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ADDRESS

By

HONORABLE ROBERT F. KENNEDY

ATTORNEY GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

at

G. I. FORUM

International Ball Room

Conrad Hilton Hotel

Chicago, Illinois

August 23, 1963

Early last year, while on a tour for the State Department, I spoke to the students of the University of Indonesia, in Djakarta.

I mentioned that I thought the United States had been unjustified in its war with Mexico -- that I didn't think it was a very bright chapter in our history -- and, as you may remember, the remark touched off a minor storm of protest here at home, chiefly from Texans.

It didn't seem to matter to most of the angry letter-writers that they were confusing the Mexican War with the Battle of the Alamo and the Texans' fight for independence, which had taken place some years before.

But I should certainly wish to add that many pages of American history have indeed been brightened by our war with Mexico -- not so much in terms of territorial gains as in the great gain of human resources. Had it not been for that war, many of you here today would not be Americans, for your birthplaces might have been national territory of the Republic of Mexico. And we are without question a stronger and better nation today because we can number so many Spanish-speaking people among our own.

The contributions made to this country by Spanish-derived culture through the ages are incalculable. Whether you are of Mexican, Spanish, Puerto-Rican or Latin-American descent, you can well afford to take pride in the achievements of your ancestors.

When the Pilgrims were getting ready for their voyage on the Mayflower, Spanish-speaking people had already established a civilization on

a great part of this continent for more than a hundred years.

Five of our states, many mountain ranges and rivers, innumerable cities and towns, lakes and parks bear Spanish names; and our national literature, music and art have been greatly enriched by Spanish influences.

But taking pride in one's ancient heritage is always less fruitful -- and less American -- than taking stock of one's own recent past, his present, and his goals for the future. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "I don't know who my grandfather was, but I am much more concerned about what his grandson will be."

And so it is the current generation of Spanish-speaking Americans that concerns us today -- the people who, collectively, have only in modern times begun to rise and free themselves from the status of an under-privileged minority within the mainstream of American life.

Let's take stock of your people: the progress they have made, the problems they face today, and the future they seek.

As is the case with any ethnic minority in our country, the key to social and economic progress has always been education. And for many years, the education of your people was sadly neglected.

It wasn't until after the First World War that any substantial number of Spanish-speaking Americans began to receive high-school diplomas in this country, and it wasn't until the great social upheaval of the Second World War that the major strides were made. Military service took the young man away from their minority environment and the G. I. Bill of Rights gave them undreamed of educational opportunities.

Countless Spanish-speaking Americans emerged as teachers, lawyers, doctors, engineers, scientists, technicians, and men skilled at business administration. The "Latino" could no longer be regarded solely as a man to be employed: in many cases he had become the employer.

It was due mainly to better education.

But I must interrupt the main theme of my talk here, because I can't leave the subject of the Second World War without mentioning another proud chapter in your history. If any proof were needed that Spanish-speaking Americans are among our finest citizens, that proof was far more than amply demonstrated in the following list of names:

Joseph P. Martinez of Colorado; Luciano Adams of Texas; Macario Garcia of Texas; Jose M. Lopez of Texas; Jose Valdez of New Mexico; Silvestre Herrera of Arizona; Cleto Rodrigues of Texas; Manuel Perez, Jr. of Illinois; Ismael R. Villegas of California; David Gonzales of California; and Alejandro Ruiz of New Mexico.

Each of those men was awarded the nation's highest decoration for gallantry in action, the Congressional Medal of Honor.

And in Korea, half a decade later, that gallant roster was lengthened to include: Eugene A. Obregon of California; Joseph C. Rodriguez of California; Rodolfo Hernandez of California; Edward Gomez of Nebraska; Benito Martinez of Texas; and Ambrosio Guillen of Colorado.

Having so nobly proved themselves in times of war, your people have continued to make rapid progress into places of distinction in many areas of public life.

Mike Garcia, Hank Aguirre, Pancho Gonzales, Rick Casares and Alex Kellner -- these are only a few of the top sports figures.

In the performing arts there are such actors as Anthony Quinn and Jose Ferrer, singers like Andy Russell and the Coronados.

There are many who have distinguished themselves in learned professions, such as Raoul Magan in the law, Walter Alvarez in medicine, and George I. Sanchez in education.

The names of Joseph M. Montoya, Henry B. Gonzales and Edward Roybal are inscribed on the roster of the 88th United States Congress.

