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The War on Poverty in Laredo, Texas 1950-1980

Noe Esteban Rodriguez

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THE WAR ON POVERTY IN LAREDO, TEXAS 1950-1980

A Thesis

by

NOE ESTEBAN RODRIGUEZ

Submitted to Texas A&M International University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2018

Major Subject: History and Political Thought

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,   Deborah Blackwell
Committee Members,   Jack Byham
                         Jerry Thompson
                         Andrew Hazelton
Head of Department,   Jonathan W. Murphy

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ABSTRACT

The War on Poverty in Laredo, Texas 1950-1980
(December 2018)

Noe Esteban Rodriguez, Master of Arts, Texas A&M International University;

Chair of Committee: Dr. Deborah Blackwell

This study examines the impact of the War on Poverty on Laredo, Texas with the notion of Laredo exceptionalism due to its homogeneous population and culture. Primary source material was drawn mainly from articles found in the Laredo Times and interviews with Laredoans that were either associated with the War on Poverty or the Independent Club within the city. Secondary sources were used mainly to identify the motives, development, and challenges that the War on Poverty faced outside of Laredo.

This study has discovered that the War on Poverty was able to achieve a greater degree of success by being able to focus on purely economic issues without the entanglement of racial issues common in other parts of the United States. Ultimately, the War on Poverty in Laredo was able to perpetuate and enhance a degree of social activism against an established political machine and thereby contributing to the collapse of the machine a decade later.

This study insists that the successes and failures of the War on Poverty cannot be applied uniformly throughout the United States as each individual community developed its own unique approach to the poverty issue and each found its own unique challenges.

DEDICATION

First, my parents, Noe and Adriana Rodriguez, for instilling within me a passion for learning,

confidence, and an undying desire to improve myself.

Second, my younger brother, Elias A. Rodriguez, for teaching me about myself and

everything that cannot be found in a book.

Third, my friends, Jerry Martinez and Orlando Rojo-Buendia, for the companionship

throughout my scholarly career. I know that it was not easy.

This thesis would not have been possible without any of you.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Blackwell. Words cannot express my heartfelt gratitude for your ongoing patience and steady guidance over the last two years. This minute contribution to the ongoing inquiry of humankind was only possible due to the freedom, time, and reassurance that you gave me as I grew as a person and as a historian.

Second, I would like to thank my thesis committee: Dr. Jack Byham, Dr. Andrew Hazelton, and Dr. Jerry Thompson for their keen interest in my work, for their ongoing support throughout my time at Texas A&M International University, for everything that they taught me during each of their classes, and for the time that they have given me as I shared my own research interests with each of them. As I conducted my research, I found my mind wandering back to my teachings on Locke, Mexican-American history, and the lectures on the very topic of my research, Laredo. I am gratefully indebted to them for their valuable comments on my thesis. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Mark Menaldo and Dr. Alia Paroo for their thoughtful advice and support.

Finally, I must express my undying gratitude to my parents, Noe and Adriana Rodriguez, and to my brother, Elias Rodriguez, for providing me with unyielding support, unfaltering guidance, and unwavering encouragement throughout my years of study and throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

Once again, thank you all for helping me realize one of my many dreams and allowing me to make a small but indispensable contribution to this field

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CHAPTER 1

THE HEIGHT OF LIBERALISM

The 1960s are often considered the height of liberalism and activism in the United

States. Much of the focus centers around the youthful activism that accompanied the anti-war

and civil rights movements as the activist sought to secure a better future for themselves.

Much of the historical narrative that discusses the events of the 1960s follows the narratives

of the grassroots activism that blossomed during the decade. However, there is little

historical discussion of the federal government's efforts to improve the lives of Americans.

Both President Kennedy's New Frontier and President Johnson's Great Society sought to use

the federal government's seemingly unlimited power to better the lives of American citizens.

