

The “Legacy” of Kennedy and Latinos: Myth versus Reality

By [Jimmy Franco Sr.](#)

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It has now been fifty years since the death of President Kennedy and this has created a lot of recent discussion and commentary on his work and life. Among Latinos much of this discussion has revolved around the traditional legacy story about how much he cared for Mexican-Americans and so on. A realistic perspective and factual assessment of this “close” relationship needs to be made minus the subjective and emotional aspects of this romanticized story. During the 1960 presidential campaign JFK’s political handlers crafted a campaign spin that consisted of an idealized and special political relationship that existed between the Mexican-American and Puerto Rican-American communities and the patrician Kennedy.



JFK (right) finally meets a Mexican-American group: Texas LULAC (A,Arroyos:clk.-enlarge)

With the passage of time this subjective political spin has morphed into an entrenched mythical legacy. As the saying goes, “nature abhors a vacuum”, and the existence of historical amnesia creates a vacuum which has been filled by people with mythical and romanticized Camelot stories which conveniently replace the stubborn facts of reality. The main premise of this embellished Kennedy “legacy” that continues to endure is that this aristocratic and rich Bostonian Catholic who possessed good looks and oratory skills somehow had a special affinity for the “underdog” Mexicans within the Southwest. Also, the affection that this patrician patron held for Mexicans had somehow become transformed into reality by Kennedy’s expansion of their civil rights and a concrete improvement in their daily lives. Another aspect of this ongoing mythical legacy also promotes the subjective belief that if only Camelot Kennedy had lived that he would have done much more to advance the civil rights of Latinos who he frantically tried to help while alive but somehow couldn’t. This emotional and romanticized belief had even motivated many Latinos in the past to place photos of Kennedy on the walls of their living rooms next to the mystical santos, candles and other religious artifacts. This legacy has created a form of icon and hero worship toward this messianic aristocrat who supposedly had been drawn by fate from the sea coast of Martha’s Vineyard and Boston to venture to the Southwest to rescue powerless and oppressed Mexicans who were somehow incapable of organizing themselves. With the passage of time such an idealized story begins to resemble the old Aztec myth of a messianic white Quetzacoatl arriving to save them from the tribulations of life.

Kennedy’s dismal record on segregation and civil rights during the 1950’s

Kennedy’s father Joe Sr. had previously amassed a fortune during Prohibition by bootlegging illegal liquor and later used this money to fund John’s political career and his life as a

carefree playboy. Kennedy's aristocratic and luxurious life where partying and womanizing consumed much of his time was insulated by a racial and class wall from the reality of strict legal segregation which then existed and the challenges of working-class life. He was elected to the US House of Representatives where his short stint there was undistinguished as he took no clear positions on issues of substance. This was followed by his election to the US Senate from Massachusetts with the assistance of his father's money as the elder Kennedy was motivated by the political goal of securing the US presidency for his son.



Mexican-American children attend a segregated school in 1950's California

In 1954, Republicans President Eisenhower and Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court Earl Warren assisted in overturning legal segregation with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs Board of Education*. This was followed by Eisenhower's use of troops in 1957 to desegregate Little Rock High School in Arkansas to protect African-American students from the violence of white racist mobs. At this point in history the Republicans were more tolerant and supportive of civil rights than the Democrats whose core leadership of their party was dominated by reactionary Southern Democrats called Dixicrats. In the decade prior to winning the presidency in 1960 John Kennedy did not take a principled nor public position in support of civil rights as he was accustomed to the existing segregation in Boston and the defense by the Democrats of the status quo. As a US Senator in 1957, Kennedy blatantly voted to oppose the 1957 civil rights bill in order to support and appease Southern Democrats who fiercely defended the continuation of racial segregation. By doing so Kennedy hoped to gain the attention and political support of the Dixicrat leaders for his future presidential bid. He was also silent on the federal government's much publicized implementation of "Operation Wetback" during the 1950's which was a national campaign that rounded up and deported tens of thousands of undocumented Mexicans. In summary, John Kennedy's political career and activity during the years prior to running for president consisted of silent inaction and outright opposition to civil rights as he didn't want to make any waves and was primarily interested in enjoying his playboy lifestyle.

