

INTERVIEWEE: HECTOR GARCIA

INTERVIEWER: DAVID G. MC COMB

July 9, 1969

M: Let me identify the tape first of all. This is an interview with Dr. Hector Garcia. I'm in his office in Corpus Christi, Texas, at 1315 Bright Street. The date is July 9, 1969, and my name is David McComb.

Now you gave me this copy of the GI Forum program of the 21st Annual Founders' Day Banquet which has a capsule biography of you here, which I will place into the record so that anybody using this tape will have the opportunity to use this.

There are several points about this that I'd like to ask you about. In the first place it says you were born in Mexico, and I'd like to know when you came to the United States.

G: Well, Mr. McComb, I came to the United States when I was only about three and a half to four years old. I was not quite four and I was a little bit over three, so I would say approximately four years old.

M: Did you come to Corpus--your family?

G: No, my father emigrated to Mercedes, Mercedes is in the southern part of the State of Texas along the Rio Grande River, and there he set up his business and we were actually raised there and went to school.

M: What kind of business was he in?

G: He had a general grocery store at that time with his brothers, who are still living in Mercedes.

M: And then you went through school, and it says here you graduated from the University of Texas in 1936.

G: That's correct, University of Texas BA, Austin, Texas, 1936.

M: Graduated from the University of Texas School of Medicine, got a Doctor of Medicine in 1940, and an internship in Omaha, Nebraska.

G: That's right.

M: How did you happen to go to Nebraska?

G: Well, when I was getting my Doctor's degree at Galveston, of course, we met some people over there who recommended Saint Joseph's Hospital which is the teaching hospital of Creighton University, so that I thought I'd go over there and take a look at Nebraskan fields.

M: And then of course you went into World War II.

G: That's correct. I volunteered as an infantry officer from Nebraska when I finished my surgical residency, because I had stayed two years. So I volunteered to go into the military service as an infantry officer.

M: And then you were in the Major Medical Corps?

G: That's right, I served in the Medical Corps.

M: Then after the war, you founded American GI Forum in 1948. Now I'd like to know what motivated you to do this. Why did you set up the GI Forum? Now it pretty well explains what this is, but why did you do this?

G: Well, Mr. McComb, actually the way the American GI Forum started--when I came back from the service, I happened to have my office next to the Veterans Administration Office, I met our congressman, John E. Lyle in Italy before he got elected to Congress, John E. Lyle happened to be a good friend of President Lyndon Johnson. So Congressman Lyle was in the same theater of operations with me, European Theater of Operations, and he said he was coming to Corpus Christi, and of course by that time my brother, J. A. Garcia was living and practicing in Corpus Christi. So I came back to Corpus Christi--I happened to have an office next to our present congressman of

today, Congressman John Young, who was at that time getting out of the Navy, and I set up my office next to the Veterans Administration. They needed doctors at that time, doctors were scarce to start with, and they put me on a contract basis or a "fee basis," so I got to know the veterans from this area. In fact, I was the "veterans' doctor" although I was not working under the Veterans Administration per se, I was merely a private doctor helping out with individual veteran's cases, and getting paid on a piecemeal basis.

Well, it happened that at that time the returning sick veterans met some opposition in hospitalization here because the Navy hospital would say, "This is a naval hospital, not a veterans hospital." So more or less, although we had a certain amount of beds under contract, the Veterans Administration limited us. In fact they practically limited us to emergencies. So one day in 1948, actually about February, we got together. All the veterans, not necessarily the Mexican-Americans but all of us, to protest the actions of the naval hospital in Corpus Christi in limiting the number of veterans who could go to the hospital. And also practically requiring that they be emergencies, which means they would be dying. We thought it was an unfair deal, so we got together a group of veterans, all of us, blacks, Mexican-Americans and Anglos to protest this limitation.

Well, at that time we were starting, the veterans schools, which were more or less "basic educational courses." No sooner had we achieved a certain success of victory in opening the Naval Hospital, because the number of beds were increased, that the veterans pointed out to me that the government was holding back the "subsistence checks" of many of these veterans who were taking basic academic classes. Now, of course, at that

time most of the veterans were Mexican-Americans, and they averaged less than two years of school. So they were going to quit because they needed the money, they had no other jobs, their families were pressuring them and wives were getting upset. So they said, "Doctor, let's get organized together and protest the Veterans Administration's failure to send us the subsistence checks." So then we got organized, not necessarily as a Mexican-American organization, although then by necessity we were working on veteran's education. And then I got to know the schools and the educational system of the basic educational courses, so that night we decided we'd go ahead and get organized and of course the name "American GI Forum" came up at that meeting here in Corpus Christi in March 26, 1948. I was elected and the vice chairman was an anglo and the secretary was an anglo and the treasurer was a Mexican-American, Mr. Montoya--Greg Montoya.

So then we decided that we had to help the veterans because of the bad conditions of other situations. So we organized American GI Forum groups all over this south Texas area. Now the name "American" -- although we are Americans, we have been subjected to a lot of discriminatory practices. One of these practices is we are told "You are not Americans, you are Mexicans." And I said, "Well, we are American citizens of Mexican origin, so let's point out to the people we are really Americans." "GI" merely means that we are ex-soldiers or ex-G.I.'s. The word "Forum" was like the Roman open forum derived from the fact that we were hoping that this would be an open meeting, and open discussion meeting for everybody taking part.

So by the end of the year 1948 we were in many cities in this area. In practically all the area from south of San Antonio to the Valley, and certainly from Laredo to Corpus Christi. So we became a statewide organization known as the American GI Forum of Texas, the first meeting

Being held in Corpus Christi to organize statewide.

M: Did you run into a great deal of discrimination toward Mexican-Americans?

G: Oh yes, definitely we did, because at this time no sooner had we gotten organized in this manner than one of my patients here, Mrs. Felix Longoria -- came to see me about discrimination against her deceased husband. We sponsored several groups, one of them we called a young girls club -- Orchidia Club -- and the chairman of this group was Miss Sara Moreno. Sara Moreno, a young lady at that time, was a sister of this Mrs. Felix Longoria. Mrs. Felix Longoria was a widow that had moved here to Corpus Christi with her daughter Adelita because her husband, Felix Longoria, had been killed in the Philippines in World War II.

So Sara Moreno comes in and says, "Dr. Garcia, we have been refused the use of the Mathis State Park, they don't allow Mexicans in the pavilion." And I thought that was horrible. Right after that the San Diego band, I believe, was denied use of the pavilion.

M: In the state park?

G: Yes, in the state park in Mathis, Texas. So right away we took action on that and I think we had a certain amount of success. Well, coming to the point here, about one week later or two weeks later, my memory is not exact on this date but not too far, Sara Moreno comes back again. And she said, "You know, Doctor, my sister is very sick, crying very much." And I said, "Why, Sarita?" [Sara said,] "Well, you see, the Felix Longorias are from Three Rivers--." And Felix was to be brought back for re-burial in Three Rivers. Mrs. Longoria, in respect to the tradition and culture of a Mexican-American and the Catholic, gave the choice to Felix's mother and father as to where they wanted Felix brought back and reburied. They chose their hometown, being of course, Three Rivers. They wanted him buried there.

Well, during the time that Mrs. Felix Longoria was making the arrangements in Three Rivers with the Rice Funeral Home, they refused her the use of the chapel. By this time Felix Longoria was already on his way back. Originally being interred in Luzon, Philippines, was being brought back for reburial. So Sara brought over Mrs. Longoria with her little daughter Adelita, who was just three or four years at that time, and she was also crying. I thought it was a horrible shame that a soldier who had died for his country would have been refused the use of the funeral home. They only funeral home, there [in Three Rivers]. To quote the funeral home director, "The whites wouldn't like it." I thought it was an awful travesty of decency, justice and certainly Christianity that this war hero would be refused a decent, humanitarian burial!

