

RECOVERING THE US HISPANIC LITERARY HERITAGE

IN DEFENSE OF MY PEOPLE



ALONSO S PERALES

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

EMILIO ZAMORA

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Recovering the past, creating the future

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For Generations to Come . . .

I dedicate this book with deep devotion and care for my nation and my people, and to the Mexican youth of the United States who are witnesses to our struggles and suffering and who will soon become adults, calling on us to recount how we, as citizens, sought a better future.

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Preface

Historians specializing in the twentieth century history of Mexicans in the United States recognize Alonso S. Perales for his singular leadership during the initial phase of the Mexican civil rights movement of Texas. They also give him credit for being the most important co-founder of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the leading and longest running civil rights organization in the Mexican community of the twentieth century.¹ Other historians, especially those who study US history, may be less acquainted with his writings, most of which remain relatively unknown because he wrote them in Spanish. This includes his first two book-length serial publications that appeared in 1936 and 1937, *En Defensa de Mi Raza*, or *In Defense of My People*.² The present, translated and edited version of Perales' two-volume work makes available to a wider audience his significant contributions to the history of Mexicans and their cause for dignity, equal rights and respect. Scholars and social studies curriculum writers and teachers in our public schools should take notice of this now more accessible history, and appreciate its importance as a subject in itself and as a means to better understand the histories that rhyme alongside it.

Alonso S. Perales

Perales was born on October 17, 1898 in the South Texas town of Alice to Nicolás Perales, a shoemaker from Mexico, and Susana Sandoval, a Texas-born homemaker. Nicolás died when Alonso was six. Six years later, Susana passed away, leaving the young Perales to fend for himself, until Crecencio Treviño, a barber from Texas, and Eugenia Naranjo, a homemaker from Texas took him in. They raised the

young Perales as their own and saw him graduate from the official high school in Alice, becoming the first Mexican-American student to have done so. Alonso S. Perales died in San Antonio on May 9, 1960.

Perales was a precocious child. According to family lore, he showed an early self-awareness and concern for the well-being of the largely impoverished Mexican working families in the area. About the time that the Treviño-Naranjo family adopted him, he would occasionally pause and stand above the cotton plants and openly exhort fellow cotton pickers to strive for better and more dignified labor. Perales may have bothered, and possibly embarrassed, the workers with his brash commentary, but this does not seem to have concerned him. His loving Perales-Sandoval and Treviño-Naranjo parents raised him to be confident and outspoken, and inculcated in him the working-class values of hard work coupled with a hopeful vision for a better future. This was evident in his determination to get ahead in life, especially when he attended a business school in nearby Corpus Christi. Perales served as an officer with the American expeditionary forces in France and, after his return, he worked for an oil company in Mexico and the US Censor Committee in the San Antonio Post Office.

Perales set out for Washington DC in 1920 to do his undergraduate and legal studies. He worked as a clerk in the Commerce Department and, prior to obtaining his law degree, he joined the US diplomatic corps with assignments in Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America. He worked as a clerk for several diplomatic delegations and subsequently became a translator and legal advisor. The world of diplomacy provided Perales with valuable experience in mediation, international norms and the preparation of foundational documents such as constitutions, treaties and agreements for reconstituted governments that the United States was propping up, often with military force. The rarified air of international relations also nurtured a confidence in his leadership and legal abilities and strengthened his abiding belief in the rule of just laws.

During one of his trips to Texas, he met Marta Carrizales Pérez, an educated and, by all accounts, lovely bookstore owner from Rio

Grande City. They married in 1922. Marta became his caring partner, the mother to their three adopted children, and his constant and closest political associate in what she called “*la causa*,” or the cause for Mexican rights. With time, along with his network-building work throughout Central and South Texas and prolific writing in Spanish-language newspapers, Perales built a reputation as an intelligent, confident and outspoken leader—in both the Spanish and English languages of Texas. In the 1920s, he joined with other young civic leaders in initiating a civil rights cause and established LULAC, the organization that was to lead the Mexican fight for dignity, equal rights and respect.³

Perales kept an incredibly busy schedule that included family responsibilities, legal work, writing for Spanish-language newspapers, speaking engagements, attending local and regional meetings, testimonials before congressional and legislative bodies, and preparing letters of protest to persons and institutions who endorsed racial segregation or were in a position to correct cases of discrimination. Representative records—including letters, reports, articles, extended public service statements and testimonials, most of which Perales published as newspaper articles between 1920 and 1937—appear as entries in his book.