The 1960's presidential campaign and the growing civil rights movement

The presidential election of 1960 was influenced by the growing civil rights movement whose goal was to break down the wall of segregation that was harshly affecting the lives of all minorities within the country. The Republicans had a comparatively better record on civil rights than the Democrats during the 1950's, but their 1960 presidential candidate Richard Nixon attempted to downplay this issue in order to appeal to the mass of conservative voters within the country especially those in the South who were accustomed to the traditional segregation of the races. Kennedy faced a close presidential race and encountered strong opposition from many Protestant voters due to his Catholic religion and rumors were spread widely by many groups of a possible "Papal takeover of the US" if he was elected president.



1960's Black students at a sit-in demonstration to integrate a restaurant.

In order to counter this anti-Catholic vote Kennedy's political consultants developed a strategy to win over crucial African-American voters from the Republicans along with the growing number of Mexican-American and Puerto Rican voters. This campaign strategy

prompted Kennedy to do an ideological and political about-face at the Democratic convention as he now declared himself to be in support of a civil rights plank that had been added to the party's platform. As part of this campaign strategy Kennedy's handlers identified five sectors whose votes needed to be mobilized in order to gain victory in the upcoming and close presidential election. Distinct and sometimes contradictory political messages and outreach were conveyed to these various sectors which consisted of organized labor, African-Americans, Latinos, southern Democrats and the Chicago mob. To carry out this strategy Kennedy's consultants had advised him to make a sympathetic phone call to Martin Luther King's wife Coretta as her husband languished in a jail after being arrested for a civil rights protest. This orchestrated political gesture by Kennedy was publicized widely to African-American voters who interpreted it as a position of strong support for their cause which Republican candidate Nixon had downplayed and ignored.

The political mobilization by the Viva Kennedy Clubs sparks a movement

Mexican-American Democrat leaders were involved in the campaign plan for getting out the Mexican vote by organizing Viva Kennedy clubs in different communities of the Southwest. The campaign political spin that these clubs disseminated to the various Mexican communities promoted Kennedy's Irish ethnicity, his Catholic religion and particularly his emotional and idealistic speeches about equality, common ties and hope for the future which were receptive to the ears of Mexican-Americans suffering from discrimination and poverty. Campaign stops by Kennedy in the Southwest and California also utilized the new political tactic and campaign tradition of listening to Mariachi music, eating tacos and hugging Mexican political leaders for photo-ops.



Viva Kennedy Clubs helped spark Chicano activism in the 1960's (Dr. Garcia papers)

The campaign stops organized by the Viva Kennedy Clubs included many of JFK's grand and vague messages which promised the appointment of Mexican-Americans to posts within the federal government and the much needed expansion of civil rights and educational opportunities. These flowery speeches and emotional promises by the "messianic" Kennedy galvanized and played on the hopes and desperation of many Mexican-Americans voters who fervently believed that their vote for this candidate would eliminate the existing segregation, discrimination and poll taxes which obstructed their right to vote, hold office and live a free life. Despite the emotional attachment and extreme loyalty expressed by these Viva Kennedy clubs and their leaders for Kennedy he purposely kept his political distance from major Latino civil rights organizations and avoided any direct and formal meetings with them. He did not want publicity of any such meetings and commitments with civil rights groups to jeopardize his campaign appeal to pro-segregationist Democrat voters. While speaking to southern voters and politicians Kennedy quickly and opportunistically switched his political message in order to downplay and distance himself from the civil rights plank contained in the Democratic Party platform which he vaguely defined as something not yet achievable. Organized labor was another sector to be mobilized by Kennedy's campaign and they were promised a raise in the minimum wage and stronger pro-worker legislation. Meanwhile, Kennedy's father facilitated his old mob ties with Sam Giancana and the Chicago Mafia so as to enlist their aid in "winning" the vote in Illinois. These mob-inspired votes would be in exchange for the promise of having a future "friend" in the White House. All of these campaign promises to satisfy these five voting sectors were

also accompanied by militant and aggressive foreign policy rhetoric that was aimed at Cuba and their people's recent revolution, the Soviet Union, anti-colonial struggles for independence and the need to continue and win the arms race and Cold War.

