PART SEVEN

ONE NATION, INDIVISIBLE

The New Politics of Hispanic Assimilation

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HISPANICS HAVE ALWAYS been an afterthought in the American debate on race. At the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, Hispanics were too few in number, too disorganized, and too far removed from the locus of news stories about civil rights marches, church bombings, and bus boycotts to attract much attention or concern. Of the approximately 4 million Hispanics who lived in the United States in 1960, 85 percent were Mexican Americans who lived primarily in five southwestern states: California, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado. Today, more than 30 million Hispanics live from California to New York, from Chicago to Atlanta, and they will soon become the largest minority group in the country, surpassing blacks within ten years. Still, Hispanics rarely generate the soul-searching anxiety routinely aroused whenever the subject of race comes up. In large measure, this indifference is testament to the tremendous social and economic progress Hispanics have made in the last forty years, but it may also reflect how unaware many Americans are that the paradigm of race and ethnicity has shifted dramatically in the last quarter century.

Hispanics do not constitute a single racial group. There are black Hispanics, like Chicago Cubs outfielder Sammy Sosa; white Hispanics, like pop singers Gloria Estefan and Ricky Martin; Indian or Mestizo Hispanics, like actor Edward James Olmos; even Asian Hispanics, like Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori. Hispanics hail from twenty-four Latin American countries, as well as the United States itself. Some can trace their lineage in the U.S. for generations, others are new immigrants. Indeed, about half of all adult Hispanics in the U.S. today are foreign born. It is this divide, whether we are talking about U.S.-born Hispanics or immigrant, that is the key to understanding what has happened to the Hispanic population in the U.S. over the last few decades and predicting whether Hispanics will remain a permanent minority or become just another of America's many ethnic groups.

At the time of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, most Mexican Americans faced obstacles similar to those of blacks living outside the Deep South. Although Mexican Americans did not have to contend with de jure segregation, prejudice and discrimination were nonetheless common, impeding Mexican Americans' full integration into American society. Many Mexican Americans lived in appalling conditions, especially in south Texas and other border areas, residing in dilapidated shanties in towns with unpaved streets and poor or nonexistent sewage facilities. Mexican American children attended crowded, ill-equipped schools staffed by overworked, undercredentialed teachers. Most dropped out before they ever reached high school. Mexican American poverty was endemic in some regions, and the median income of Mexican Americans was 57 percent of non-Hispanic whites. In spite of their low socioeconomic status, Mexican Americans did participate in the political process, however. Mexican Americans served in Congress throughout the twentieth century, initially only from New Mexico, where until 1940 they constituted a majority of the population, and by the 1960s from Texas and California as well.

The advent of the civil rights laws, which outlawed discrimination on the basis of national origin and ethnicity as well as race and color, no doubt played a crucial role in the rapid upward mobility of Mexican Americans

in the last several decades, but so did the general expansion of educational opportunity and the movement of the Mexican American population from small towns and rural areas to cities. But while Mexican Americans were quickly climbing the educational and economic ladder into the mainstream of American society, another important change was taking place within the Hispanic population. Mexican Americans, though still the dominant Hispanic group even today, were being joined every year by hundreds of thousands of new immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and elsewhere in Latin America. Some 8 million Mexican and more than 4 million Central and South American immigrants make up the second largest group of Hispanics now living in the United States. Puerto Ricans, once the second largest group, number only about 3 million in the U.S., and Cuban refugees and their American-born children another 1.1 million.

Nevertheless, even with the tremendous demographic shift taking place within the Hispanic population, many observers failed to recognize that Hispanics could no longer be considered a single group, with a common history, experience, and interests. Many Hispanic leaders continued to make the case that Hispanics had been left behind in the quest for equal opportunity. At the very time that many Mexican Americans were closing the gap with their Anglo peers in terms of education and earnings, Representative Edward Roybal (D-California) bemoaned, "We are no better off today than in 1949." His sentiments were echoed countless times. As the head of the National Council of La Raza, one of the oldest and most respected Hispanic advocacy groups, said in 1990: "Each decade offered us hope, but our hopes evaporated into smoke. We became the poorest of the poor, the most segregated minority in schools, the lowest paid group in America and the least educated group in this nation." And to casual observers, these statements rang true, at least with respect to the aggregate achievement of all Hispanics living in the United States at the time.

What these commentators failed to note, however, was that the population they were describing no longer consisted largely of Mexican Americans who had lived in the United States for generations but instead in-

cluded millions of recent immigrants, most of whom had resided here for less than a decade or two. What's more, few of these immigrants spoke any English when they arrived, and they had had little formal schooling, so they could hardly be expected to earn wages equal to native-born Americans—Anglo or Hispanic—who had benefited from the tremendous opportunities that opened up in the wake of the civil rights movement. Thus, aggregate statistics that purported to represent the social and economic achievement of Hispanics concealed more than they revealed, minimizing the great progress made by native-born Hispanics in closing the gap with their fellow Americans while at the same time underestimating the great challenge posed by recent immigrants whose skills and education lagged far behind those of others in this society.