Well, we tried to deal with the director of the funeral home, the Rice Funeral Home. He wouldn't move. He said, "No, we're not going to let the Mexicans use the chapel of our funeral home." Which actually meant not using the funeral home.

M: Was this the only one in the city?

G: It was the only one in the city, and of course it made no difference even though we had a separate cemetery. They had separate cemeteries for Anglos and Mexicans. Yes, this was the only funeral home in the city.

M: It was privately owned?

G: Funeral homes are privately owned, although they get a state charter or permission or license from the state.

So we tried to convince everyone it was wrong but the funeral home didn't change. In desperation somebody said, "Call Senator Lyndon Johnson."

M: Did you know him at this time?

G: No, I never met him. I never knew him. I never helped him politically because you see first in 1940 to 1942 I had been in Nebraska. I had been in Austin four years from '32 to '36; I'd been in Galveston from '36 to '40, and I'd been in Nebraska from '40 to '42. Of course, I had heard of him, I had never met him, I was not that involved in politics and neither was my family, although I met Congressman Lyle and he talked very highly about Senator Johnson. In fact, I gave Congressman John E. Lyle a ride in our ambulance from where we were stationed into Naples port so he could take a boat back -- as Congressman!

So he talked very highly about then Senator Lyndon Johnson. Of course Lyndon Johnson was well liked in Corpus Christi, though remember, Mr. McComb, I had not lived in Corpus Christi. My home was south Texas and it was not Lyndon Johnson's congressional district. So somebody says, "Call Senator Johnson. He'll help you. He's a fair man, and he likes Mexican people."

I put in a call to Senator Lyndon Johnson in Washington and of course by that time I had been practicing medicine here in Corpus Christi for two years. We had run against a racist wall in Three Rivers, and this wall was a wall of racist attitude, discrimination and hate. I called Senator Johnson and he said, "Well, Dr. Garcia, let me assure you, tell Mrs. Longoria I'll help!" I was speaking for Mrs. Longoria, not necessarily for the GI Forum, and the Longoria family out of Three Rivers. We had been meeting every day and every night for about two weeks in desperation. Still we wanted Texas to bury Felix Longoria. He was a Texan. So finally we reached a point where nothing could be done. Then I called Senator Johnson

and this is what he told me. He said, "Dr. Garcia, I promise you this. You try to talk to the Governor and try to talk to everyone and see if Felix can be buried in Three Rivers, after all, this is where he should be buried, and if not, I promise you that we'll bury him with full military honors at the National Cemetery in Arlington."

We continued. We continued trying to get an arrangement and trying to make a deal with the funeral home and the city. By this time of course everybody was involved. The Governor at this time, if I recall right, was Buford Jester. He said, well, we could get it settled. But the breaking point was simply this, Mr. McComb, that the community of Three Rivers, I'm talking mostly about the English-speaking community, would not stop calling Senator Johnson horrible names orally and in print. I still have copies of the Three Rivers newspaper. I think eventually the funeral home would have acceded to the use of the chapel, but the idea was that he could be buried there if we would negate Lyndon Johnson. The family, and thank the Lord for that, the Longoria family and the widow were honorable people and they were so honorable they said, "Dr. Garcia, we will never go back on Senator Johnson." Of course I wouldn't either. So it ended that they did not stop calling the Senator Johnson awful names. By that time, in all due justice to the Governor and to the state officials, they would bury him in Texas. They would send the National Guard and officers and other representatives of the government to bury Longoria. The family was willing provided that Senator Johnson's name would be kept in the proper position of respect and dignity. After all, he had been the one who had helped us. The family's request was rejected.

M: But they wouldn't do that?

G: They wouldn't. They kept on insulting the Senator publicly and also in print. And I mean horrible insults just because he had acted as a decent Texas by trying to get one of his own Texans buried there. I could not understand the antagonism or the viciousness of their insults toward Johnson. What had he done wrong? Nothing. He was a human being, a true humanitarian, and of course, a true Christian man at that time to us. So no, we decided we were going to raise the money to send all the Longoria family in an airplane to Washington for the funeral and this we did. By this time, Longoria's body, or remains, were already being returned. But he need never stop here in Texas! He was taken directly to Washington where with the help of Senator Lyndon Johnson and President--I think it was President Truman--Felix Longoria was buried in Arlington with full military honors. And President Truman sent General [Harry] Vaughn, if I recall right, as his personal representative. And the Longoria family, with money raised by Mexican-American people and the infant American GI Forum, sent all the family over there.

And this is how I got to know this great man, who came to us in a moment of sadness, need and suffering. And this action restored a great amount of faith in the system, and certainly in the State, and in our government. I don't know what I would have done at that moment without the help of Senator Lyndon Johnson because our people were very restless and very, very upset and certainly we were very unhappy.

M: Did Johnson attend the ceremony at Arlington?

G: I did not attend myself, I don't recall at this time. Because no sooner had Felix been buried than the Texas legislature decided they were going to hold an investigation, and the investigation really merely meant at this

time to try to embarrass me and to try to embarrass Senator Johnson. The whole purpose of the investigation was an appointment of a committee, "a whitewash committee," to prove -- mind you, Dr. McComb -- that there was no discrimination! You see, the soldier was already buried, you know, the man was going to be buried. Then what was the object of this committee? Of course, they already had their guns set against: "the American GI Forum" in its infancy, Dr. Hector Garcia, and Senator Johnson. I don't think this investigation was aimed at the Longoria family.

So they held this investigation at Three Rivers, a whitewash committee, headed by a representative from, I think, Cuero, who was chairman.

M: When did you finally meet Lyndon Johnson personally?

G: I met him sometime thereafter, I think in one of his campaigns when he came back over here for re-election. I'm not quite certain. I remember I met him -- at one time we were having an American GI Forum meeting in Corpus Christi at the Lamar School, I think it must have been in the early part of '49 or '50. It must have been 1950, I remember it was election year for somebody, and he came in with Congressman John E. Lyle who was still our congressman. And he talked to us. I met this tall, good-looking, young senator. Of course, we went to thank him, I said, "Senator Johnson, I want to thank you because I think you've done a great thing for our people, and our country, and our soldiers." And I remember his words quite easily today. He said, "Dr. Garcia -- " of course now he calls me Hector and I appreciate that because I feel he considers me a friend of his and prefer to be his friend. He said, "Dr. Garcia, I think greatly of your organization and there is only one [piece of] advice I want to give you. You can achieve anything you want if you just take it easy and slowly."

And then he talked to our American GI Forum group. He addressed our group, and of course it was a great occasion because at that time it was rare to have any politician or certainly any U. S. senator addressing this Mexican group of people and veterans!

M: Have the Mexican-Americans supported Johnson ever since then in elections?

G: I supported President Johnson and Senator Johnson, Lyndon Johnson, every election since that time, and I think in every election we -- the Mexican-Americans -- have given him 98 percent of the votes, and I think that is certainly a tribute to this man. And I say this, I don't think we have ever had to spend a single cent in Senator Johnson's or President Johnson's or Vice President Johnson's campaign. We never had to spend a penny in his campaigns. By that I mean we didn't have to ask for contributions. Our people, the Mexican-Americans here and the Mexican people in Mexico know who Lyndon Johnson was and is -- "Es Nuestro Verdadero Amigo."

