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CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION*

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I was born in 1968. The year continues to ring loud in the minds of people, young and old. It was a year of profound change. During 1968, the country and the world witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, the escalation of anti-war protests, and the election of Richard M. Nixon.

For those of us born in 1968, we now occupy an interesting position in the generational time line. Squeezed out of the baby boom, anyone born after 1960 has the somewhat unflattering distinction of being part of "Generation X," where the "X" signifies the unknown aspirations and inclinations of a group of Americans not anchored by significant historical events.¹

For Latinos of the "X" generation, our place in history is more confounding still. Born during the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement, our generation has risen briskly up the escalator of opportunity as a result of another generation's struggles. We are the fruits of their labor.

Passing the Torch

I am thankful and appreciate the sacrifices made by those who fought to improve the opportunities afforded to the Latino community. I listen to their stories and marvel at their strength, courage, and commitment.

The passing of time, however, obscures the roles and responsibilities of each generation. The struggles for equality and justice fought by Cesar Chavez, Raul Izaguirre, Richard Alatorre, Antonia Hernandez, Gloria Molina, Edward Roybal, Art Torres, and other Chicano/Latino activists, including organizations like

* A version of this speech was delivered at the UCLA School of Law on Feb. 6, 1993.

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1. By "historical events," I refer to events like the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. It could be argued that our generation had the distinction of coming of age during the modern rebirth of the Republican Party and the beginning of the end for 1960s style liberalism.

LULAC [League of United Latin American Citizens], MALDEF [Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund], NCLR [National Council of La Raza], and the Southwest Voter Registration Project present a bitter irony.

Because of their determination, obstacles that hindered and generally prevented Chicanos from receiving even the most basic services have been eased and in some cases removed. As a direct result, my generation possesses options and avenues of opportunities that simply were not available in years past. How many Chicanos imagined it was possible for them to attend Harvard during the 1960s or even 1970s?

As our expectations are raised, we begin to define our roles in the shaping of our community. Having fought to remove boundaries, previous generations have helped create a new generation of leaders poised to inherit the reigns of leadership. The exchange of leadership will be the key to continued progress for the Latino community. While we hope for a constructive transition of power, there should be no illusion about the potential for conflict.

Challenges

What will be the challenges facing our generation? What will be the role for a generation that grew up believing that if you worked hard and played by the rules anything was possible? What responsibility will a generation that came of age under the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George Bush undertake in the years ahead?

The next generation of Latino leaders must combine the experiences of the past with the knowledge of the present. Young Latinos must learn from the leaders who initiated the struggle for justice and equality with the influence and power that they have obtained. In general, young Latinos have been afforded improved educational opportunities relative to prior generations of Latinos. As a result, young Latinos find themselves with tremendous access to information and knowledge. We must use this access and knowledge to improve our communities.

Our future leaders must identify and understand the root causes of social problems. Once we have identified the true causes, we must develop practical and workable solutions and commit to seeing them implemented at all appropriate levels. It is not sufficient to blame agencies, organizations, or individuals who have failed to meet their commitments. Our generation cannot afford excuses. We will have to be pro-active in order to get results.

We must understand that the Latino community continues to grow and mature and that many substantial gains have been achieved only within our lifetime. Only recently has *overt* racism and discrimination been challenged through legislative means. Prior to the late 1970s and early 1980s, Latino elected officials were virtually non-existent. More importantly, only within our lifetime have many of the prejudices and stereotypes about Latinos and other minorities been challenged in our popular culture.

Young Latino leaders must learn to appreciate the differences within the Latino community. The Latino community is comprised of people who identify with a variety of social, economic and ethnic categories. Among Latinos who identify themselves as Chicanos, Hispanics, Mexican-Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Salvadoreans, for example, Latinos are rich and poor, educated and uneducated, conservative and liberal, politically correct and not so politically correct. This diversity must be viewed as a strength. On close inspection, I believe that, despite our many differences, there are many more issues that unite our diverse community.

The next generation of leaders must understand the difference between politics and political participation. Politics will bring momentary victories. Political participation will provide lasting change. While the Latino community has been able to make considerable gains in the political arena in the last quarter century, this cannot be accepted as an end in itself. Elected officials and other community leaders must encourage active political participation in all sectors of society—from the boardroom to the classroom—to ensure representation.

We cannot be satisfied with the fact that we have Latino representatives. Elected officials must be held accountable by the communities they represent. If they are not meeting the needs of a community and failing to promote economic opportunity, then they should be opposed and removed from office whether Latino or not.

The next generation of leaders must appreciate the difference between political empowerment and economic empowerment. Political empowerment of the Latino community has been gained through long struggles. However, political empowerment does not translate into economic stability or prosperity. Our Latino leaders must also improve the quality of life for all Latinos. Economic empowerment ensures that people can provide for themselves. It gives people the financial security to help others and the luxury to challenge wrongs. It affords people time to read, to study, to volunteer, and to become *active*. Without a focused effort on the part of the public and private sector to im-

prove economic conditions in the Latino community, we will continue to suffer as a result of deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

The next generation of leaders must understand that the state of our national economy, as well as the condition of the social institutions it upholds, directly affects the health and welfare of all Americans, including and sometimes especially that of Latinos. Our generation must work to make the economy strong so that socially and economically disadvantaged members of our community will be able to utilize the institutions that gave prior generations of Americans the opportunity to advance and succeed. Without a strong economy not only will families lose jobs, they will lose quality schools, quality government services, and most importantly, hope for our children's future.

Yet the next generation of leaders must understand that barriers exist on the road to empowerment. While America continues to offer freedom and opportunity, we must acknowledge that discrimination and misunderstanding continue to plague our society. While the level of discrimination can be disputed, its negative impact, no matter how minimal, cannot.

Today, minority and women entrepreneurs must still battle for contracts and procurement of dollars. Minority entrepreneurs must overcome tremendous obstacles, such as access to capital, insurance, and bonding before they can compete for work. The ladder of opportunity is made slippery by the effects—intended or not—of discrimination. Whether it is on a personal or institutional level, our generation, including people of all races and ethnic backgrounds, must work to eradicate the misunderstandings, misperceptions, and stereotypes that feed discrimination.

The next generation of leaders must be committed to becoming international leaders. The challenges faced by young Latinos are the same challenges facing young people in our country and throughout the world. We must understand that all of us, regardless of race or ethnic background, are responsible for making our world a better place to live. We must all work to improve communication between communities that have not come together in the past. The increasingly global world will call on the next generation to lead without regard to race, color, creed or gender.

The future of our community, and indeed that of the United States, will be determined in part on how well we educate ourselves on the various communities, cultures, races and life styles that constitute our great Nation. If everyone committed themselves to learning something new about a community with which

they have little contact, we would bring ourselves closer to the kind of society envisioned by great leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez.

Demographic trends will produce diversity in the faces of our nation's leaders, both in terms of race and gender. We should recognize, and more importantly, help others recognize the inevitability of these trends. Additionally, we need to harness the positive energy that will be created by our growing diversity. The sooner we understand the strength and promise of our nation's diversity, the sooner we will move towards a better society.

Finally, the next generation of leaders must never lose sight of what is truly important—our families. We must be good husbands, wives, partners, parents, neighbors, and citizens. In our hectic lives, we must not get too caught up in “the cause” and neglect the special people around us. Nothing is gained if we make a positive impact on society at the expense of our personal lives. We must choose our commitments wisely, understand the sacrifices that they entail, and reconcile those sacrifices with those we love before we become too involved.