Perales advanced the civil rights cause as a representative of LULAC and other civil rights organizations that he co-founded, including the Committee of One Hundred Citizens and the League of Loyal Citizens. Some of his important achievements during the early 1920s included the continuous recruiting of new members and local councils or chapters, and tending to the work of LULAC at annual conferences and smaller meetings throughout the state. Perales also served as the head of the Nicaraguan Consulate in San Antonio for twenty-five years, an accomplishment made possible by the contacts that he had made in Central America as a member of the US diplomatic missions of the 1920s and 1930s.

Perales testified before congressional committees on immigration, consistently arguing that the United States could formulate all the policies that it wished, but public officials and powerful lobbying groups

like the American Farm Bureau Federation could not use racially demeaning arguments to justify their actions in favor or in opposition to Mexican immigrants. To do so would undermine the work of the Mexican civil rights organization, especially its advocacy for improved relations between Mexicans and Anglos and for advancing the principles of justice, fairness and equality embodied in the nation's Constitution. Perales also became a major figure in the discourse over the Good Neighbor Policy in Latin America, usually challenging such groups as the Pan American Round Table of Texas for their hypocrisy in calling for better relations in the Americas but doing little or nothing about accommodating Latin Americans at home.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Perales and other Mexican civil rights leaders merged their pan-Americanist appeals with calls for civil rights legislation. He worked closely with members of the San Antonio delegation to the Texas Legislature to propose civil rights legislation based on the official designation of Mexicans as whites but also as a pan-Americanist initiative during the 1930s and a wartime measure in the 1940s. These efforts as well as his interventions with federal officials failed, but the civil rights leadership managed to shift their attention to Mexican government officials. This cooperation turned into a working relationship between Mexican civil rights organizations and the Mexican consulates in soliciting, investigating and settling complaints of discrimination by Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans. Perales also began to call for civil rights legislation from hemispheric platforms, including the 1943 Inter-American Bar Association Conference in Mexico City and the inaugural meeting of the United Nations, for which he served as a member of the Nicaraguan delegation. These accomplishments occurred after 1937, the date of the publication of his second volume of *En Defensa de Mi Raza*, but they are relevant to his longstanding civil rights work.

Perales received numerous recognitions for his work. Aside from his appointment to the Nicaraguan Consulate in San Antonio and the Nicaraguan delegation to the United Nations meeting, El Comité Patriótico Mexicano, a federation of thirty-four "civil and cultural" organizations from San Antonio, gave him a hero's welcome for his participation at the UN meeting and especially for his contributions in

the preparation of the UN Charter. The Spanish government awarded him the rank of Commander in the Spanish Order of Civil Merit for his public service. The Edgewood ISD named an elementary school after Perales and LULAC delegates to their 1990 national convention paid tribute to him and his work. The Law School at the University of Houston administers a scholarship under his name, largely made possible by Arte Público Press and Law Professor Michael A. Olivas, the editor of a recent anthology that celebrates his life and work. Perales was especially proud of his membership in American Legion Post No. 2 and the Knights of Columbus (Fourth Degree), No. 786.

The Book *En Defensa de Mi Raza*

The book's title greets the reader with the popular Latin American self-referent of "La Raza" that Perales turns into the possessive "mi Raza," or "Nuestra Raza," meaning my or our people. José Vasconcelos, the Mexican historical figure, makes a similar, famous declaration that now stands as the motto encapsulating the guiding spirit of Mexico's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, "*Por mi Raza hablará el espíritu.*" The differences between the two are as memorable. While Vasconcelos points to spiritual redemption of a people somewhere beyond their present, Perales, with the customary bravado of a righteous civil rights leader, confidently shifts our attention to his ongoing and enduring defense of a people that are his people. Vasconcelos was assuring his own Raza of a wondrous and reconstituted Mexico earned under the fire of an exhausting social revolution. Perales was not yet imagining a restored and comforting future for his people in the United States; he was absorbed in his own insurgency and living out the meaning of his old German cognate, Adalfuns, "ready for battle."

