

Arte Público Press

Teacher's Guide

The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983
By Henry A.J. Ramos

Book Synopsis

The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983 recounts the birth and evolution of an influential Hispanic civil rights organization committed to making the American Dream accessible to Latinos in the United States. Henry A.J. Ramos' extensive documentation and analysis traces the American GI Forum's efforts to improve social, economic, and political conditions for Hispanics in American society.

Founded in 1948 by Dr. Hector P. García and other Mexican American World War II veterans, the American GI Forum is the nation's oldest and largest Hispanic veterans organization. Its family and community focus, commitment to American ideals, and patriotic roots paved the way for Mexican American community activism in the second half of the twentieth century. Its grassroots community organizing and legal defense efforts on issues of injustice, such as segregation, voter-rights violations, labor exploitation, and policy brutality, challenged American social structures and institutions built on double standards that marginalized Mexican Americans and other minorities.

Teaching Overview

Intended Audience and Disciplinary Connections

This guide is intended to facilitate the exploration of Latino/Hispanic contributions to U.S. culture among high school and junior (as well as lower division) college students in history, social studies, and civics classes. It is also intended to educate general adult readers interested in issues of civil rights, racial equality, and community empowerment.

Important Curricular Themes

The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983 is valuable as a tool to strengthen student comprehension and understanding of several important themes, including:

- the importance of participation in advancing American society and promoting democracy;
- the successes, as well as challenges that particular groups have faced in the pursuit of equal opportunity and mobility within American society; and
- the moral, historical, and cultural impact of community organizing and institution building, and its relationship to the evolution of American social standards and values in the second half of the 20th century.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Before Reading: *Initiate in-class discussions with students on topics that underscore the social and historical relevance of the work. Sample topics include:*

- The American Dream: key thinkers and its evolution
- World War II and the participation of Mexican Americans
- Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles and the History of the Chicano Movement
- César Chávez and the history of the farm worker movement
- Orientation to landmark civil rights legislation and government programs, including: the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Voting Right Act of 1965; the Great Society and War on Poverty programs, and Affirmative Action
- Segregation: focusing on important judicial decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and other court decisions that specifically affected Mexican Americans (e.g., the *Salvatierra*, *Ozona*, *Mendez*, *Delgado*, *Carrizo Springs*, *Kingsville*, *Mathis*, and *Driscoll* decisions mentioned in the book)

Many of the media and literary tools listed in this teaching guide can be readily incorporated into pre-reading activities.

As Reading Progresses: *Pose questions to students designed to improve reading comprehension. Sample questions include:*

Introduction and Chapter 1: Veterans and Americans

- What were the expectations of Mexican American World War II soldiers upon their return to the United States? How did this contrast with the social circumstances that they faced at home?
- What were the differences between how Anglo and Mexican American soldiers were treated as veterans?
- Why was the American GI Forum created? What were its founding principles? What were some of its initial successes? How did it address issues and causes of prejudice and discrimination?

Chapter 2: Building from the Ground Up

- How did participation in World War II give Mexican American men and women a new perspective? How did it expand their community consciousness?
- What was the GI Forum’s organizational structure? How did this structure contribute to its success?
- How did organizational leaders propel the GI Forum into national prominence? What were their roles, styles, and tactics? Who were some of the women leaders and what role did they play?

Chapter 3: Education Reform

- What was the GI Forum’s educational strategy? Why was it important to focus on educational interest and performance, as well as systems reform?
- How did the GI Forum take on structural barriers to equal opportunity for Mexican-Americans, such as segregation in schools?

- Did the GI Forum's legal strategies improve the equality of educational opportunity for Mexican American youth? How?

Chapter 4: Early Struggles for Justice and Equal Opportunity

- What was the general attitude toward immigrants and newcomer groups during the late 1940's and early 1950's? How did this result in the mistreatment of Mexican Americans?
- Why was the GI Forum well positioned to advocate for civil rights for Mexican Americans? What were some of its civil rights successes?
- Why was it important for the GI Forum to try to increase its influence in the political arena? Why was voting such a critical issue?

Chapter 5: The Kennedy and Johnson Years

- What were some of the circumstances during the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies that pushed Hispanic Americans into an unprecedented state of community awareness?
- Which Mexican Americans primarily supported conventional protest? Which supported militancy?
- What were some of the political, economic, and social gains for Hispanic Americans in the 1960's? Who were some of the leading Chicano and GI Forum contributors toward this positive change?

Chapter 6: Economic and Employment Struggles

- How was the GI Forum involved in increasing Hispanic opportunities through corporate accountability? What, for example, was the Coors boycott and how did it come about? What were the long term gains from the boycott?
- What were some of the GI Forum's other strategies to enhance Latino economic and employment opportunities besides pressure tactics like those used with Coors?
- Why was the Veterans Outreach Program (VOP) important to Hispanic Vietnam veterans?