The Great Society, the longer lived of the two programs, has had its history documented a

handful of times with the focus being largely on its failure to meet its ambitious goals.

However, due to the wide range of experiences it is impossible to write the program off as a

failure. Recent revisions on this narrative have sought to make the argument that the Great

Society had a greater impact on the American landscape than previously thought. As it has

been in the past, the focus of any narrative on the Great Society has been its Community

Action Program. Historians have often highlighted the program as one of the major causes

for the failure of the Great Society. However, because the program was locally implemented,

the results varied greatly from city to city. Recent scholarship has started to focus on the

impact of the program on local communities as opposed to the national point of view

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of American History*.

previously taken. This work attempts to do the same.

The Community Action Program was a remnant of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and was adopted by Lyndon B. Johnson shortly after Kennedy's assassination as part of his War on Poverty and the Great Society. Community action was the brainchild of Kennedy's Council of Economic Advisers who drew inspiration from previous successful programs like New York's Mobilization for Youth, and Chicago's "Back of the Yards" program developed by Saul Alinsky. The idea of community action was initially at the forefront of what was going to be Kennedy's approach to poverty. At its core, community action was meant to restructure society's institutions for the betterment of the country as a whole. "Maximum feasible participation of the poor" was intended to involve the poor in the local power structure. Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's sudden thrust to power altered the course of community action and the future of the War on Poverty. Johnson, who had felt alienated by the Kennedy Administration, sought to immediately establish himself as the liberal president that the people looked for in Kennedy during the 1960 election. He immediately began the push for a comprehensive War on Poverty and appointed Sargent Shriver, then director of the Peace Corps, as head of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Shriver, who had become recognized for his work directing the Peace Corps, shifted the focus of the War on Poverty away from community action and towards a series of government funded services, most notably, the Job Corps and Head Start.

Amidst the reshuffling of the White House, Johnson lost the original intent of community action that had been created under the Kennedy Administration. Johnson and many others came to see community action as a new version of the Works Progress Administration. The "maximum feasible participation" clause was understood to mean that

members of the poor community would be hired to work under the program with local leaders administering it as opposed to the poor being directly involved in the planning process. The misunderstanding at the hands of community action managed to go unnoticed by Congress and became part of the legislation passed on August 20, 1964, under the Office of Economic Opportunity and through the Community Action Program.

Municipal and state politicians saw this as a way for the federal government to bypass state and local governments and threaten their power. At the same time, grassroots organizations, specifically those associated with various Civil Rights movements, came to see the Community Action Program as a way to help local minority communities plagued by poverty without having to appeal to the local city power structure. Community action quickly became associated with minorities, so many whites avoided association with the program as minority groups seeking to secure federal funds for their neighborhoods competed with other local organizations. Community action quickly became the most problematic program of the War on Poverty until the OEO began to retreat from the "maximum feasible participation" clause in 1967.

Laredo, Texas at the dawn of the 1960s was one of the poorest cities in the United States. Education, literacy, income, and infrastructure lagged considerably behind the rest of the country. Laredo's backwardness in comparison to more urban parts of the country was not uncommon. Rural areas across the United States still lacked much of the necessary infrastructure that had become the norm in more developed areas of the country. Laredo during the 1950s, like many other isolated cities, displayed a pre-Progressive Era view of the United States. However, unlike many other parts of the country, Laredo did not share a similar history with the United States after the events of World War II. Laredo had its

internal struggles that mirrored the earlier movements of the 20th century. As a result of the city's unique socio-political history, the grassroots movements in Laredo took on a shape tailored to the city's situation. Unlike other areas of the country, classism rather than racism plagued Laredo and shifted the political arena in favor of Joseph C. Martin Jr.'s Independent Club. The Independent Club, headed by Martin, had maintained control of Laredo's political arena since the turn of the century. The machine's patronage was in turn used to keep the power structure through control of the local economy using local offices to influence employment, city planning, or business contracts. Because economic patronage was the bread and butter of the Martin machine, it was necessary for the local government to maintain a large poor population rather than aid in the growth of the city's middle class. What resulted was a vicious cycle of poverty that plagued Laredo for much of the 20th century. While the rest of the United States was able to expand through a flurry of economic activity brought about by a greater global presence during the early 20th century, Laredo remained isolated from the rest of the country, its primary contact with other cities coming from nearby Mexican cities that lay across the border.

