Forumeer.

"I have always felt that the poor people in this country have to have someone who can help them," he said. "I felt that because of my organization, my freedom of action and my knowledge as a doctor, I would be the one involved."

Four years ago, Garcia was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor given a civilian, by President Reagan.

During the 36 years of activism that preceded the award,

Garcia sometimes fought discrimination against Hispanics in unorthodox ways. Like the time in 1949 when he and other GI Forum leaders attached a public address system to his car and drove through Del Rio on the Texas-Mexico border, urging Hispanics to enroll their children in the majority Anglo schools, instead of remaining in segregated schools.

At 74, he's an elegant figure. A recent bout with illness has slowed his gait just a bit and hollowed his cheeks. He's been fighting his own health problems since he came home from World War II — a regimental commander in the Army Medical Corps with a Bronze Star pinned to his chest — and nearly died of kidney failure.

Today, when he's in town, he practices medicine at his clinic seven days a week. He serves on a committee lobbying for a four-year university for Corpus Christi and is helping plan the 40th national convention of the GI Forum Aug. 1-7 in Corpus Christi.

"I think the man probably is the foremost civil rights activist in the country today, who has toiled in the vineyards longer than any other individual of any ethnic or racial group," said Corpus Christi attorney Tony Bonilla, a former political foe.

"Even as he has aged and lost a step or two, he remains active and knowledgeable about issues that affect the Hispanic community."

"The thing I admire most about Dr. Garcia is his selflessness," said Edward H. Harte, former publisher of the Corpus Christi Caller-Times. "He has dedicated his entire life to the cause of social justice for Americans of Mexican extraction, and what he has done he has done with no thought of gain or loss to himself."

"If not for the work he has done, a lot of us wouldn't be in office," said state Rep. Eddie Cavazos, D-Corpus Christi. "I don't always agree with him — we sometimes have different ways of doing things because we are of different generations — but I never lose sight of what he has done."

Garcia's critics are reluctant to speak up publicly both out of respect for Garcia and wariness at the political power he still wields, but some complain privately that Garcia has a "take-charge" personality and an unwillingness to share glory. At the same time, they see a positive aspect to those characteristics — that a high self-image has gotten him where he is and has enabled him to make gains that benefit Mexican-Americans.

Garcia has received death threats for his wide-ranging activism. His integrity has been impugned by his critics, who accused him of exploiting his own people. He was thrown in jail for participating in a sit-in at a Corpus Christi school administration building in the early 1970s, protesting the lack of free transportation for Hispanic children to Anglo schools.

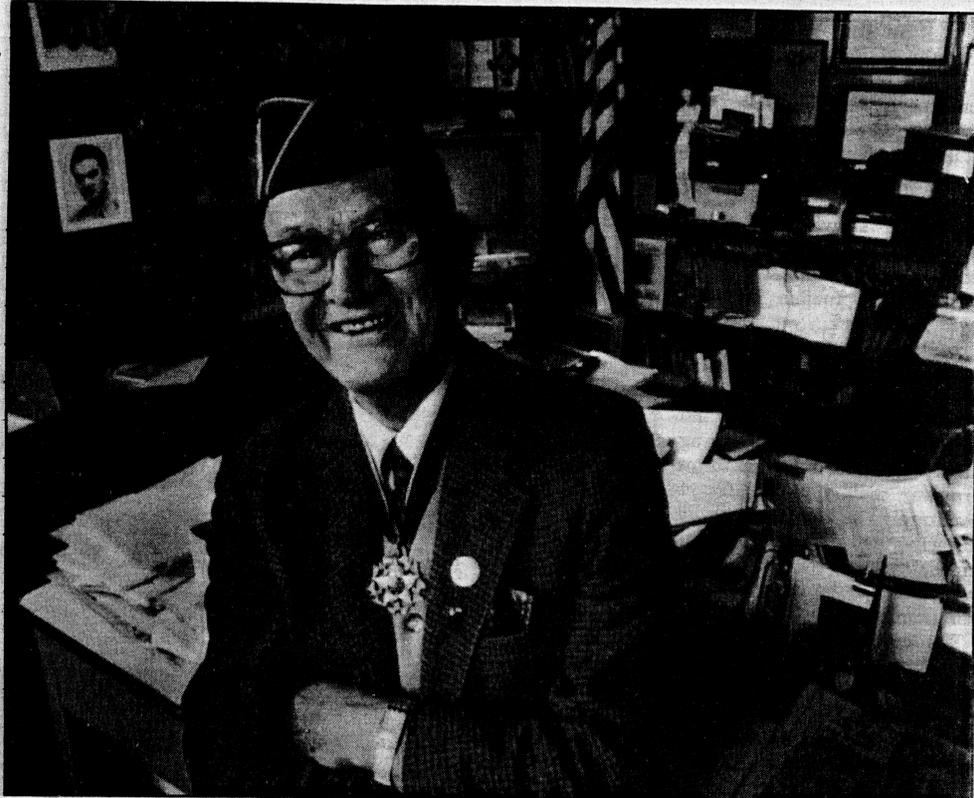
Education is the foundation of everything that he does. The motto of the American GI Forum is "Education is our freedom and freedom should be everybody's business."