You have to remember also that he visited in Mexico, in 1966 or so. I [would] like to remind you that I was over there with Vice President Humphrey in March 30, 1968, to sign the Treaty of Tlatelolco in Mexico City, and this is a historical moment for us. I rode with the Vice President in his plane and of course the Vice President was representing President Lyndon Johnson at the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which you know is the prohibition of nuclear weapons in the Latin American zone.

I was there at the President's Palace when the announcement was made that President Johnson would not seek re-election. When this announcement was made there was great sadness from the President of Mexico, his staff and his family, and everyone present. They regretted the fact that he was not going to run. And when I went into the streets the next day some of the

people told me [they were disappointed]. I could read the papers and talk to some of the people. They were greatly disappointed that this great friend of the Mexican people was not going to run.

M: How did you feel about it?

G: I felt bad. I felt terrible. I actually felt that the reasons, whatever they may have been for his not running, were only injustices against this great man. This great American who was trying so hard to do everything for everyone. And yet in a way because of the times and the Viet Nam situation he was unable to continue. I think if Viet Nam had been settled before the election or one month before the deadline for the election, he would have run. But I felt badly and I have been around. I have been in the United Nations and been traveling throughout the world. I know a little bit about history, Mr. McComb, and I still say this: when the history of our times is written -- of this era -- Lyndon Johnson is going to come up mighty high. These problems of these people, all of this restlessness, when we say that we have failed in Viet Nam, all of us failed -- from the President on down. I think if President Johnson had continued as President, and I wish he had, I don't think our situation here, the internal conflict of group against group, or race hating other races, I don't think it would have developed. I think his domestic program had achieved a certain amount of acceptability and agreement between all the groups and, therefore, internal stability and peace.

I campaigned for Stevenson, and let me tell you something else here. I campaigned for Kennedy and Johnson. However, Lyndon Johnson was the only politician that I ever knew who would openly go with Stevenson and campaign for him. After all, I was Stevenson's manager for south Texas, because no one else would support him. I know Johnson actively helped him.

M: Is this in '52 or '56?

G: The first time he ran.

M: '52.

G: '52, yes. Johnson was there with us.

M: Johnson was the only one?

G: Johnson was the only one in Texas who helped and traveled statewide.

When we had Stevenson in San Antonio, there was no Democratic politician who would come out and be seen with him! Senator Johnson took him in his car and stood with him and would introduce him. This is a great tribute to a man who was faithful to his country and faithful to his party.

But coming now to the point that I was trying to point out, I campaigned for Kennedy and I campaigned for Johnson in the first presidential race for Johnson as vice president--vice presidential candidate of Kennedy. I was going to Chicago and New York and the east wherever we had contacts with the Mexican-Americans. And of course I have a lot of close Negro friends and as soon as he became president, the Negroes--the blacks--also had accepted Johnson as a humanitarian and as a good President and this I know because they would tell me. And we minority members talk in sincerity with each other. So he had been accepted as a great humanitarian and as a great President. And I think this necessarily will again come out when this history is written.

M: Was Humphrey surprised at this announcement when you were down in Mexico?

G: Of course. His eyes were full of tears--and I remember his saying -- "You know they have a lot of smog in Mexico," this is tragic -- but he was not surprised. He knew it. But he was still greatly moved and became saddened and his eyes became moist and other people's eyes became moist. I had

breakfast with the Vice President the next day and he was still saddened about this thing. I know because we went and lay a wreath at the tomb of the heroes of Mexico, called the Monument of Independence for the Heroes of Mexico, and he was sad--and so was Mrs. Humphrey, and so were the Mexican officials. It was a sad day for all of us at that moment. And I'm glad I didn't come back on the airplane. I didn't come back because they were flying to Washington and my home is Corpus Christi and I had my practice, so I begged the Vice President's excuse and permission to leave the presidential plane and I came by myself. But it was a sad day for all of us, and all of us who had specially become involved in, say, the civil rights movement. I like to think of myself, as being a spokesman for the poor, because I have been poor. We in the Rio Grande Valley know what it means to be poor. I think the poor people, who ever they may be--anglos or blacks or whatever they may be--knew they had a friend in Lyndon Johnson.

And all of his programs were made for the benefit of the poor. Yes, certainly we were also saddened.

M: Did you get involved in that 1956 fight with Shivers?

G: Yes, sir, I was involved. I have always been asked this question. Generally speaking, I have politically been against the Texas governors, I sincerely feel that they do not have the interest of Mexican-Americans at heart. Up to now I have practically been against them with the exception of the November election where, as a true Democrat, I have supported the candidacy. I was involved in the Shivers fight and was one of the maverick group that was chased out of the Chicago convention. We were not kicked out--of course, we were actually just asked to leave. The question was asked of me: "How is

it that you can be against the Texas governors and be such a great friend of Lyndon Johnson, President Johnson, Senator Johnson or Vice President Johnson?" And I said, "Well, because first I served my country in wartime. I think President Johnson has always liked Mexican-Americans." He has chosen me I'm sure over (perhaps I'm just imagining) the wishes of the Texas governors because I have received, as you know Dr. McComb, many high honors. All the recognition with the exception of my first recognition from President Kennedy, I have received from either Vice President Johnson or President Johnson.

But I was one of those that was removed from the Chicago convention by Governor Shivers because I was a "liberal maverick."

M: Do you think that Lyndon Johnson has led the state party as well as he should have?

G: To me Lyndon Johnson has been what I wish every Texan would be. I think a Texan should be first an American and then a Texan. I think, of course most Texans are provincial in their politics. I think Johnson was never provincial in politics. He certainly may have been subjected to some of the pressures of state politics, which is the conservatism of big money. Yet his heart was all right and he was never completely controlled or even controlled by the rich people who helped him financially. Because I think a representative in the sense of representing the people should not just represent the Mexicans or the Anglos or the rich or the poor, he should represent everyone. I think Johnson did this at all times. Where he would help his friends who were affluent, he would also help the poor. He helped the Anglos, he helped the blacks and helped the Mexican-Americans. He was truly a people's representative.

As far as leading the party, yes, I think he led the party as well as he could under the circumstances, and retrospectively he was a brave man. He certainly ended up by being an American first, and serving not only his state but his country. And I hoped other Texans would follow suit, follow the footsteps of Johnson who came up being a great President. Otherwise I will tell you one thing, Mr. McComb, Texas is never going to have another President.

M: Did you have anything to do with the founding of the Viva Kennedy clubs?

G: Yes.

M: Were you one of the founders?

G: I am one of the founders of the Viva Kennedy Club. The first step was when we have received a call through a friend of ours who was working with then Senator John F. Kennedy. This friend of ours named Carlos McCormick, who in spite of his name was a Mexican-American, and is a Mexican-American. He also happened to be one of the American GI Forum state officers out of Arizona. The American GI Forum, although not a political group in itself, certainly its individuals were interested in politics. It is one of the solutions we must use in trying to achieve our goal for first-class American citizenship. So Carlos said, "Well, you want to come to New York and meet the Kennedys? He's going to run for President." I said, "Yes, I'm very much interested."

So first Senator John F. Kennedy invited us to this civil rights conference in New York. At that time I think, when was it, in early '59, I guess. In late '59, if not in early '60, we went to New York. This is where I met Vice President Humphrey, at that time Senator Humphrey, he was speaking to a group of New Yorkers at a hotel, perhaps the Waldorf-Astoria, and we listened to his speech. I got a ticket because I couldn't afford \$100 for

a plate, so somebody gave me a ticket. So we went over to the dinner and at that time Congressman Gonzalez was along with us. Then, of course, he was not a congressman. So we went over there -- after the dinner we met Senator John F. Kennedy. I think this was in the Waldorf-Astoria and this is w
President Kennedy.