A study focused on the War on Poverty in Laredo will provide a sorely needed historical narrative to the rapid economic development that occurred in Laredo and the rest of South Texas during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The War on Poverty coincides with a period in which Laredo was starting to become better connected with the United States. The creation of the Community Action Program contributed to the expansion, radicalization, and branching off of the Civil Rights movements. Civil Rights organizers looking to expand upon the notion of equal opportunity saw the Community Action Program as a way to achieve their goals. The divergent goals of different organizations led to the

flourishing of social entities that would create a degree of political contention within the local community as they fought over the scarce federal funds for their implementation throughout the decade. The internal competition amongst these organizations and racial groups occurred in cities across the United States but failed to achieve full materialization in Laredo. This study will be analyzing the political and socioeconomic structures of the city during the 1960s to figure out the effectiveness of the Community Action Program in Laredo and why the city did not experience the same degree of social movement activity as other surrounding regions of Texas.

The creation of the Community Action Agency (CAA) and the vague meaning behind "maximum feasible participation" would link the War on Poverty to the ongoing Civil Rights movements that had been pushing for equal opportunity since the 1950s. "Maximum feasible participation" had been intended to ensure participation of the poor in the organization and implementation of community action. However, due to the vague wording of the enabling legislation, many grassroots organizers saw this a new opportunity for themselves to secure political power in the local area. Thus, the Community Action Program (CAP) was quickly adopted by minorities as a means to achieving equal economic opportunity. By the time CAP was put in place, Civil Rights movements, following the lead of the African American Civil Rights movement, shifted away from searching for equal social and political opportunities and towards equal economic opportunities. Other minority groups began forming to follow the success of the African American Civil Rights movement with groups such as Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán (MEChA) and the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in Texas. The pursuit of equal economic opportunity turned away many of the less radical supporters of the Civil Rights movements. The takeover of the local CAAs by local

chapters of the larger civil rights movements in effect turned the CAP and the War on Poverty into an offshoot of the Civil Rights movements.[1]

Beyond the impact of the Civil Rights movement, there was also the issue of how to approach the War on Poverty itself. The wording used to describe the method in combatting poverty for the CAP was vague at best and was continually shaped to fit new interpretations. Ultimately, it transformed into a vehicle for the empowerment of the lower class, far off from President Johnson's original intentions. While the CAP and the War on Poverty had indented the divisive lines that had formed by the mid-1960s, "maximum feasible participation" had also provided another inadvertent attack against local political offices. The perceived threat only alienated many local leaders in the state and local government agencies who came to see it as another attempt by the federal government to exert its influence over the states, something that Johnson continually tried to mend throughout the rest of his presidency.

The goals of the War on Poverty focused exclusively on community organization and local activity despite its implementation on a national scale. The regional, cultural, and ethnic diversity throughout the country created different situations for the programs and how each should be implemented on the local level. While the War on Poverty programs were more focused on local activity, it was operating with a recently accepted notion of what it meant to be middle class in the United States. At the same time, while there was no intention on behalf of the Johnson Administration to further fuel the grassroots movements of the

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[1] Matusow, Allen J. The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s. New York, NY. Harper & Press, 1986. p.243-274. Matusow dedicates a chapter to the history behind the creation of the Community Action Program. For discussions of the ways in which the CAAs and the Civil Rights movement worked together see *A People's War on Poverty* by Wesley G. Phelps and *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980* edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian.

1960s through the Community Action Agency, there was prominent activity on the local level that also influenced the national view of the War on Poverty.