A flawed presidency full of flowery promise and a lack of achievement

Kennedy preferred the exciting realm of foreign policy and particularly fighting the Cold War against the Soviet Union instead of what he considered annoying domestic issues such as civil rights and other urgent social problems which faced the country. Much of his energy was spent on wanting to out-compete the Soviet Union in the arms race, space exploration and in proxy wars involving independence movements throughout the third world. Upon being elected Kennedy's first adventure into the arena of foreign policy was his approval for the invasion of Cuba in 1961. This military invasion resulted in a disastrous defeat as he had aligned himself with the ousted elements of the brutal ex-Batista regime and attempted to restore them to power in Cuba.



US supported Batista supporters are defeated at the Bay of Pigs invasion

This military attack by Kennedy against the Cuban revolution and the embarrassing defeat at the Bay of Pigs would cause their leader Fidel Castro and his people to defend their newly-won revolution from an antagonistic US by turning to the rival Soviet Union for military aid and survival. The subsequent reckless installation of missiles in Cuba by the Soviets to counter US missiles near their border led to an international crisis with mutual threats and a possible military confrontation between the two superpowers. Instead of utilizing the rational method of democracy Kennedy and Kruschev escalated their military rhetoric which nearly erupted into a devastating nuclear war. This near nuclear disaster dissipated once the Soviets removed the missiles from Cuba. Kennedy's foreign policy supported and provided military aid to the dictatorships in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Guatemala, Iran, South Korea, the Republic of the Congo and the authoritarian PRI in Mexico. The defeat of the US allied French colonialists by the Vietnamese in 1954 resulted in Eisenhower violating an international agreement by blocking free elections and dividing Vietnam politically between north and south. He followed this up by deploying a small military force to the new "country" of South Vietnam which was a US creation. At the beginning of Kennedy's presidency there were 600 US military "advisors" in Vietnam and within three years his aggressive military policy had increased this neo-colonial intervention and military force to 17,000 US soldiers with tentative plans to deploy even more forces. Kennedy's approval to assassinate South Vietnamese President Diem and replace him with a more cooperative puppet leader had the effect of expanding Vietnamese resistance and the war. The eventual toll from Kennedy's role in expanding this colonial and militaristic war in Vietnam War would be 58,000 US deaths which included 10,000 Latinos and close to a million Vietnamese. Another result of this destructive and costly war was the eventual death of the Great Society and extensive federal programs that attempted to improve the level of education, healthcare and eliminate poverty.



JFK escalated military intervention & Johnson expanded the war

A nuclear treaty with the Soviets, a landing on the moon, efforts to improve healthcare and ironically, his establishment of a national Commission on the Status of Women for discussion

of gender issues were political bright spots for Kennedy. While all of these major issues demanded his utmost attention, unfortunately, much of Kennedy's time was spent at public expense on adulterous womanizing as the White House soon became a true Camelot party center as his staff secretly shuffled numerous females in and out of his quarters on a regular basis. During his first year in office JFK did nothing to advance voter registration rights for minorities. He declared publicly that his Attorney General brother Bobby had advised him that voting rights were not under federal jurisdiction as it was the responsibility of the states to reform and resolve this problem.

Also, his civil rights campaign promise to African-Americans to confront the problem of housing discrimination became a low priority for him and was generally ignored as polls at that time showed that most Americans did not see this issue as important. Impatient with segregation and false promises by Kennedy, leaders and members of the Civil Rights Movement soon became more active and militant as pro-integration sit-ins at restaurants and pickets at businesses accelerated in the Carolinas, Alabama and Georgia where protesters were brutally beaten, gassed and jailed by police and Klan thugs. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had criticized Kennedy for his vacillation and inaction on civil rights and the president responded by verbally attacking this young organization as being the one responsible for the police violence perpetrated upon student protesters!

The increasing violence and the use of police dogs and billy clubs against peaceful civil rights groups was being widely televised to the US public and abroad. Reacting to this pressure Kennedy finally sent federal marshals to Mississippi to defend an African-American named James Meredith who encountered mob violence and rioting as he attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi. In all of the other southern states the struggles for integration by the freedom riders, protesters at sit-ins and young people on picket lines were left undefended as the violence from racist police, the Klan and other segregationists went unopposed by the so-called US Justice Department. By 1963, the growing scenes of brutality and attacks against protesters particularly in Alabama were being beamed around the world and Kennedy became worried about his credibility. This prompted him to eventually send federal troops to stop the Alabama violence.