There we took a group picture, and I still have the picture which I will be glad to give you, and in this picture the Mexican-American Viva Kennedy leadership were in this picture with Kennedy. We were: Henry B. Gonzalez; Carlos McCormick; Carlos' father-in-law, Mr. Ralph Estrada; Hank Lopez [from] Los Angeles; Albert Pena [from] San Antonio; two New Yorkers, one of them being a Puerto Rican; and, of course, myself. So then Senator Kennedy took this picture with us and I remember quite effectively kidding the cameraman saying, "I don't think you're going to get a picture -- you should use a bulb." And the photographer, who was using a 35 millimeter, I think, said, "No, I'm going to get a good picture." And, of course, he didn't get a good picture. It was a little cloudy. Then he said, "I want you to go to Washington and meet my brother Bobby, who's going to tell you what to do."

Well, we went -- by this time Albert Pena came in and Carlos McCormick and Estrada and Gonzalez and Hank Lopez from Los Angeles, and myself and the two Puerto Ricans. We met with Bobby at the Democratic headquarters there, I think on Avenue K, where we went ahead and had a meeting. At this time we told Robert Kennedy that we would like to work for the candidate, John F. Kennedy, but we would work at it by ourselves. That we didn't want to work under any state Democratic setup because we felt, like we still do, that the state Democratic setup would only use Mexican-Americans and not give us the proper recognition. So we said we would not work under

the state setup, so he said, "You will work directly under the Kennedy umbrella."

By that time, of course, the vice presidential nominee had not been chosen. So we at that time organized the "Viva Kennedy Club" then as soon as the nominee was chosen, we organized the "Viva Kennedy-Viva Johnson"--but we still refused to work under any state Democratic setup.

While I always felt I didn't try to outwit President Kennedy because he seemed to me such an open, warm human being, I always felt that Robert Kennedy was a shrewd individual. He was very wise and I said, "Well, I will start kidding Robert Kennedy." And he said, "Dr. Garcia, I understand you founded this group, American GI Forum, and although you are not in politics, what do you think of my brother's candidacy?" I said, "Well, we'll give your brother 98 percent of the votes, since we have always given Johnson on other races 98 percent of the votes. I'm sure we'll probably get you that much." He said, "Well, are you sure?" And I said, "Yes, I'm sure." And I said, "If things go right, we may give you 99 percent of the votes." Now, as it happens, on the first race we gave him 99 percent of the votes of all the Mexican-Americans in Texas and throughout the nation.

And I said, "Incidentally, I'm glad to meet you. I'm glad to finally meet you. In case you don't know, we were neighbors for a little while." And of course I could imagine Mr. Robert Kennedy's brain cells were rushing around saying, "what does this Mexican mean, that he's a neighbor of mine!"

He said, "Dr. Garcia, I don't understand?" Very politely, I said, "I'll have you know, Mr. Kennedy, I trained the first amphibian brigades of World War II out of Camp Edwards, Massachusetts. This camp happened to be across the bay from your home. Everybody would point and say, there is the Kennedy home or mansion. So you see, we were neighbors." At that time, Mr. Robert

Kennedy, or Bobby as everybody called him, started smiling and said, "You know what, Dr. Garcia, I think I'll tell my brother that story."

So right there we organized the Viva Kennedy Clubs. And then we had another meeting as soon as President Johnson was chosen. We sent out the "Viva Kennedy-Viva Johnson Club" cards here in Texas. I was the national coordinator. I think we had honorary chairmen. I think Montoya was one of them and Senator Dennis Chavez and others. After one of our American GI Forum National meetings in Chicago, in August of 1959, we set up the National Viva Clubs using as nucleus the statewide GI Forum groups in 24 states.

M: Did it upset you any that Johnson was thinking about running for the presidency at the same time?

G: At that time, no. No, let me tell you. I consider since you are writing a historical thing--I will tell you an incident.

M: This is going to be in the record.

G: It's history, I think we have to be honest with history. I was asked by Senator Johnson to take a survey among the Southwest to find out what did people think of Senator Johnson for President. It was getting close to the national convention. I ran a survey on my own, talking mostly to Mexican-Americans, Hispanos and Spanish surnamed people. There was no question, Kennedy was the first choice. In fact my report that I still conserve, sent to Senator Johnson, was simply this: "That as far as the Mexican-Americans were concerned, he couldn't win." That my suggestion to him would be to run as vice president, and I think later that he could win as president. And I think, Dr. McComb, I was one of the few people at that time who guessed this thing right. And I still have this report

as a document. I still have the original with my signature. Because by that time the Kennedy enchatment, or vision, or charisma had spread to our Mexican people. He seemed like an idealist. It was not so much that Johnson was not an idealist, it was the fear again, to us that he was still a Texan, and we felt he could be controlled by the Texas interests which are against us. But I was one of the few ones, I said, and I told him the truth and the truth came out.

M: You talk about delivering 99 percent of the votes and this sort of thing. How do you go about delivering that vote? What do you do to contact your people?

G: Our contacts were through the American GI Forum, being a veterans' national organization. Although we do not participate in politics these are the people who work with us. The Mexican-American people have respected us from the very beginning, they know we are not going to sell out. They trust our judgment and decisions, no matter who threatens us, what the pressure is, what the price is, we are never going to abandon a Mexicano for any cause or reason. We have no machinery. We have no money. We never bought a poll tax in the old days. Therefore, our people know that when we recommend a candidate, whoever he may be, a black, or an Anglo, a Mexican-American, our people know we think this man is going to be for our people, for our problems. So we have the people's trust and faith, and it is the leadership of the American GI Forum that they follow. It's just a fantastic thing, Dr. McComb, that they would do this. For example, in the last race here while we're supporting a Mexican-American candidate in the May primaries, by November election our candidate was eliminated, so we switched over to a liberal Anglo. While in the primary the liberal Anglo friend didn't get 5 percent of the vote, she or he would get 95 percent of the votes in the November election. So, this is the trust and

respect that we have established by being faithful to our people for twenty years. There's nothing else, we have no machinery. And we won like this throughout the nation, the same way. This is the same reason why Humphrey carried Texas the last election.

M: All you have to do then is recommend somebody, and your people will read this?

G: That's right, that's all it takes. In fact we get frequent calls here and every time, "What do you want us to do, doctor?" As I say, I know it sounds pretentious, but I know I'm talking to you for historical basis. We have no weapon, this idea that we have control just isn't so, and I challenge anyone to ever prove that we have any control over the people other than persuasion and judgement and faithfulness to them. In other words, when the little man comes here, he gets attention. He may have an immigration problem, problems with the police, with payments, with poverty, with sickness, with the hospitals, he comes to us and I pick up the phone and help him. Let me give you an example.

I well remember a specific case that was about the time of the Kennedy-Johnson election. A mother came in here, and it happened that this mother was pregnant and very nervous. And I said, "What is your problem?" She said, "My boy is in the Marine guardhouse in Camp Pendleton, California. I'm going to pieces, doctor." And I could see she was going to pieces. And she said, "All I want is to talk to my son and find out what is happening to him. Perhaps he is dead." So I used my telephone at my expense and called the commanding officer of the brig or the guardhouse at Camp Pendleton and I identified myself simply, "Dr. Hector Garcia, a doctor whose patient this lady is, and she is very sick. She wants to talk to her son." And he said, "Well, I'm sorry I cannot give you any such

information." The lady was listening on the extension in the other office. I said, "Well, you are doing a very cruel thing to this woman because she is sick. A mother needs talking to her son," I said, "for compassion and humanitarian sake, let her talk." "No, sir," and he won't tell me a thing. He was a major. I said, "Major, do me a favor, don't leave there because pretty soon I'm going to have somebody call you from Washington, and you are going to have to talk." This lady got very sick. She was about to have labor pains and miscarry.

