Mexicanos Need to Control Their Own Destinies

The following are excerpts from the speech to the May 4, 1970, meeting in San Antonio by Jose Angel Gutierrez, leader of La Raza Unida Party and the new president of the Crystal City school board.

As you know, there is a new political party in Southwest Texas. It's called La Raza Unida Party. The history of this party is rather interesting.

For years the Chicano farmworker has made up the majority of the population in the South Texas counties. But he goes trucking across this country on his summer vacation (laughter), and so he's never there to vote. Yet this is precisely the time the primaries are held-in May. And he is already vacationing in his resort area by the time the runoffs are held in June. So, you see, we are in fact not even able to vote.

We have had other problems which we have known about for a long time. For instance, the fact that the mexicano can't cope with the culture of the monolingual creatures that abound in South Texas. You see, we're literate in Spanish, so we can't recognize the name of John Waltberger on the ballot, but we sure as hell recognize Juan Garcia. (Laughter)

Supposedly in this kind of a democratic society the citizenry is encouraged to participate in the political process—but not so in South Texas.

Someone asked me recently whether I thought any type of system other than the American political system could work in South Texas. I thought about it for a minute and suggested that the question be reworded because we ought to try the American system first. (Applause)

They accuse me and mexicanos in Cristal [Crystal City], in Cotulla and Carrizo Springs, of being unfair. One gringo lady put it very well. She was being interviewed around April 6, right after the school board elections and before the city council elections. The guy from Newsweek asked her to explain the strange phenomena that were occurring in these counties: a tremendous voter turnout and a tremendous amount of bloc voting. She said, "Well, this is just terrible! Horrible! A few days ago we elected a bunch of bum Mexicans to the city council." And the reporter said, "Well, they are 85 percent of this county." And she replied, "That's what I mean! They think they ought to run this place!"

By all these little things you can begin to understand how to define the word "gringo," which seems to be such a problem all the time. It's funny, because the mexicano knows what a gringo is. It's the gringos themselves that are worried about what the hell it is. (Laughter) Let me elaborate on it.

I'm not going to give you a one sentence thing on them; I feel they deserve at least two sentences. (Laughter) The basic idea in using the word "gringo" is that it means "foreigner. The gringos themselves say, "It's Greek to me." So the mexicano says, "It's griego [Greek] to me." That is one explanation of its origins, according to Professor America Paredes of the University of Texas. …

The word itself describes an attitude of supremacy, of xenophobia—that means you're afraid of strangers. I pick up a fancy word here and there. This attitude is also found in institutions, such as the Democratic Party. It's in policies like the one that says you can't speak Spanish in school because it's un-American. It's in the values of people who feel that unless Mexican music is played by the Tijuana Brass or the Baja Marimba Band it's no good. You can't eat tacos de chorizo [sausage tacos] around the corner for 20 cents. You've got to go up there to La Fonda [fancy anglo-owned Mexican restaurant] and eat a $3.50 Mexican plate that gives you indigestion. (Applause and laughter)

The formation of this party came about because of the critical need for the people to experience justice. It's just like being hungry. You've got to get food in there immediately, otherwise you get nauseous, you get headaches and pains in your stomach.

We were Chicanos who were starved for any kind of meaningful participation in decision making, policy making and leadership positions. For a long time we have not been satisfied with the type of leadership that has been picked for us. And this is what a political party does, particularly the ones we have here. I shouldn't use the plural because we only have one, and that's the gringo party. It doesn't
matter what name it goes by. It can be Kelloggs, All-Bran or Shredded Wheat, but it's still the same crap.

These parties, or party, have traditionally picked our leadership. They have transformed this leadership into a kind of broker, a real estate guy who deals in the number of votes or precincts he can deliver or the geographical areas he can control. And he is a tape recorder-he puts out what the party says.

A beautiful example of this is Ralph Yarborough (Democratic senator from Texas]. The only thing he does for Chicanos is hire one every six years. He's perfectly content with the bigoted sheriff and Captain Allee (Texas Rangers] and the guys that break the strikes in El Rio Grande City and with (Wayne) Connally (brother of former Texas governor John Connally] and all these other people. Well, he gets beaten, and he knows why. The Republicans, the Birchers, the Wallace-ites and all these people went over to support Bentsen in the primaries. Yet I just read in the paper this afternoon that he said, "As always, I will vote a straight Democratic ticket in November."

There is only one other kind of individual who does that kind of work and that's a prostitute. . . .

So you see that what's happening is not any big miracle. It's just common sense. The trouble is that everybody was always bothered and said, "We can't get out of the Democratic Party. Why bite the hand that feeds you?" Well, you bite it because it feeds you slop. (Laughter and applause) Others say, "Well, why don't you switch over and join the Republican Party?" Well, let's not even touch on that one.

Why can't you begin to think very selfishly as a Chicano? I still haven't found a good argument from anyone as to why we should not have a Chicano party. Particularly when you are the majority. If you want to implement and see democracy in action-the will of the majority-you are not going to do it in the Democratic Party. You can only do it through a Chicano party. (Applause)

But you see there is another, more important, reason, and that is that mexicanos need to be in control of their destiny. They need to make their own decisions. We need to make the decisions that are going to affect our brothers and maybe our children. We have been complacent for too long.…

You've got a median educational level among mexicanos in Zavala County of 2.3 grades. In La Salle it's just a little worse-about 1.5 grades. The median family income in La Salle is $1,574 a year. In Zavala it's about $1,754. The ratio of doctors, the number of newspapers, the health, housing, hunger, malnutrition, illiteracy, poverty, lack of political representation - all these things put together spell one word: colonialism. You've got a handful of gringos controlling The lives of muchos mexicanos. And it's been that way for a long time.…

In 1960 there were 26 Texas counties in which Chicanos were a majority, yet not one of those counties was in the control of Chicanos. If you want to stand there and take that you can. You can be perfectly content just like your father and your grandfather were, con el sombrero en la mano [with hat in hand].

That's why most of our traditional organizations will sit there and pass resolutions and mouth off at conventions, but they'll never take on the gringo. They'll never stand up to him and say, "Hey, man, things have got to change from now on. Que pase lo que pase [Let whatever happens happen]. We've had it long enough!"

This is what we've got to start doing. If you don't go third party, then you've got to go the independent route, because there is no other way you are going to get on the November ballot. And don't try to put in a write-in candidate. That never works. . .

Source: http://cinet.sscnet.ucla.edu/research/docs/razaunida/control.htm