Because there is such a limited amount of historical writing on both major topics, most of the source material will be based on interviews conducted with individuals who associated themselves with the people that were politically active in the region. These individuals will   come from within the municipal government and from the grassroots organizations that formed as a result of Johnson's War on Poverty. The Tejano Voices Project at The University of Texas at Arlington and the Civil Rights in Black and Brown Oral History Project at Texas Christian University will provide some of the primary source material in the form of oral history interviews. Archival research will be done primarily in the Special Collections and Archives section of the Sue and Radcliffe Killam Library at Texas A&M International University, the Webb County Historical Collection, and the archives located at the Laredo Public Library. Further research on the national and state historical background of the War on Poverty will be done at the Benson Library and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library at The University of Texas at Austin. However, because this research focuses primarily on the history of grassroots movements within a city that seemed so cut off from the rest of the nation at the time, the majority of the historical content will come from the interviews conducted with those that witnessed the events unfold themselves.

On January 8, 1964, in his first State of the Union Address, Lyndon B. Johnson issued an unconditional War on Poverty. Within a few short months, the War on Poverty had become one of the cornerstones of Johnson's Great Society, and on August 20, 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 was signed into law. The Economic Opportunity Act

created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to spearhead the War on Poverty under the leadership of Robert Sargent Shriver Jr. The OEO managed the creation and implementation of programs designed specifically to combat poverty in the United States such as the Job Corps, Head Start, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and the Community Action Program (CAP). CAP quickly became one of the larger and more divisive issues within the War on Poverty and created opposition both within the OEO and among municipal, state, and federal leaders as well. The divisiveness that formed in the wake of the initiation of the CAP was largely due to the ambiguity of the wording regarding the implementation of community action, specifically the words concerning the participation of America's poor community, which called for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor. The vague wording created several different interpretations on how the poor would participate within the CAP. From these varying interpretations, many municipal leaders who originally saw the War on Poverty and CAP as an opportunity, like the mayor of Houston, Louie Welch, quickly came to view it as a threat to their power.

There has been a great degree of focus on behalf of historians on the Presidency of Lyndon B Johnson. Only recently, historians have started to look more at the Great Society separately from the Johnson Presidency, with a greater deal of focus on the War on Poverty and an increasing interest in the grassroots organizations and programs that formed out of the Community Action Program and Volunteers in Service to America. While Community Action has always been at the center of discussions concerning the War on Poverty, there has been an increase in a number of works that exclusively look at the CAA and focus on the grassroots involvement in the War on Poverty. Thus, much of the work that focuses on the CAP and the CAA and their local operations exclusively have been written within the past

few years. This is currently a rapidly growing topic among historians looking to expand upon the historical narrative concerning the Great Society, Johnson's presidency, or the 1960s.

The earliest works analyzing CAP focused on its contribution to the success or failure of the War on Poverty or the Great Society. 1969 offered the first true opportunity to analyze the success or failure of the War on Poverty and thus was a period during which much of the analysis was made. *The Great Society's Poor Law* by Sar A. Levitan, *Participation of the Poor* by Ralph M. Kramer, and *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* by Daniel P. Moynihan all provide early accounts and an analysis of the successes and or failures of the War on Poverty. Each pays attention to the CAP, and *The Great Society's Poor Law* focuses exclusively on the creation and administration of the Office of Economic Opportunity. Sar A. Levitan provides an account that traces the development of the War on Poverty detailing the formation and passage of the Equal Opportunity Act of 1964, the bureaucratic nature of the Office of Economic Opportunity, and an analysis of the programs themselves. His focus revolves around the Economic Opportunity Act as opposed to the anti-poverty movement but offers an excellent analysis of the internal structure on the OEO.[23]

Ralph M. Kramer's *Participation of the Poor* focuses on doing a comparative analysis of the CAAs in the San Francisco area. Kramer outlines four different modes through which the residents can achieve "maximum feasible participation" and compares them to the varied experiences of four different CAAs in the region based on their goals. Kramer titles each of the modes based upon the goal of the respective CAA: Policy Making, Program Development, Social Action, and Employment. He then applies this model to offer a

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[2] Levitan, Sar A. *The Great Society's Poor Law: A New Approach to Poverty*. Baltimore, MD. Johns Hopkins Press, 1969.