Growing domestic and international political pressure and criticism forced Kennedy to make a public statement and finally take a firm position on civil rights which he did in June of 1963. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and other civil rights activists were becoming more impatient and angry with Kennedy over his opportunistic lack of commitment and lack of concrete support for the people who were being beaten and killed for the cause of civil rights. These leaders then organized the huge and successful nationwide 1963 March on Washington which was opposed by Kennedy who felt that it would be critical of his administration's weak stance on civil rights. After being given some input into the March by black leaders a less than enthusiastic Kennedy grudgingly supported this historic event.

The idealistic Camelot tale where a rich patron helped poor Latinos is a myth

The 1960 campaign promises made by Kennedy to Latinos in exchange for their broad support and hard work in getting out the vote turned out to be hollow, unfulfilled and disrespectful. The poll taxes required by certain states for voting which directly affected Latinos remained intact under Kennedy. Also, the dangling promise of more government positions for Latinos in return for the time consuming campaign work and voter turnout that was mobilized by the Viva Kennedy clubs resulted in nothing but a good political sales pitch

by his administration. A couple of token crumbs were tossed out by the Camelot presidency as one Latino was appointed to a low-level judicial position while another was appointed as the ambassador to distant Costa Rica.



Political movements developed in the 1960's for justice & to end the war

While these two appointments were beneficial for these individuals they had no concrete effect on increasing Mexican-American political power nor improving the daily lives of Latinos throughout the country's barrios. Before his death Kennedy and his campaign consultants were preparing for the 1964 presidential race and faced a close election in Texas that was up for grabs. After three long years Kennedy was finally persuaded by his campaign handlers to acknowledge and meet with a Latino civil rights organization in order to help get out the vital Mexican vote in Texas. This brief encounter consisted of dropping by a 1963 Texas state LULAC event for 17 minutes and allowing wife Jackie to give a few nice pleasantries in Spanish before quickly leaving. Thus, in return for all of the time, labor and voter turnout efforts that were contributed by Latinos to Kennedy's candidacy they had been given the new and ongoing political response of being ignored and taken for granted. It was under the presidency of Lyndon Johnson who was pressured by mass political movements from below that real progress was achieved for minorities with the passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts, aid to education, healthcare, jobs training and the war on poverty. What sabotaged all of these constructive social policies of the Great Society was Johnson's fatal decision to continue and expand the disastrous Vietnam War that ultimately ended in defeat. This historical debacle was accompanied by a wasteful human and financial cost that undermined the equal restructuring of our society and its future resources for years to come.

John Kennedy may have meant well, but he was in way over his head as President and was beset by many personal contradictions and compulsive obsessions that distracted him from confronting the urgent problems faced by our society. This lack of competency and focus caused him to lose his bearings and credibility by promising everything to everyone in an unprincipled and opportunistic manner. Kennedy once stated, "I had different identities, and this was a useful way of expressing each without compromising the others". An historical perspective and objective analysis of his political work is not meant to disrespect his family especially the later work of Bobby and Edward whose political consciousness developed further than that of their older brother. Many people's feelings may be hurt by the truth, but an unbiased and factual assessment of Kennedy's Latino "connection" and the persistent Camelot myth which was created after his death by wife Jackie is needed.

Many people still naively cling to and promote this illusory tale which is totally devoid of reality. Somehow, this myth depicting the exalted patron prince from Boston who supposedly had a "special connection and affection for Mexicans" verges on a saintly type of romantic hero worship. What Kennedy inadvertently did contribute for civil rights was his verbalizing and dissemination of the principles of equality, progress and the need for change. While his actions on these principles were limited, more importantly they took hold in the young minds of a new generation who decided to organize political movements and struggle to make these principles a reality. The political and historical lessons to be learned in the real world by contrasting factual events with the enduring Kennedy cuentos and myths is that history is not created by a theory of heroes and messianic Camelots, rather it is made by the masses of people who become politically conscious, organize themselves

and proceed with clear objectives to improve their lives and those of their families. This is what won the victories of the 1960's civil rights and anti-war movements which were driven by the broad involvement of African-Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asians, Native Americans and other progressive sectors. Those who gave their lives for these struggles for equality and rights during this period of history are the real heroes and not the self-promoted savior aristocrats from above whose self-interest is placed ahead of the social interests of the mass of people.

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