I got on the telephone, and I called Senator Johnson and Senator Johnson talked to the lady. He said, "Don't go, lady, I'll get this man called on the telephone. And in five minutes after he hung up this major was calling apologetically from Camp Pendleton. And these are the favors I do for people, through people like Johnson and Congressman Young and the Kennedys and other people. I'm the helpful go-between. This is why we have faith, and this faith has been built up with the federal government. I think we're building it up on a state level, although it hasn't reached this point. In other words, we Mexican-Americans would rather trust federal officers, officials, presidents, vice presidents, senators, congressmen rather than Texas officials. Of course, it's changing.

When Senator Johnson became Vice President he said, "Dr. Hector, I want a Mexican-American secretary, get me one." Well, I had a young girl here named Angelita Hernandez, who was my secretary at that time, a very charming young girl who is now married. He was ready to hire her, and Angelita Hernandez decided that she was going to get too homesick and she didn't go. I didn't ask him, I didn't ask him to put anybody in there. He did it on his own.

There is another point. We petitioned Vice President Johnson previously and President Johnson when he came into office that we wanted certain positions in Washington. One of them was in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, one of them was the Commissioner on Civil Rights. He came into office in '64--this was in '65. We wanted a Mexican-American man in the Civil Service, we wanted a Mexican-American in the civil rights section of the Attorney General's office. Well, finally he agreed that he would place a Mexican-American in the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and he went ahead. We submitted a list of names. And you remember Mr. Vicente Ximenes, who was a friend of Johnson, was chosen. We were called up to Washington for the installation of Mr. Ximenes as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commissioner, and without anybody's knowledge.

While in Washington at the installation and out of the clear blue sky, he said, "I have created the Interagency Committee for Mexican-American Affairs and I appointed as the chairman of this new Cabinet level committee, Mr. Vicente Ximenes and under him would be the Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Equal Employment Opportunity, Secretary of the War on Poverty, Sargent Shriver, and down the line." And mind you, no one had ever asked him for the creation of this agency, nobody knew anything about it. Nobody had heard about it, and certainly how would we know, because we had no precedent. He did it because he wanted to help his Mexican-American friends.

We had another problem at that time. The "SER" organization, which means Service Employment and Re-development in skills, had been proposed for many months but never funded! We wanted "SER" which is a joint operation of American GI Forum and LULAC, to place people in jobs for job training, manpower developing, migrant education and also skill

bank. At a White House conference, the first White House conference we attended, I complained to President Johnson. I was there; so was Mr. Raul Ornelas from LULAC, Mr. Augustine Flores from the American GI Forum, Mr. Luis Tellez from the American GI Forum (Mr. Vicente Ximenes at that time was in South America with the Panama AID), and there were other people. I said, "Mr. President, you know I wish you would go ahead and get us the money for 'SER'." He said, "You mean it hasn't been funded?" I said, "No, Mr. President." He said, "Jacobsen," (he called him Jake) "I want you to go over there right away and before these people leave get them the "SER" money." And before we left the White House Conference, and I remember as we were sitting at a table having coffee and cake, within the hour "Jacobsen" came back. He said, "Mr. President, they will be funded."

Well, it's those little things, Mr. McComb, that prove to you that this gentleman was not only talking, he was producing. And, of course, you go back to my appointment as the first Mexican-American Commissioner on Civil Rights. I didn't want this appointment.

M: Did that surprise you?

G: Yes, I didn't want it. I was not asking for it, nobody asked him for this appointment. I think as this thing developed, as I was appointed November 7, 1968, what had happened, the United States Commission on Civil Rights was going to have a hearing in San Antonio. As you know, I'm a doctor of medicine, not an attorney. The Commission wanted a Mexican-American. The Chairman at that time was [John] Hannah from Michigan State. Father Ted Hesburgh and Mrs. [Frankie] Freeman and Dr. [Robert] Rankin and others wanted a Mexican-American, and I think the request eventually got to him, I think possibly through the Civil Service Commission, the chairman--being John Macy.

M: John Macy?

G: Mr. Macy, and he also thought of me. And before I knew it, President Johnson called me. Of course, by this time I had security clearance for the United Nations. I served the government on several missions. So he appointed me. I didn't know anything about it. Of course I'm grateful to my country and I tried to do my job and discharge my duties and obligations with all expediency and also with all the ability I have within my power. But no Mexican-American had asked him at this point. Perhaps the Commission on Civil Rights asked, Dr. Hannah, or Father Hesburgh, perhaps Mr. Macy--but not us.

M: Why did he ask you then?

G: Because he knew I had been working on civil rights for over twenty years. The American GI Forum started with the Felix Longoria case, we had gone into police brutality, lack of representation in juries, lack of representation in draft boards, lack of representation in schools, he knew that I knew civil rights. I knew civil rights as a Mexican-American, I knew the problems, I knew where they were. And this, I believe, is why he asked me. And of course again I think he was pleased with the fact that I had done my duty as his choice to be the Ambassador to the United Nations--

M: Let me ask about that. How did he happen to appoint you to that?

G: All I know is that one time, I think a Mr. Cox from the White House called me and he said, "Would you like to serve as a representative, as alternate delegate, with the rank of ambassador to the United Nations." And I said, "Well, how long will it take?" I remember because the feast of the Mexican-American Independence Day, September 15 and 16 of 1967, this happened a few weeks before. I went through the process of security clearance and he asked

me and I said, "Yes, I'll go." I figured at a time when we were receiving so many casualties in Viet Nam that I should also be a good citizen and go to serve in the United Nations.

I figured if Guan Garcia, private, is called to serve his country, he goes and it makes no difference who he is. I don't think it's fair that just because I'm a doctor I should hesitate to serve my country.

I I served on the battlefields, if they wanted me at the United Nations I'll go. And I went and I had about ten days to arrange my business--actually to leave it running and move out. I didn't leave any other doctor in my office. I went to the United Nations. I think I can tell you why he chose me on this occasion.

M: Why?

G: He chose me really because he was very close to Latin America. He was close to all of the Spanish speaking Latin American people. He chose me first because he knew that I could speak Spanish fluently and well. He knew that I was faithful to this country and also to his philosophy of being good to everyone, especially to Mexican-Americans. At this time we had a lot of trouble in Latin America and he asked me to go to the United Nations to help out. It happened during the process of my serving as the representative that they asked me to speak in Spanish and to deliver the speech on the Treaty of Tlatelolco and as you know, Dr. McComb, this was the first time an American representative or ambassador or delegate ever spoke in a foreign language. This was a terrific--. This is also one of the reasons why Vice President Humphrey took me to Tlatelolco to sign that treaty--called the Treaty of Tlatelolco, the prohibition of nuclear weapons in the Latin American zone. So I know President Johnson was pleased, and let me tell you how I knew he was pleased--he told me so.

M: Did he ever talk to you about being a UN ambassador?

G: Before, no, never. Never, this came out of the clear blue sky.

M: Did he tell you what he wanted you to do when you did accept it?

G: No, he never did. I knew what he wanted me to do. I think he wanted the people to know that there are other people over here other than big business people in the sense of rich or mighty. There are people who are warm human beings. As a doctor who is interested in those things he chose me to let Latin Americans see that we have a Garcia here like they have over there who can do a job, and who understands their culture and their language.

They tell me that I was one of the few delegates who could easily mingle or mix openly with Latin American delegates. Because all of belong to "La Raza. "La Raza" is that group of people of Spanish parent-hood mixed with Indian and this practically comprises all of the Latin American people. I know how pleased he was because after I had delivered my speech, I left to attend the cabinet committee hearings on Mexican-American affairs at El Paso, and I left exactly the same day.as my address.