[3] Moynihan, Daniel P. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty*. New York, NY. Free Press. 1969.

generalization of CAAs that appeared in the United States. Each CAA would fall within one

of the determined categories and face similar issues. In attempting to answer questions

regarding organization, activity, and participation from the poor, Kramer brought about some

theoretical organization to the topic of the CAAs. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* by

Daniel P. Moynihan recounts the history of the theory of Community Action and a reflection

over its collapse. Reflective of the title, Moynihan argues that the issue with Community

Action stemmed from the inability of the federal government to articulate the methods and

intentions behind the CAP. It had been implemented with the intention of resource

distribution which failed to align with the original conceivers of the program and the War on

Poverty. Moynihan continues to stress this point throughout the rest of his book as he covers

the collapse of the program and crippling of the OEO. Moynihan very clearly asserts the

liberal agenda as the backdrop for the goals and failures of the CAP and sets the stage for

Matusow's work in analyzing 1960s liberalism more than a decade later. The three texts

quickly set both the CAP and the "maximum feasible participation" clause as the

controversial issue regarding the War on Poverty and the Office of Economic Opportunity. It

is important to note that before the publication of this work, Moynihan had worked under the

Johnson Administration through the Department of Labor, which allows unique insight into

the War on Poverty, but also provides motivation for bias within his work that must be taken

into consideration.[4]

It is not until Allen J. Matusow's *The Unravelling of America* that Community Action

is covered to some extent in a historical setting with a degree of historical hindsight.

Matusow is looking at the rise and decline of American postwar liberalism throughout the

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[4] Kramer, Ralph M. *Participation of the Poor: Comparative Community Case Studies in the War on Poverty*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice-Hall, 1969.

1960s, specifically for the issues within the liberal coalition that led to its fracture and eventual collapse. He provides an analysis of the major national issues and projects that involved the federal government and looks at it in a binary fashion of success or failure. Two chapters are dedicated to the War on Poverty, the first dealing with the War on Poverty while the second is spent giving a historical account of the CAP. Matusow focuses primarily on the national and federal levels of its history but then expands upon the need for analysis at the grassroots level for Community Action. In recounting the history of the CAP and the OEO, Matusow builds upon the established argument that the "maximum feasible participation" clause causes internal divisions between the radical and moderate factions of the OEO as well as between the federal and municipal governments. Matusow provides the origins behind the CAP and how this ultimately served to alienate municipal governments, state governments, and by extension, the presidency. He focuses primarily on the interplay between municipal governments led by mayors and the OEO under the direction of Robert Sargent Shriver until the collapse of all support for CAA and "maximum feasible participation." He argues that the OEO had attempted to protect itself from any form of external threats but ultimately fell to its version of radicalism. Matusow concludes this portion of the chapter with a challenge to future historians: to uncover the history of Community Action Agencies across the country as each agency faced its own unique set of difficulties and provided its own unique set of solutions catered to its environment's needs.

