



The Important Role of the American G.I. Forum in Hispanic Civil Rights



"Our idea was that we were not going to be interested in pressing purely for benefits for the veterans as such...we were interested in handling the problems of Mexican-American people." -Ed Idar



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Adventures:
The American
G.I. Forum



Image of Hector P. Garcia and Ed Idar (on the right) at a party function. They were two key members of the American G.I. Forum.

Images from the Hector P. Garcia archives courtesy of the University of Texas A&M Corpus Christi

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As far as the GI Forum is concerned, I became active in the GI Forum in June of 1950 when I was a resident of Austin. A year later at the convention which was held here in Austin in July of 1951, I was elected the second state chairman of the organization, succeeding Dr. Hector P. Garcia of Corpus Christi, the founder of the GI Forum. I served as state chairman until July of 1953 when I was succeeded by Chris Aldrete of Del Rio. I then became executive secretary, and I held the position until I graduated from law school in June of 1956. I was out of office, you might say, in the GI Forum until on or about November of 1958 when I came back on as executive secretary, and I held that position until December 31 of 1966 at which time I resigned. I continue to be a member of the organization, but I do not hold a position at present.

Ed Idar, Jr. Interview, Oral History Collection, University of North Texas Oral History Program February 20, 1969.



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G.I. Forum leadership

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A typical American G.I. Forum audience

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The GI Forum from its very inception made an effort to involve not just the veteran but his family as well--that is, the wives and the sisters and other female relatives of the veterans as well as the younger people.

Our idea was that we were not going to be interested in pressing purely for benefits for the veteran as such. In fact, the GI Forum never did go on record for things such as veterans' bonuses. Rather, we were interested in handling the problems of the Mexican-American people. For that reason we felt that we needed the participation of the women, and we wanted the young

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From the beginning, the American G.I. Forum involved young people in its organization.

Images from the Hector P. Garcia archives courtesy of the University of Texas A&M Corpus Christi

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Idar: Well, of course, a lot of the local problems--take for example the problem of the discrimination or segregation at the naval base in Corpus Christi--were solved rather quickly. It didn't take much action to contact people in Washington in those years, to contact Senator Lyndon B. Johnson who was of considerable help in handling that kind of a situation. Those were, I would say, problems that were not too crucial in the sense that they did not require a lot of time and effort.

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"Jim Wright and Lyndon B. Johnson." Photo circa 1960.

<http://texashistory.unt.edu/permalink/meta-pt-18276>

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I consider the more significant problems or the bigger contributions by the GI Forum to be in the field of education. I can recall that in the early years of the GI Forum we used to have what we called the "back-to-school" drives. Around July and August of every year as the school term or the school year started to roll around we would get our local chapters interested in holding rallies, in using leaflets, in going house to house, in bringing speakers to talk to different groups encouraging the people to put their children in school and keep them there. This was particularly crucial with respect to the migratory agricultural workers. In those years it used to be the custom that a family would leave

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Hector P. Garcia (center white shirt) heads a Corpus Christi Texas American G.I. Forum Auxiliary meeting.

Images from the Hector P. Garcia archives courtesy of the University of Texas A&M Corpus Christi

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Cuellar: Do you feel that these advancements could have been done without the GI Forum?

Idar: I rather doubt it because you must recall that the GI Forum started right after the Second World War. At that time the LULAC organization had already been in the field since about 1928 or 1929. In fact, my father and couple of my uncles were among the early LULAC leaders. In its early years the LULAC was an aggressive organization. It did a lot of good. However, as its membership grew older and what have you, it became a little more conservative in its approach. As a result, after the Second World War a lot of its leadership, aside from a few people such as Dr. Sanchez of The University of Texas, Gus Garcia, Raul Cortez, and John Herrera, was ineffective. By and large LULAC was a dying or a static organization. It was constantly involved in factionalism. In fact, I was a member of LULAC myself, and I attended two or three state and national conventions of LULAC.

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Hector P. Garcia at a Forum function.

Images from the Hector P. Garcia archives courtesy of the University of Texas A&M Corpus Christi

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Ed Idar at an Award Ceremony at the Robert Driscoll Hotel.