So the next day we were over there at El Paso at the signing of the Chamizal Treaty and President Johnson addressed the conference of Mr. Ximenes' committee. We waited for him at this meeting place by the airport, where the Mexican-Americans were. He came to speak to us. Mr. Ximenes and I were in the receiving line, after all I had the title of Ambassador at that moment, and I was the highest ranking Federal person there. So he said, "Hector, I'm so pleased with you." And I said, "Why, Mr. President?" He said, "Because you made headlines in the Baltimore Sun newspaper, and you made headlines that your speech had caused great

happy reactions in the Latin American countries and their ambassadors and of course you also peeved the Russians a little bit. Because they didn't quite expect an American to be speaking Spanish." So he was pleased and very happy. Of course, which pleased me very much, after all I was there to please my country first and also to please "my President," as we say in Spanish: "mi presidente" and he was happy. He took off back to Washington and I stayed there for the conference. Then I went back to the United Nations to finish the term.

M: He also appointed you to the Council on Economic Opportunity back in March of '67.

G: Yes, the war on poverty. And this I know he told me what he wanted. He said, "Hector--

M: Did he call you to Washington?

G: He called me on the telephone. He said, "Hector, I want you to let the poor people know that anything they want that I can get them, I want to get it for them. I don't want any more poverty. And I know you come from Texas and you as a doctor, as a humanitarian, are well acquainted with the poverty of the area. I wish it wasn't like it is. But I want you to serve there, and I want you to help the poor in every way possible. And report to me anything that they need or that you think should be arranged, because I want poverty erased!

And this is one of the few times I felt also that he was giving me authority in a sort of a way. Of course I never used the authority. I was his representative, of course all of us were his representative. But the fact that he called me personally on this appointment, I felt he was sincere. This was close to his heart, the poor, whoever they were, they were close to his heart.

M: What happened to this war on poverty? Were the funds cut into by the Viet Nam war?

G: I think so. But more than that I actually believe that elected or government officials, whoever they may be, were jealous and resented any directional guidance by people who are not professionals. I think it is a human element. With few exceptions, congressmen and senators, governors, state representatives, mayors, county judges, county commissioners, they want everything to be channeled through them. So the war on poverty had intended not only to provide help and need for the poor but to teach leadership to the poor. This governmental jealousy against the poor resulted in the passage of the Green Amendment, and reduced the power of the poor.

Certainly a lot of money was not accounted for, but as far as results were, we were producing leadership. We were producing--a great change in that there would be a voice of the poor in the democracy. Our democracy is of the poor also. This is the first time in our government that with government funds the poor were given a voice in determining their future and certainly in overcoming their poverty. I think it was a great experiment. Personally, I don't think this has failed because I see it working today. I see it working--this war on poverty on the local level of which I am still a member. I saw it last night at this meeting on "closed and open beaches," where the lowest educated person or the poorest on an economic level can get up and talk to the Mayor, or talk to the rich, or talk to the political leaders in a way that they would never talk before, say ten years before. And this a democracy at its best. It is working.

M: Then leadership has been developed?

G: It has developed. And I wish you would attend--poor people like Coronas, Perez, etc. are leaders here. Practically illiterate people who get up and demand that the city repair the streets, that the city pick up the abandoned old automobiles, and fix their streets and the city does it! Before they wouldn't do anything like that, they expected people like us to do it. Now we don't have to do it; in fact, they do it themselves. And I say this is not an experiment anymore, it's become a "reality." There's a voice of the poor in our democracy today that was absent before!

M: Now you mentioned that the mayors and the county people wanted the funds and power filtered through them. Doesn't this interfere somewhat with the carrying out of federal programs, say urban renewal for example, HUD programs? Does that have trouble getting through down to the local level?

G: Yes, I think it has trouble getting through to the local level. I think actually what has happened, we have never been able to formulate enough programs on a local level to benefit the people who should be benefitted. There's too much time lost in moving up a program and presenting it. By the time it comes back it's very weak. I think what has failed--we don't have enough writers on a local level who can write a request well enough to avoid all the delays and the pitfalls of administrative red tape. But I don't think this is an obstructionist movement by the power structure of the establishment, it's just a question of lack of experience not leadership!

They don't want you to have complete leadership on a local level. They don't mind you developing it by trial-and-error methods, you see, but they don't want you to go ahead and say, "Hey, get us an expert from government in Washington to write a project to build a "mechanics school." No! You have to find someone on the local level to write a project to set up a "mechanics school." This is hard to do!

M: Looking at your list here, you also had an appointment in 1964 to the inauguration of the President of Venezuela. How did that come about?

G: I really don't know how that came about. Of course the President knows me, and knows that I speak Spanish, and of course Venezuela is a Spanish speaking country, and at that time the President chose me. Of course I had served on some other diplomatic missions with President Kennedy in the American delegation that signed the Treaty of Mutual Defense Area Agreement between us and the West Indies in 1961. So again I think it was a question of my bicultural and bilingual background which he like a lot. After all, remember that teacher Lyndon Johnson taught his first school in Cotulla, Texas, where all the student were Mexican-Americans. He can understand Spanish quite well. I never spoke Spanish to him. He also speaks some Spanish. I suspect he speaks it, but not as fluently as perhaps he would like to. So he sends me over there, and again this is a great moment in my life as I carried the rank of "Special Ambassador" but more important than that was that as a representative of the President of the United States, I never dreamt that it would ever happen--a Garcia--a representative of the President of the United States.

Again, let me tell you how important this bilingual, bicultural idea became. While in Caracas it happened that the ambassador from Spain, whose name I've forgotten at this time, and his delegation's car broke down. So we gave him a ride to the presidential palace of Dr. Raul Leoni and in it we started talking, started talking in Spanish. Pretty soon we got to the palace, you know, the Estados Unidos de America is close to Espana in the reception line. This ambassador would introduce me to all the Latin American delegations and pretty soon as we talked Spanish, they forgot that I was an American. And they never realized it, until I talked to President Raul Leoni and outgoing President [Romulo]

Betancourt, I talked to them in Spanish. And our talks created a lot of interest. In fact I could never convince the ambassador from Spain that I was not educated in Spain or Mexico. I could never convince him! He said, "No? Then you are a doctor of literature or a teacher?" I said, "No, I am just a doctor of medicine.? Then the German representative came over to talk to me and he said, "You mean you are a Mexican-American?" I said, "Yes!" [He said,] "And you come here representing the USA!" I said, "Yes!" He said, "Well, that's good. I never thought it would be possible."

I made great friends there with the diplomatic corps and I was well received by both the outgoing President Betancourt and the incoming President Dr. Raul Leoni. Again, I received this appointment as a serious appointment. It was a great thrill that I would be the "special ambassador" representing the President of the United States. I still carry as a memento my diplomatic passport.

And this is important, Mr. McComb, because psychologically we Mexican-Americans want to also belong. In other words, I say this: we always want to end our days in somebody's arms. Is it our mother's arms, is it our wife's arms, is it our priest's or minister's arms, is it our children's arms, we want to be loved and to [be] taken in by someone. We Mexican-Americans up to the time of '60 were dejected people because we were rejected by everyone. In Mexico we were never accepted by the Mexicans, and here we were not accepted by the Texans. So since 1960 is the first instance that we feel that we are Americans. After all, you cease being a Mexican when you are an ambassador for the United States of America, or when you carry with you a card or a passport that says "representative of

the President of the United States," you stop being a Mexican and become an American. I think this is the most important thing that has happened to the Mexican-American people -that we now feel that we belong to this country. That this is truly our "country" and we may keep our pride and our dignity. That we are Mexican in origin and in blood, but we also now have the feeling that we are accepted as Americans also!