Today, the organization boasts 150,000 members in 502 chapters in 24 states. There are more than 100,000 members in Texas and California.

The forum was founded to

display terminals for more than 20 hours each week in the first

# g strong after 40 years



AP Laserphoto

## American GI Forum founder Dr. Hector P. Garcia

address problems of discrimination and other inequities involving Mexican-American veterans. But Garcia soon expanded its scope to work for desegregation of schools, voter registration drives, fair judicial proceedings and an end to media stereotypes of Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics.

"He is the Mexican-American equivalent of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.," said Guadalupe Rangel, a Corpus Christi educator and writer.

"I have always felt that whatever talent the Lord gave us we should use for the benefit of other people," Garcia said. "I believe the ones who have suffered the most and have been abused and exploited the most are the Mexican-American people, which are my people."

A model for the character of a Mexican-American doctor in Edna Ferber's 1952 Texas opus *Giant*, Garcia cut his teeth on politics in 1949 handling the

issue of burial of a Mexican-American veteran. The case propelled him into national prominence. It also cemented his friendship with Lyndon B. Johnson, then a U.S. senator.

Garcia was the first Hispanic to receive an appointment from President John F. Kennedy, who asked him to negotiate a defense treaty between the United States and the Federation of the West Indies.

During the administration of President Johnson, Garcia became the first Hispanic to serve on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. He also became the first Hispanic to serve as a member of the U.S. delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, where he had the rank of ambassador.

Garcia campaigned for Jimmy Carter, who as president appointed him to a nominating commission for federal judges.

In 1985, an endowed chair was named in Garcia's honor at Yale

University's Chicano Research Center. In the same year, the Corpus Christi City Council named a city park for him, and last month the main post office in Corpus Christi was named in his honor.

Garcia said he has enjoyed having the ear of presidents, but he is happiest among his people in the Mexican-American neighborhood in Corpus Christi where he practices medicine.

"I come back to my rincón, my barrio," he said. "This is my home."

"I had to be a good example for my people," Garcia said. "I was on trial. If I failed, people would say: 'Those damn Mexicans. They can't do anything, and Garcia is a good example.'"

His undergraduate and medical degrees are from the University of Texas. "All my kids are Longhorns, too," he said. He has three grown daughters.

See GARCIA, Page 7A

# Garcia

Continued from Page 6A

Garcia was only 3 when his father, Professor Jose Garcia, a Mexican college professor who feared revolution in his own country, moved his family to Mercedes in Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

While stationed in Italy during World War II, Garcia met and married his wife, Wanda Fusillo, a Ph.D. who came from a family of Italian scholars.

After the war, Garcia set up medical practice in a "little cubbyhole" next to the Veterans Administration office in Corpus Christi. The VA needed help and paid him \$2 for each veteran he examined.

He soon discovered to his outrage that Mexican-American veterans who had fought bravely for their country were being treated as second-class citizens at home — often denied GI Bill of Rights benefits for housing, education and other basic needs, including disability assistance.

"Finally, one day we got tired of it, and we decided to meet," Garcia said. At that meeting, the American GI Forum was born.

In 1949, came a touching illustration of their case.

The family of Pvt. Felix Longoria — a Mexican-American soldier from Three Rivers,

Texas, killed in action in World War II — were making arrangements to bury his remains, sent home four years after his death. The widow was told that her husband could be buried only in Three Rivers' non-white cemetery, and also that the funeral chapel would not be available for his wake.

Garcia was asked to intervene. He didn't stop with local officials; he also protested to Texas politicians in Austin and Washington, including then-Sen. Johnson.

Although the mayor of Three Rivers tried to make amends, Garcia and the Longoria family accepted Johnson's offer to bury Pvt. Longoria in Arlington National Cemetery with full military honors.

"After the Longoria case, I believe we moved people 20 years ahead taking one jump," Garcia said.

But today he is concerned that Hispanics now take their progress for granted.

"I am trying to get more of our young people interested in leadership," he says. "This is a problem to me. They don't know the struggle we had to go through."