He then goes on to place this into practice as he provides brief historical accounts of the histories of several agencies in the cities of Atlanta, Philadelphia, Harlem, San Francisco, and New York. Most of his history is focused on the first two years of the OEO mainly because after the initial two years, it abandoned its stance on "maximum feasible

participation," and was struggling to survive as an agency for the remainder of the decade. Matusow's brief overview of the rise and fall of the CAP does well to expand the narrative beyond the limited scope of the federal government as he draws attention to the various programs in cities across the United States. Matusow realizes that the history of Community Action goes well beyond the history of a government program solely because of the nature of the program. However, because Matusow is primarily focused on mapping out liberalism's political trend throughout the 1960s rather than a specific history of the CAP, the work falls short when it comes to detailing the effects of the CAP. Matusow also falls short when it comes to talking about other minority groups aside from African Americans. Latinos are noticeably excluded from Matusow's work despite being a large percentage poor population during the time as he readily associates the local CAAs with the expansion of the Civil Rights movement within major cities. While this issue is apparent to current historians looking back at the period, it is more an issue of the period during which Matusow wrote this history. Since then, there has been more historical work done concerning minorities and their civil rights efforts throughout the 1960s. Matusow acknowledges that there is more to the narrative than what he is covering, but leaves it open to future works on the matter in favor of his primary objective in the book. Because of this, *The Unravelling of America* can be viewed as the starting line for any historian looking to research the CAP. Matusow's work provides the national context for any research into the grassroots organization that formed in the various cities as a part of the War on Poverty's CAP and VISTA programs.[5]

Historical work on Community Action began to evolve in the wake of Matusow's challenge. Following *The Unravelling of America*, historians started to focus on the

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[5] Matusow, Allen J. *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. New York, NY. Harper & Press, 1986.

grassroots aspect of the CAP and the individual histories of the CAA. The histories of the

CAA quickly become more complex as historians attempted to deconstruct the internal

machinations of political machines in their struggle against Community Action and the

internal racial and ideological divides that formed from agencies competing for War on

Poverty funds. Wesley G. Phelps completed his Doctoral Dissertation under Matusow in Rice

and researched the Community Action Agency in Houston, Texas. He later expanded upon

his work in the book *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics and Grassroots Activists in

Houston*.

Phelps provides an excellent analysis of the contention that formed between city

officials and local grassroots organizations as they sought to expand the poor community's

democratic involvement. Houston is an interesting choice for a study on the War on Poverty

due to its liberal base in a conservative state. Mayor Louie Welch saw the War on Poverty as

an opportunity to secure his political base and as a means to fund services to aid the cities

poor population in a top down system with little participation from the poor community.

Welch's attempts at establishing a CAA for Houston fell through when the OEO rejected his

Houston-Harris County Economic Opportunity Organization (H-HCEOO) and was denied

CAP status and funds in favor of Houston Action for Youth (HAY). Phelps also discusses the

degree of contention that forms as HAY and H-HCEOO compete for CAP funding. H-

HCEOO in time conforms to the OEO standards of "maximum feasible participation" and

gains access to federal funding. Phelps spends a great deal of time analyzing the use of

Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) volunteers as part of the local CAA employees

and their impact in securing involvement from the poor. He also covers the implementation

of the Saul Alinsky method that extends political power to the poor via the CAA.

Phelps's biggest contribution to the historiography surrounding the CAA is not so much the illumination of the intricacies surrounding local CAA chapters, but the shift away from the binary analysis of success or failure for the CAP. Perhaps it is because the history is being written from a standpoint of time that is no longer in the shadow of the War on Poverty. Phelps looks at the long-lasting contributions that the CAA made within the Houston area, including the expansion of political involvement among the poor. Phelps offers a complete look at the interplay between the poor community and municipal leadership for the CAA and puts the narrative in line with the original goals of Community Action and the issue of equal economic opportunity that plagued both the Civil Rights Movement and the War on Poverty.[6]

The developing shift away from a binary and general analysis of Community Action comes as a natural response for historians who are looking at the grassroots history of the program. The national narrative of the War on Poverty, the OEO, and the CAP simplifies the topic and the issues surrounding it. At the same time, it does not do the War on Poverty, nor the CAP, any justice as they are both inextricably tied to the grassroots efforts that are only now being narrated. Perhaps it is only now that this type of analysis is possible. The first studies on the CAP had their own set of issues concerning lack of data and the inability to see the full impact of the War on Poverty at the time. *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980* edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian continues with the historiographical trend and *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas* by William S. Clayson looks at the impact of the War on Poverty on the Chicano Movement in South Texas. Further research is necessary to truly understand the