M: Let me ask this. During Lyndon Johnson's years as President, there was a lot of legislation passed to help poor people, to help people in general. Now which of those laws that were passed have helped the Mexican-Americans the most?

G: Well, I think for one, of course, is "The war on poverty." And next of course the Civil Rights Act of 1960 and other civil rights bills of 1964.

M: That's a good point because most people think this in regard to the Negro rather than to the Mexican-American.

G: No, no. Let me tell you this. For instance up until about 1960 we Mexican-Americans had never made the federal people realize first that we were a minority of any numbers. Secondly, they never realized we had specific problems. It was until the Civil Rights Act of 1960 that we were able to start moving into this field of civil rights. Previously we moved into other fields. But, I think these civil rights acts were the ones that gave us the feeling--that we also had civil rights and the voting rights. The repeal of the poll tax on federal elections which involved the presidential and federal nominees helped. This was a most important thing, because this federal law made the State of Texas repeal the pre-requisite of voting, which was the poll tax. And this happened only about [in] '65 or '66, not too long ago.

M: How did this help the Mexican-Americans?

G: Well, you see, we still had to pay \$1.75 to vote before 1964.

M: Is that a prohibitive amount?

G: Oh, yes. It is a prohibitive amount, Mr. McComb, when you realize that 60 percent of our people in Texas are on the poverty level. The poverty level being \$3,300 per year for a family of four. Not only that, there are a lot of families who live on \$6 to \$8 a week even today--we are the poorest. The number one county in level of "poverty" is not Deep South counties, it is Starr County in the Rio Grande Valley. \$1.75 was very prohibitive, because even today, mind you, with Medicare and Medicaid, we have many people who do not have 50 cents to buy the medicine. They have to pay 50 cents to buy the medicine--some still don't have it. We are a poor people. You take a line drawn south of El Paso County and go all the way across from El Paso east, and leave Beto and Midland counties because of the oil interests, and then to San Antonio and continue all the way south of Houston and there is only one county south of this line there that is not at poverty level. That's called Comal County with the mills, the textile mills. All the other counties, as far as Mexican-Americans are concerned, are poor counties. And I have a map there to show you. I'll tell you, \$1.75 was a horrible amount, a great amount of money for our people. They couldn't afford to vote. Why should you spend \$1.75, when it could buy you so many pounds of pinto beans, or tortillas, or flour tortillas? \$1.75--how much wieners could it buy you? How much hamburger meat? It is still a prohibitive amount even as of today to our poorer people.

M: Did more of the Mexican-Americans then begin to vote and participate in politics?

G: Very much more so, very much more so. Then the most humanitarian thing that was ever done for our people was "Medicare."

M: It helped?

G: Oh, it helped a lot. I know. After all, I serve the poor. My office is [in] the poor part of town, you know, this is West Port, west of port. My office used to be one block down. I was the first doctor who established an office in the barrio here. I work only with the poor. The people who helped me are the poor Mexican-Americans, not the Mexican well-to-do, not the Mexican professionals. It's the poor who sustain and back me and help me.

Now I can see many more patients because before they had to go to the clinic. Now they are back with Medicare. But the point is this-- I think we live with more dignity. I think human beings are the same. I think young girls want to have a mink coat, everybody wants to have a nice Cadillac car, and our families want a twenty-thirty thousand dollar home. The point is this: we want to have dignity. We want to have a good status. The most horrible thing was that a lot of our elderly would die at home because they couldn't afford to go to the hospital. Now with Medicare and Medicaid, they can go. Not only that, when they went to the hospital, they would be put in what we in Spanish call "Rincon del Diablo." It means the Devil's Corner--that abandoned part of the hospital, ill-equipped and ill-ventilated. Now, I think, it's a homage to God that His children created in His image now have a decent bed, an air-conditioned room, a lavatory. The majority of these people would never have these things at home and they still don't now. Medicare brought dignity and

respect to the Mexican-American elderly. And I'll tell you one thing, politically, you can argue anything but I would always vote Democratic because of Medicare for our people.

M: Did Medicare also help break down discrimination in the hospitals?

G: Oh, definitely, very much. It helped break it down all the way through because we can always use "the weapon," you know, the federal money through Medicare. And before then, the hospitals here in the '50's would still have separate wards for Mexican-American people, and of course for the Negroes. We thought it was horrible because separate wards would mean inferior wards. But it has helped. In other words, all people on Medicare of that age are hospitalized together. It has helped very much.

M: How about the various education bills that were passed under Johnson? Have these had any effect?

G: In a way the bills have helped a lot, of course, all the aid to the colleges and universities have helped very much. But I think, Dr. McComb, the state still controls the education to such a degree that the whole education system of Texas is not that good. As you know, we are 42nd in high school graduates. I believe, 36th or 37th in the amount of money we spend per capita on students. What has happened was that the whole system of Texas was geared to agricultural pursuits. I well remember that we would never get a hearing from the school boards in 1948, '49 and '50. Even here in Robstown the school board would say, "If we educate the Mexicans, who's going to pick our cotton." I don't think the educational system has come up to par, no, and I'm not talking merely as a Mexican-American. I'm talking as a Texan. I think we are derelict, delinquent and we are deficient in education. I don't think we pay our teachers

right or properly. I don't think we teach students right. I think Texas should have at least two years of college education-free for all the students. We're backwards in this. Certainly the federal government has helped because in all these counties we have a "special schooling " We have first, preschool classes, the kindergarten, now you have your Head Start, which is a terrific help. If it hadn't been for Head Start, the Mexican-American child would be in trouble today, it's a terrific things and I hope they keep it up. That has been the most moving aspect of the educational thrust. Not necessarily the scholarships to students or the G.I. Cold War Bill, no this is it, "Head Start." Of course bilingual education has helped, too--but more can be done!

M: Did you get involved with Johnson in regard to the Padre Island National Seashore?

G: I got involved with President Johnson. I'm going to give you a copy of my testimony in behalf of Padre Island. President Johnson was greatly interested in the Padre Island Park. He came here--I remember that quite well--he came over here. We had this hearing at the Exposition here in Corpus Christi. He asked me to go ahead and give some testimony and his feelings were like my feelings, that he wanted Padre Island to be a national seashore park and when he asked me I think he knew my position. My position is simply always to be with the people, and in this case, the poor people. And as you read my statement there, I objected to building big hotels, big complexes, big residential areas. I thought of Padre Island as a gift of God really, and we were lucky to get it in such a nice, primitive, beautiful condition.

And I remember President Johnson coming over here for two other occasions. This is important historically. We had a naval base, the naval base installation, now it's Army, ARAOMAC. The change came when the Republicans came in with Eisenhower--when was that?

M: '52.

G: '52. Eisenhower was re-elected in 1956.

M: That was the election. Senator Lyndon Johnson came in in '58 to help us.

G: Republicans started closing the base in 1958. Senator Johnson was still then a senator. He came over here at the Driscoll Hotel to help us. He had a meeting. We asked him to come here, we were horribly worried about the economic situation here in Corpus Christi in 1958. He flew over and came here, and he said, "I'll do everything in my power to keep the naval establishment open." And I remember he expressed himself about what a horrible thing the Secretary of Navy [Thomas] Gates, shut down the base. He went to work for us. Of course he didn't succeed. Actually the naval base never opened--and the naval base establishment never opened. But he brought us "ARAOMAC." This is an army establishment which was something new. So he came over, everytime we called this man he came. When we had this hurricane called Carla, he came again in September 1961.