En Defensa de Mi Raza contains 106 records plus the front matter that includes prologues and introductions by Perales and leading civic and civil rights leaders of the time. The entries include mostly articles that Perales published in Spanish-language newspapers, including reports on conferences, acts of discrimination and violence against young male adults in legal custody, correspondence with other LULAC and civic leaders, as well as articles on prejudice, discrimi-

nation and the civil rights cause.⁴ The book also contains other entries such as letters that Perales wrote to government officials and civic leaders calling for interventions and assistance on behalf of aggrieved Mexicans. The last and smallest group of entries are articles that fellow civil rights leaders and Spanish-language newspaper editors wrote about his civil rights work.

When the articles were located in newspapers and archival collections, they appear as verbatim entries, otherwise, the editor has included the translated Spanish versions that Perales shares with us. The entries that Perales originally published in English and that he included in their original form—for example, sample applications for government service and a series of letters between LULAC leaders that credit Perales with being the principle founder of LULAC—also appear in verbatim form. Together, the materials introduce the readers to a rich collection of Mexican records compiled and mostly authored by the leading Mexican civil rights leader of the twentieth century. The book speaks to the Mexican discourse over prejudice, discrimination and inequality, as well as the process of asserting self-worth and collective pride, the righteous, willful acts of protest, claims for moral and constitutional rights and conciliatory and aggressive appeals to reason.

The reviewers that Perales selected to introduce the book—one Mexican American and three Mexican nationals with long residence in Texas—placed their attention on him, especially his tenacious and honest leadership. Carlos E. Castañeda, the renowned borderlands historian from the University of Texas at Austin and a major civil rights figure in his own right, was the first among the invited reviewers to comment on the 1936 volume.⁵ The book, according to Castañeda, sought to motivate the youth to assume leadership positions in the fight for the dignity and rights of Mexicans. Castañeda's focus, however, was on Perales, the author "with the moral strength to protest the injustices before civil authorities, the public and an entire people during the last eighteen years."⁶ "We are not exaggerating," Castañeda added, "when we say that he is the defender of his *Raza*" and "although he is not the only one to have fought for our dignity and rights in recent years, no one else has done as much."

Manuel Urbina, a popular teacher, minister and political figure from San Antonio with a flair for the dramatic in his writings, also paid tribute to Perales' dedication to public service.⁷ Young people had to emulate him if Mexican communities ever expected to rid themselves of the racial oppression that lorded over them. With Perales in mind, he added,

Conditions will change in the Imperial State only when we can count on a significant number of Mexicans without an exaggerated sense of self. They should also have a deep understanding of history, sociology, economics, law, etc. and, above all, a genuine love for our racial brothers.

According to Urbina, the situation was desperate for Mexican communities because prejudiced Anglos seemed to be acting with impunity. Mindful of the corrosive and far-reaching consequences of racial thinking, Urbina warned of global calamities: "Anglos are slowly instilling into the hearts and minds of thousands of people the idea of future world wars that bring destruction, ruin and the death of entire nations." Only persons like Perales could defend his people and help the world avoid the destructive effects of racism.

José de la Luz Sáenz, a teacher, author of a World War I diary, and one of Perales' closest confidants, also heaped praise on his character and abilities. Like the other reviewers, the native son from Realitos, Texas, counseled the youth to look to Perales as the kind of leader that they should strive to become. He also urged them to read his book to appreciate the demanding political work of a civil rights leader, "You will find in his articles and letters many ideas emerging out of the different moments that pressing circumstances have dictated to him."

Juan Saucedo rounded out the introductions of the book.⁸ He also offered a generational view of the cause and the need for youth to join it. Saucedo used Perales' techniques of pointing to Mexican historical and cultural figures to validate and inspire the fight for the rights of Mexicans. These allusions to a glorious Mexican past were not limited to the collective fight. They were also necessary in the personal struggles for growth and development among the youth. According to

Sauceda, “The sincere interest that you express in improving your immediate social condition will serve as the best and most welcomed crown of recognition that you will be extending to the work of the descendant of Ilhuicamina, Cuauhtémoc and Juárez.”⁹

Perales compiled thirty-six excerpts from letters of support that he received from fellow civic and civil rights leaders, government representatives, scholars and private citizens and residents that offer further evidence of the reception that the two volumes received.¹⁰ Renato Cantú Lara, the Mexican Consul in Los Angeles, reminds us that Perales was addressing race and color as the central issues in the lives of Mexicans: “Clearly there are few like you who have studied the racial issues that the color of our skin has raised in this country.” Sumner Welles, the Under Secretary of Foreign Relations, added weight to the claims for equality in a way that only a government official could do: “There is no room for harboring racial prejudice in our country, especially when men and women of your racial background have done so much to build it up to its current world standing.” Enrique Ortega from San Antonio, lacking the standing of a Sumner Welles, but making it up with an abundance of praise, stated, “The book has significant historical value and all persons of Mexican origin in the United States should read it to strengthen their eventual unity and obtain through legal means a change in their humiliating condition.”