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this limited amount of money, a drive was conducted in the three valley counties. As a result of this particular drive for the first time in history the Mexican-Americans in the Valley had the majority of the poll taxes even though they had always been anywhere from seventy to eighty per cent of the population in the area.

I can recall

that those were the years when in San Antonio the only elected Mexican-American public official was Gus Garcia, who was elected to the San Antonio School Board sometime around 1947 or '48. Those were the years before Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez, before County Commissioner Albert Pena, before Senator Joe Bernal, before a lot of these, and before other younger political leadership that has now developed in San Antonio. In fact, Commissioner Albert Pena in San Antonio started out in his career through the GI Forum. It was the GI Forum that gave him the inspiration to get into politics

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Ed Idar addresses a meeting

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Another problem that I consider a major social problem and that the GI Forum had a lot to do with handling was the so-called "wetback" problem. For years we would pass resolutions, we would write letters to Washington to Senator Johnson, to other people, trying to get action on the wetback problem, trying to see that the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service and the U. S. Border Patrol were given adequate manpower and vehicles and other facilities in order to seal the border, in order to enforce the immigration laws.

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The whole thing culminated during the Eisenhower administration. In 1953 the GI Forum and the American Federation of Labor, that is, the Texas State Federation of Labor (that was before the merger of the AFL and the CIO), got together and agreed to conduct a study on this problem. The AFL financed most of the project's expense. The GI Forum paid for my own personal expenses in a field survey that was made by myself and by Andrew C. McLellan of Rio Grande City. We started out in El Paso. Spending about two months in the field, we gradually worked our way down all along the border to Brownsville. We had photographic equipment with us.

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The next spring, around April or May, President Eisenhower and his administration initiated what was called a drive to clean up the wetbacks. The Immigration Service was given adequate men and equipment. They started out in California. They gradually worked their way all across the Mexican border down to Brownsville. They instituted a task force of officers that worked all the way along the border, and they cleaned out the wetback once and for all.

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An American G.I. Forum march

Images from the Hector P. Garcia archives courtesy of the University of Texas A&M Corpus Christi

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Well, anyway, after the election was over, in 1961 in Texas at least, which is that I'm familiar with, the question arose as to whether we were going to allow these clubs to die on the vine. There was a meeting that was held, I recall, in Victoria, Texas, sometime in the spring of 1961 at which we debated whether to continue with the organization and if so what name to select. Several names had started cropping up. I believe that in California the Viva Kennedy Clubs were renamed MAPA--the Mexican-American Political Association. Initially in Texas we started to use that name but over in Victoria for some reason some of the people objected

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to it, and instead of naming it MAPA in Texas we agreed to name it the Political Association of Spanish-speaking Organizations. That's where you get the name PASO.

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Now I know the thing that we discussed and that we agreed among ourselves was this: by that time, mind you, this was in 1961 and '62 . . . by that time we had already been supporting the liberal movement in Texas for years. We had started out with Yarborough in '52 and had lost with him. We had lost with him in '54. We lost with him again in '56 . . . or was it Henry Gonzales that year? No, I guess it was Yarborough in '56, and then Henry Gonzales ran in '58 for governor. And we lost with him. We supported Henry again in '61 in the special Senate race to fill the position of Senator Johnson when he became vice president, and we again lost. So we had been faithful to the liberal movement, but we had lost

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first-hand that we didn't contribute any GI Forum money nor did we have a GI Forum council or chapter active in Crystal City when this happened--at any rate, the PASO name still carried a certain amount of wallop, and all the people in Crystal City became identified with the organization. Albert Pena went in there and made speeches, and they used Teamster money. They did have that initial success in '63 when they took over the city council. However, of course, two years later they fell apart, and the Cornejo slate was defeated by a slate made up of more moderate elements about equally divided between Mexican-American and Anglo-American people there in Crystal City. I believe that it was after that Crystal City election, at a subsequent PASO convention, where Dr. Garcia criticized Albert Pena, PASO, and the Teamsters for what had gone on in Crystal City, and I believe that Hector dropped out of PASO sometime after that. Gradually most of the other men dropped out. To my knowledge, PASO right now as of today doesn't amount to anything. A lot of people think it does, but it hasn't got anything left.

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Hector P. Garcia addresses American G.I. Forum state delegates.

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