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[6] Phelps, Wesley G. *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics and Grassroots Activists in Houston*. Athens, GA. University of Georgia Press, 2014.

history of the War on Poverty and the class and racial divisions that have dominated

American social history since the post-war era.[7]

The most recent work of note done on the activities concerning the War on Poverty

comes from Thomas Kiffmeyer's book, *Reformers to Radicals*, detailing the story of the

Appalachian Volunteers. Kiffmeyer does an excellent job of exploring the history in its

entirety from the onset of the Appalachian Volunteers, its radical split, and its eventual

demise. *Reformers to Radicals* divides the narrative into three distinct sections. Kiffmeyer

spends the first few chapters explaining the origins of the Appalachian Volunteers and how

this contributed to the development of the War on Poverty during the early 1960s. The

second part of the book deals with the introduction of War on Poverty programs into the

region and the radicalization of the program as it splits from the Council of the Southern

Mountains. The last chapter details the failure of the Appalachian Volunteers program and

the rest of the War on Poverty programs that were put in place in the region. The book

follows the chronological order of the entire narrative, taking advantage of this format to

show the transformation that occurred over the span of a few years. However, like many

books that deal with the poverty programs of the 1960s, there seems to be a lot of focus on

the origins of the program and the War on Poverty, then it slowly peters out as programs

decline. The great deal of information that Kiffmeyer presents covering the origins of the AV

program and the War on Poverty as a whole is necessary to understand how the programs

would unfold properly. "The strictly chronological approach to this subject gives the reader a

sense of the changing times between the optimism of 1964 and the cynicism of 1967.

However, this approach also meant that much time was spent examining the early years of

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[7] Orleck, Annelise and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian. *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1980*. Athens, GA. University of Georgia Press, 2011.

the organization and the details of schoolhouse renovations and cultural enrichment programs that at times seemed repetitive."[8] The disproportionate focus on the early years of the Appalachian Volunteers (AV) also manifests itself in the visual primary source documents provided by Kiffmeyer at the center of the books. Several visuals used show the kind of work that the AV did during its early reformer years, but there is an absence of any visuals depicting the AV in its later more radical phase. Kiffmeyer makes up for the lack of visuals with his exemplary use of oral sources, recollecting the events and points of view of the original actors.

The entirety of the narrative is looking to analyze the radicalization of the Appalachian Volunteers program which occurred within a very brief period of time. Kiffmeyer points to the Volunteers in Service to America Program as the primary source of agitation within the region as the program brought in outsiders who had little understanding of the area's people to help solve the poverty issue. It is an interesting take to have on the situation not because it was unusual for outside volunteers to initiate more radical initiatives in eliminating poverty, but because it seems to set up the argument that the AV would have been more successful in dealing with the poverty issue in the region had it only used local volunteers. Kiffmeyer presents an original stance on the study of poverty programs. Works that look at the War on Poverty, like Wesley Phelps's *A People's War on Poverty*, contend that internal factionalism of regions and the interventions of local officials who sought to control the federal programs were the primary causes for the shortcomings of the War on Poverty. It needs to be acknowledged that the poverty programs tended to develop in a variety of ways depending on the region and that Kiffmeyer's stance may be something

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[8] Martin, Lou. "Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty, by Thomas Kiffmeyer." Labor History 52, no. 2 (2011): 252-54.