Elsewhere in the field of Government service, notable progress for Spanish-speaking citizens has been late in coming. Until 1961, there were very few appointments at the Federal level. The President, in his desire to give equal opportunities to all Americans, has since encouraged the recognition of many Spanish-speaking men in top Government positions -- not because they are Spanish-speaking, but because, in each case, they have been the best available men for the job.

This is only a partial list of such men:

(List selected names from brochure.)

Last month I had the duty to appoint a delegation of leading jurists to represent the Department of Justice at the Third Annual Inter-American Congress of Attorneys General, held in Mexico City. For the first time in history, a United States delegation to an international conference contained a majority -- eight of eleven -- of Spanish-speaking Americans. And I am proud to report that their participation in the conference was

highly valuable in helping to strengthen ties among our Latin-American neighbors.

But to go on with further examples of this gratifying success story is to miss another and equally important point. For all these impressive gains, far too many of your people are still the victims of poverty and of social and economic discrimination.

As much as fifty percent of our Spanish-speaking population still earns less than the average American per-capita income -- though this does show a notable improvement over five years ago, when the figure was set at 62 percent.

And what about education?

The average Spanish-speaking citizen in California, Texas, and New Mexico has been given only a fifth-grade education or less; in Texas the average still is third grade.

Those figures, of course, include the total Spanish-speaking population -- adults and elderly people, as well as youngsters. It is beyond question that the present generation of children are receiving a better education than their parents and grandparents.

But if education is the key to all other forms of American progress, -- and we have clearly seen that it is -- can we be content to give our children anything but the best possible opportunities?

The fact is that we are not helping them nearly as much as we could -- and I'm talking now about all American children, not only those with Spanish-speaking backgrounds.

Many millions of public school students today, of whatever national origin, face critical educational problems. Schools are overcrowded and understaffed, and the number of drop-outs from junior and senior high schools across the country is steadily increasing. More than a million are expected to drop out this year.

And the disturbing thing about these boys and girls who leave school too early, apart from the education denied them, is they present a serious unemployment problem.

No less than thirty-thousand new jobs will have to be found every week during the next ten years if we are to avoid a national depression. Our economy will continue to offer an abundance of jobs for trained employees, but the market for unskilled and semi-skilled workers is rapidly shrinking under the advance of industrial automation.

The problem of unemployable school drop-outs is not merely an economic but a social one; idleness and poverty among the young breed resentment and frustration, family disorganization and juvenile delinquency.

What are we going to do about it?

In a recent press conference the President called public attention to the severity of the problem. He emphasized that it can only be solved by all of us -- as responsible citizens, whether as individuals or in groups, taking action in our own communities.

Americans have never been a people to depend on Federal edict alone in solving their own domestic problems. The very strength of our democratic system has always been the ability of free citizens to act on their own initiative.

Today, through various programs and expenditures, the Federal Government is actively supporting projects in many cities designed to prevent drop-outs, and to initiate remedial education and job training for unemployed youth.

But all these activities are local in origin -- they have been undertaken by parents, by school principals, by clergymen, by labor unions, by civic leaders and other public-spirited people. They are working in the classic American tradition of self-help and community responsibility.

An organization like yours, concerned with the problems of a specific ethnic minority, and keenly aware of the need for education, is ideally equipped to take on leadership of this kind.

Both as a group and as individual, responsible citizens, you must know that there is an active and continuing need for your engagement with this cause -- not because you are Spanish-speaking Americans, but because you are Americans.

Let none of us forget that we are living in a time of infinite possibilities. Both domestically and in international relations, America has never before in history had a greater chance to fulfill the dreams of men through the ages -- dreams of individual freedom, national prosperity, and world peace.

The test ban treaty may not put an end to the Cold War, but it is a positive step toward honorably peaceful relations with our potential enemies. And history may well show that it was only the first of many steps leading to the ultimate goal of a world free from the threat of nuclear destruction.

In the meantime, we have continued to build our military defenses to a point where no nation can seriously challenge our strength. From within this bastion of might, which all of us pray we will never have to discharge, we can stand without fear as the champion of peace and democracy for all men.

But success in international affairs, no less than in domestic matters, depends on active interest and support not only by our leaders but by all of us. The responsibility of world power, like that of democracy, is something that must be shared by all citizens of the nation that enjoys it -- citizens who know how much they have to gain by sustaining it, and how much they have to lose if it should ever fail.

I am confident that as the Spanish-speaking people continue to rise and prosper within our society, the society itself will also prosper in terms of enlightenment, wisdom, and courage.

America today is moving ahead toward the realization of its destiny -- moving at a pace unmatched by that of any other time in history.

And I would be proud, as would millions of our countrymen, to see the American G. I. Forum in the vanguard of that forward march.