Prudencio Gutiérrez, the president of LULAC Council 60 from Houston spoke with equal fervor: “I do not have enough words to congratulate you for your great work for the advancement of *Nuestra Raza* and the well-being of our youth so that future generations can live without the obstacles that have hindered our way.” Dr. Herschel Manuel, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas, repeated a common observation when he said, “I congratulate you for the great service that you have extended to your people. As you know, I admire you and appreciate your courageous work. You have been a strong and able leader.” Urbina may have noted the most moving statement in a separate article in *La Prensa*. The book, according to Urbina, made a deep impression in my spirit, not only because of its just ideas and, in some ways, for the international con-

cepts (in relation to the good understanding that should exist between Anglos and Mexicans in Texas) but also for its clarity, frankness and sincerity, as well as the loyalty that the author expresses for his community and his Raza.¹¹

Complementary Writings

Perales published other works, including “El México Americano y la Política del Sur de Texas, Comentarios,” a reproduction of an article by O. Douglas Weeks, a University of Texas at Austin Government professor, with limited commentary by Perales.¹² Weeks’ purpose, abetted by Perales the publisher, was to explain race and class as determining variables in the social relations between Mexicans and Anglos in South Texas, especially in the border region between Laredo and Brownsville and extending northward to the Nueces River, which empties in Corpus Christi. Three groups, according to Weeks, characterized the Mexican class structure. The first class included the landed and politically influential descendants of the original settler communities from places like Laredo, Rio Grande City and Brownsville. They had strong cultural attachments to the colonial past and contemporary Mexico, but also identified themselves as citizens of the United States by immersing themselves in the commercial and political activities of South Texas. In counties where they predominated, they wielded political influence.

The second group included urban-based and educated persons, some of whom were products of the first class and actively seeking incorporation into American society. Weeks suggested that these aspiring Mexicans—including Perales—represented the future for the community, given that they were adept at operating in the Anglo world and embraced life in the United States. The third group included the larger impoverished working class of native citizens who were culturally isolated in low-wage occupations and segregated communities.

Weeks offered demeaning descriptions of the group as a class and as a racial group. Perales did not challenge this view, suggesting that he agreed with one of Weeks’ central conclusion, that political bosses in rural areas and segregationists in the cities could maintain a caste-like system because the majority of the Mexicans did not understand

English, would not identify as American and were ignorant of the obligations and responsibilities of civic culture. Perales' commentary ended with the observation that Weeks "has told the truth," a "truth" that Perales and his civil right associates expressed on other occasions, including disparaging descriptions of the Mexican working class. Although Perales does not include these negative views in Weeks publication, he did incorporate the work of other non-Mexican academics and government officials who affirmed his views of Mexican communities and their obvious need for effective leadership.

Perales' last book-length publication, *Are We Good Neighbors?*, is a compendium of articles, speeches and reports of discrimination by some of the leading Mexican and Anglo civic and civil rights leaders in the state, including Perales himself.¹³ Published in 1947, the book takes stock of the Mexican condition soon after the Second World War, a period that historians describe as a time of recovery from the Depression years. The expanded wartime economy had provided new and better paying jobs that helped working families recuperate from the hard times of the 1930s. Mexicans, according to Perales and other contributors, had made use of improved employment opportunities but had not recovered like Anglos and African Americans did. Recent research confirms this view. Mexicans joined the movement out of agriculture, a low-wage industry, but remained disproportionately concentrated as farmworkers beyond the 1940s.¹⁴

One of the book's contributors, Carlos E. Castañeda, added that Mexicans entered urban-based, high wage firms at a lower rate. He pointed this out from his first-hand observations as a former Regional Director of the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), the government agency responsible for enforcing President Franklin D. Roosevelt's executive order that prohibited employment discrimination based on creed, race and national origin. Several contributors to the book also pointed to Mexico's interventions on behalf of Mexicans in the United States. They suggested and outright declared that racial thinking was so ingrained that not even an expanded economy, the FEPC or the greater diplomatic awareness and admission of racism as a hemispheric issue worked to improve the Mexican condition relative to Anglos and African Americans.