Chapter 7: The "Decade of the Hispanic" and the New Federalism

- How did the Reagan presidency view important Hispanic issues such as affirmative action and bilingual education? How did the GI Forum try to work with the administration on these issues?
- What happened at the 1983 GI Forum convention? How did Democrats feel about Reagan's participation? How did GI Forum leaders respond to Democratic opinion? On what issue did Reagan publicly reposition himself at the convention meeting?
- Overall, what was the impact of the Reagan years on Latinos?

Chapter 8: Summing Up

- What inspired the GI Forum's leaders to take on issues of cultural, racial, and economic prejudice?
- How did the GI Forum open doors for Latinos in the latter half of the twentieth century?
- What lessons can be learned from the GI Forum's involvement in civil rights work over the years?

Writing/Composition Ideas

- What does the American Dream mean to you?
- How are Mexican Americans better off today than before World War II?
- Which GI Forum leader most inspired you and why?
- What do you think is the GI Forum's greatest achievement as an organization? Why?
- How did the GI Forum contribute to the advancement of civil rights for other people of color?
- How did the GI Forum work with other Mexican American civil rights groups, such as Chicano and farm worker activists?
- How have U.S. values and attitudes changed toward Mexican Americans since the 1950's? How did the GI Forum contribute to this change?
- What American civil rights leader has inspired you the most? How? What were his/her chief accomplishments or qualities?
- Can you think of another organization that has achieved similar accomplishments to the GI Forum in terms of civil rights and racial equality? What has it achieved and why is it significant?

Word and Terms Study

- *American Dream*: An American ideal of a free, happy, and materially successful life to which all may aspire.
- *Anglo*: An informal expression for an Anglo-American -- an English-speaking, white North American who is not of Hispanic or French descent.
- *Barrios*: Spanish term for neighborhoods used in the Chicano vernacular to connote Mexican neighborhoods and communities.
- *Braceros*: Mexican laborers brought to the United States to fill jobs under the Bracero Program. [The Bracero Program, established in 1943 through an international agreement between the United States and Mexico, imported temporary Mexican workers for agricultural production.]
- *Chicano*: A Mexican American. The literary and political Mexican American movements of the 1960s and 1970s established *Chicano* as a term of ethnic pride.
- *Hispanic*: Of or relating to Spain or Spanish-speaking Latin America. Often used to refer to a U.S. citizen or resident of Latin-American or Spanish descent.
- *Latino*: A person of Latin-American descent, often one living in the United States. While *Latino* and *Hispanic* are often used interchangeably, *Hispanic* refers more broadly to culture and persons descended from both Spain and Latin America. *Latino* and *Hispanic* also have strong geographic and political connotations, whereby some prefer the use of one of the terms to the other.
- *Manifest Destiny*: A policy of imperialistic expansion defended as necessary or benevolent. The notion evolved from 19th-century doctrine that the United States had the right and duty to expand throughout the North American continent.
- *Mexicano*: A Mexican citizen or a person descended from Mexico.

Word Study Note: Given that many of these words possess deep and complex meanings, encourage students to conduct more in-depth analysis of these terms through paperback and on-line dictionary and encyclopaedia sources. This may also serve to enhance student reading comprehension.

About the Author

Henry A.J. Ramos is executive editor of the Arte Público Press Hispanic Civil Right Series. He holds degrees in law and public administration from the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University. In the early 1980s, he served on the Washington, D.C. staff of the American GI Forum. He currently lives in New York City.

Related Media/Literary Tools

Audio-Visual:

CHICANO! A History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement. 1996. A Co-production of Galán Productions, Inc. and the National Latino Communications Center, in association with public television station KCET/Los Angeles.

Books:

- Acuña, Rodolfo. 1988. *Occupied America*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Allsup, Carl. 1982. *The American GI Forum: Origins and Evolution*. University of Texas, Austin: Center for Mexican-American Studies.
- Bonilla-Santiago, Gloria. 1992. *Breaking Ground and Barriers: Hispanic Women Developing Effective Leadership*. San Diego: Marin Publications.
- Camarillo, Albert. 1984. *A History of Mexican-Americans in California*. San Francisco: Boyd & Fraser.
- Estrada, Leobardo F., et al. 1988. *Latinos in the Political System*. Ed. C. García. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ferber, Edna. 1952. *Giant*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- *Gonzales, Rodolfo. 2001. *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings*. Ed. A. Esquibel. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
- *Gutiérrez, José A. 2001. *A Gringo Manual on How to Handle Mexicans*. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
- Gúzman, Ralph C. 1976. *The Political Socialization of the Mexican-American People*. New York: Arno Press.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1948. *The American Political Tradition*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Leininger Pycior, Julie. 1997. *LBJ and Mexican-Americans*. Austin: University of Texas.
- Meier, Matt S. and Ribera, Feliciano. 1993. *Mexican Americans/American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Morín, Raúl. 1963. *Among the Valiant*. California: Borden Publishing Co.
- *Rosales, F. Arturo. 1997. *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.
- *Tijerina, Reies L. 2000. *They Called Me "King Tiger": My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights*. Ed. and trans. J. Gutiérrez. University of Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press.

*Other Arte Público Press books.

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