M: Carla?

G: Carla. I remember him flying over in a helicopter and landing over by the shoreline coliseum. He flew from the naval base by helicopter and I remember him getting off that Army helicopter--and he came over and I talked to him. I still have some pictures of him which show he was really worried about this area and the devastating effects of Carla. He seemed to be everywhere the people needed him. And I thought this was a great tribute to the people, that he would respond to our call. I guess he responds likewise to

all his friends' calls. But whenever there was any danger or need, he helped. In 1955 a hurricane also hit Tampico, remember? We felt a great affinity for our Mexican brothers out of Tampico, so we decided we would raise clothing, and food and sent it over there. Of course how would we send it? Only through Navy planes. So I got on the phone, called Johnson and I said, "Senator, we can raise some money here, raise some food and clothing and can you help get it over there?" [He said,] "I'll talk it over with the Navy people." They were flying, and we were able to [send these things to Tampico]. And of course we were fortunate because perhaps [because] of our warmth and feelings toward Mexico, we got the okay of the Mexican consul and government. Usually they hesitate about those things. This time they accepted our assistance.

Mind you, before the United States government was moving its aircraft carriers and ships into Tampico, the American GI Forum, with the help of the Navy planes and people like Senator Johnson, were flying hot, fresh baked bread to Tampico and also food and clothing and medicine. And I say again, I think this is a great tribute of how much this man has helped. After all, who are we? We are little people, I should say I'm a little people. It's people like Johnson who make little people important, and I think little people have felt important under Johnson, because I consider myself little people, after all I'm still a Mexican-American.

M: Where did he get the idea of making Padre Island a national seashore? Do you know?

G: No, this I don't know, I really don't know. I don't think we ever went into it that much. I don't know how it developed because as you know it has a terrific history, and I don't know how it developed into a national seashore park.

M: Have you had much connection with Mrs. Johnson?

G: Some! I have some acquaintance and have some meetings with Mrs. Johnson. She's a great lady. My wife thinks very highly of her. As you know, my wife is from Italy. She is a very nice lady, she has a doctor's degree from the University of Naples, a beautiful woman, too. however, she doesn't like to travel. She's not a Garcia! She's only a Garcia by marriage! But when Mrs. Lyndon Johnson invited her she gladly went.

And one day when he [President Johnson] had the ambassadors from the Latin American states, the OAS, the Organization of American States in his ranch, he invited us to the barbecue. And he wanted me to bring my wife and my children, so we went over there. Besides Mrs. Johnson's attention to the ambassadors' wives and relatives, she was also very kind to my wife. In fact she gave her a very nice wrist watch and I think this again speaks very eloquently for this great lady.

And we had her here on Padre Island when we dedicated The Padre Island Seashore Park. I think she's a great lady because I think she's sincere. She certainly seems so warm and of course with her family tie-in with the Taylors in New Mexico, they are also well liked over there. I think she's a great, nice, compassionate and sincere lady. She's always helpful-- everytime we needed something from her, we called her.

M: This exhausts the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you'd like to say, or any other connections you have had with Johnson that ought to be put in here?

G: Yes. One time we were up in Washington at some event at the White House and the official White House photographer was there. I think this predated Mr. Ximenes' appointment, or about that time in 1964. I said, "Mr. President, you are going to give me a picture." I knew because I could see the photographer so I suddenly said, "Let me give you these pictures." So I

gave the President some pictures that we had taken at his ranch on one of these festivities for the Latin American ambassadors, the Organization of American States. Then I said, "Besides that, President Johnson, let me show you these other pictures. In these pictures I show you the usual cemetery ceremony the American GI Forum has with its hundred flags at the veterans' funerals." And I said, "President Johnson, when I go and speak and give a eulogy posthumously on a soldier's death, I say that of course we present this flag on behalf of the President of the United States and the Congress and the People." And said he, "Hector, you can always tell those people that I have asked you that wherever you go or you can go, to say that Lyndon Johnson (these are the words that he used) was very grateful for their sacrifice. And you tell those Mexican-American people that I'm forever grateful to them for the sacrifices of their fathers, sons and brothers."

And since that time I would tell the mothers and the fathers and the widows and the children, "President Lyndon Johnson asked me on this occasion to tell you that he is very grateful, though sorry for the death of your husband (or brother or father), he's grateful for the sacrifice." And I think this speaks very highly for this man who loved the soldiers. And all during the time I attended the funerals of the soldiers, I remembered what he said. I could see that Viet Nam war certainly always worried him constantly. I still remember that day when he decided that he was not going to run, I felt bad about it. Sometimes I figure perhaps we didn't help him as much as we should have helped him. Perhaps the advice or whoever his advisers were, didn't advise him as much as they should have advised him, or as well.

I know he tried so hard to do everything for his country and for the world. He certainly tried hard enough to achieve a permanent peace. Of course those of us who were involved in a little diplomacy like I was in the United Nations, can tell you, Dr. McComb, even today that peace still is an elusive thing, it isn't so clear, it isn't so easy to get, and sometimes I wonder if even in twenty years more we might still find peace elusive!

I say overall the Mexican-American people loved this man, respected him and still love him. And in fact we are still working that somewhere down the line we will give him recognition that he deserves from us. The Mexican-American people themselves went through a little revolutionary crisis and when this turbulence is settled, we will again see the greatness of this man. We feel greatly indebted to President Lyndon Johnson!

I remember when Mrs. Johnson was here for the Padre Island dedication. Many of our people wanted to go there and see her. We had a bus load. Although we got there late because of the crowd--we got there at the end of the ceremony. However, we got there in time to see Mrs. Johnson. We had about thirty Mexican-American Gold Star Mothers, mind you, that asked us to take them because they wanted to see Mrs. Johnson. And I think this is again a tribute to the Johnsons from a viewpoint--of course, of Mexican-Americans. I can go on and on like that and tell you more of these things. But I think it should suffice enough to say that first, I am grateful; secondly, speaking on behalf of the Mexican-American people and the Spanish speaking people in this country, we are grateful to this man. And speaking as a citizen, I should say he is one of the greatest presidents this country has ever had. And as history is written you'll find out that Johnson will stand out very high in the love and respect, not only of the Americans, but

of the world. He will come out being one of our greatest presidents. He set himself aside from the every day common point of politics in order to achieve what he thought was more important than his political future, which meant stability and world peace. I was hoping it could have been accomplished before he finished his tenure of office. Unfortunately, it didn't, but he kept his word. He did not run.

M: Well, on that eloquent statement I wish to thank you for the interview.

G: Thank you, Dr. McComb, thank you very much.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Gift of Personal Statement

By Hector Garcia

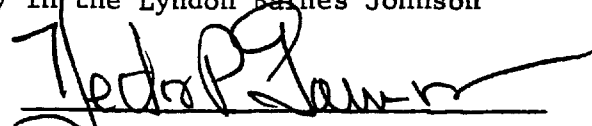
to the

Lyndon Baines Johnson Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, Hector Garcia, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.
2. It is the donor's wish to make the material donated to the United States of America by terms of this instrument available for research as soon as it has been deposited in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.
3. A revision of this stipulation governing access to the material for research may be entered into between the donor and the Archivist of the United States, or his designee, if it appears desirable.
4. The material donated to the United States pursuant to the foregoing shall be kept intact permanently in the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library.

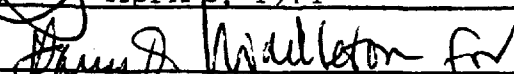
Signed



Date

April 5, 1974

Accepted


Archivist of the United States

Date

April 10, 1974