So how are the children and grandchildren of those civil rights–era Mexican Americans faring today? By and large, well. One of the best recent studies of Hispanic progress, an analysis of Hispanics living in five Southern California counties by Pepperdine University research fellow Gregory Rodriguez, shows that a majority of U.S.-born Hispanics are middle class, as defined by household earnings and home ownership. American-born Hispanics have not fully caught up with non-Hispanic whites—about 10 percent fewer Hispanics than whites had middle-class household incomes in 1990 or owned their own homes in the Rodriguez study—and U.S. Hispanics are far less likely to attend or complete college. Fewer than one in ten Hispanics holds a four-year college degree or higher, compared with more than one-quarter of non-Hispanic whites. Even among the youngest cohorts, only 11.5 percent of Hispanics have earned a bachelor's or advanced degree, compared with nearly one-third of young non-Hispanic whites. These differences are not primarily the result of discrimination but are due to more subtle factors, including culture. In many respects, Hispanics in the U.S. have followed a pattern of social and economic progress not unlike that of certain previous ethnic groups, such as Italians and Poles, both of which took longer to catch up with other Americans in education, for example.

The real question today is whether this slow but steady movement of

Hispanics up the economic ladder and into the social mainstream will continue in the face of unprecedented Latin immigration, which brings millions of poorly educated, non-English-speaking immigrants each decade. There are two problems that this phenomenon poses. First, the immigrants themselves differ in important respects from previous immigrants, even those who came in greater numbers (in relation to population) at the beginning of the century. Second, our expectations of what to demand from these immigrants have changed, as has our public policy for dealing with them.

Latin immigrants, unlike the waves who came from southern and eastern Europe from 1900 to 1924, speak a single language, and most come a relatively short distance, made shorter still by air travel, which allows them to return home frequently to renew their cultural ties to their homeland. More importantly, however, Americans no longer seem to expect newcomers to abandon their language and culture when they arrive—or so it appears, judging from the myriad of public policies in place to promote "multiculturalism" and separate ethnic identities. Where once immigrant children were expected to learn English immediately upon entering public schools and to adopt American civic values, cultural norms, even habits of dress, manners, and hygiene, today the public schools proclaim as their mission "diversity" in all its forms.

Bilingual education and multicultural curricula have worked to undermine commitment to a common civic identity that was once a mainstay of public education. Mexican children newly arrived in American public schools now frequently find themselves in classrooms where they are taught part of the day in Spanish, where they learn more about the achievements of Mayans and Aztecs than about the Puritans, where they are taught to revere Miguel Hidalgo and Emiliano Zapata on the same plane as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, and to celebrate Cinco de Mayo with more fanfare than the Fourth of July. Although such efforts are aimed at boosting the self-esteem of children whose backgrounds were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, the clear consequence has been to promote a separate identity among some ethnic and racial groups. The goal is no

longer assimilation. The intent of such policies is not to help the many become part of the one but to perpetuate separate racial and ethnic identities for generations to come. Nor do these multicultural policies affect only the schools. Whether in providing Spanish-language ballots, creating majority Hispanic voting districts, or giving preferences in jobs, government contracts, or admission to college on the basis of race and ethnicity, public policies that encourage groups to divide themselves by color or ancestry discourage them from forging a common, American identity.

Whether these policies will have a long-term effect on the assimilation of Hispanics and their full social and economic integration into the mainstream of American society remains to be seen. Evidence abounds on both sides of the debate. On the one hand, Hispanic immigrants seem somewhat slower to learn English or to become U.S. citizens than previous immigrants or even other contemporary immigrants from non-Latin countries. Three-quarters of Mexican immigrants who arrived in the 1980s do not speak English well a decade or more later. Moreover, only about 15 percent of Latin immigrants now living in the U.S. have become citizens, a rate that reflects not only lower naturalization but also the higher proportion of Latinos who are very recent immigrants or are here illegally and therefore ineligible to become citizens.

On the other hand, some immigrant parents and other Hispanics are beginning to balk at programs like bilingual education. In California, some 40 percent of Hispanic voters joined the more than 60 percent of other Californians who voted to abolish bilingual education in a statewide referendum in 1998. Test scores from the first year under the new program suggest that the shift in state education policy, which now emphasizes special English immersion programs for non-English-speaking youngsters, has been a modest success, with double-digit gains by students in most districts that have adopted the new methods. Moreover, perhaps in the ultimate test of full assimilation, Hispanics are intermarrying at faster rates than many members of other immigrant ethnic groups traditionally have, with about one-third of third-generation Hispanic females now marrying non-Hispanic whites. Still, if our public policies continue to treat the

offspring of such unions as somehow different from other Americans—and entitled to special benefits and consideration because of their ethnicity—we should not be surprised if Hispanics fail to follow in the footsteps of previous ethnics who have become virtually indistinguishable from the American mainstream. Unless we recommit ourselves as a nation to put aside race and ethnicity, to abandon all foreign allegiances, as our oath of citizenship still requires, America's national motto—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many—will become mere hollow words in the twenty-first century.