unique to Appalachia. However, Kiffmeyer's argument should make any historian looking at similar situations take the time to evaluate the impact of external pressures that people native to the area may feel. It is certainly a question that needs to be acknowledged when there is any discussion of VISTA volunteers in a region who may have initiated radical initiatives and retreated to their own homes after their tenure. Kiffmeyer does take the time to briefly cover the impact of local politicians on the poverty effort and stays true to form in that regard. In regards to Laredo, Kiffmeyer outlines a major aspect that fails to be discussed in other works concerning the War on Poverty. He focuses heavily on the impact of outsiders on a region filled with poverty and how their grassroots efforts, largely motivated by their own personal views, fell under scrutiny on behalf of the locals. Some of the major grassroots activities in Laredo were initiated by outsiders like Richard Geissler who came to Laredo through the VISTA program. Kiffmeyer's work places an emphasis on how poverty was perceived by outsiders to the region and social class and why this could be rejected by the very people that the War on Poverty was trying to help. In Laredo, a city that is predominantly hispanic, a different culture exists distinct from American culture. In this case, it is important to take into consideration what poverty meant in the eyes of the nation versus what it meant in Laredo.[9]

Further work on the impact of the War on Poverty in Texas can be found in William S. Clayson's *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas.* Clayson focuses predominantly on the Chicano movement that developed out of the Civil Rights movement in South Texas during the 1960s. By the mid-1960s, securing equal economic opportunities for minorities had become one of the main issues surrounding the

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[9] Kiffmeyer, Thomas. *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty*. Lexington, Kentucky. The University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

various Civil Rights movements across the United States. Clayson begins with a general history of Texas in the postwar years with a focus on the issue of poverty within the state, a general look at the origins of the war on poverty and its relationship to the Civil Rights Movement, and the initial conceptions about the War on Poverty as it was introduced into the state. He focuses on the Community Action Agencies of three cities for his study: San Antonio, El Paso, and Houston. Like Phelps, much of Clayson's work revolves around the politicization of the CAA into an instrument for achieving political power for underrepresented groups. Clayson focuses on groups such as SANYO, MAYO, MACHO, and HAY to show that there was a great deal of interest for the CAA at the grassroots level even as the federal government began to distance itself from the program. The three cities are all economically and politically similar in the sense that the business community holds a high degree of influence over elected officials and local politics. This sets the stage for a comparison between the three cities and Laredo.[10]

To provide Laredo's historical context, I will be using Fernando Piñon's *Patron Democracy* to gain insight into the political culture of the city under the Martin political machine. While the text itself lacks much-needed substance for the period, it does well to trace Laredo's political history with America history,often hinting at the social class structure within the city and how the political machine was able to put itself in power. Curiously, Piñon does not talk about the Chicano movement in Laredo and the push for La Raza Unida Party here during the 1970s, which may be due to their lack of focus on local politics. The book does provide a broad look at the history of Laredo and introduces some of the major political figures of Laredo's 20th Century history. He also manages to string it along to

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[10] Clayson, William S. *Freedom Is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas*. Austin, TX. The University of Texas Press, 2010.

national events and the possible interpretation of said events by elected officials, in particular, Mayor Martin. Even when it comes to the primary topic of the book, the fall of "Pepe" Martin from power and the rise of Tatangelo, the book is very loosely held together by a string of events that provides little in the way of context and ends shortly after Tatangelo's election into office. This research will attempt to fill in the gaps in the narrative by looking at the local grassroots efforts of organizers and their individual goals like Richard Geissler, Joe Valdez, Alberto Luera, and the Martinez brothers. Fernando Piñon's latest book recounting his life in Laredo "Searching for America in the Streets of Laredo," will be consulted in an attempt to provide an accurate portrayal of life in Laredo during the height of the machine's political power.[11]

Preliminary research on this topic has shown that Luis De Leon and Alberto Luera had connections with the Raza Unida Party and the rest of the Chicano Movement. In looking at the grassroots efforts of the Chicano Movement, I have consulted Armando Navarro's *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas*. Armando Navarro's book serves best as an introduction to Chicano History despite his focus on minor details that tend to convolute the narrative. Navarro takes a top-down approach to the history of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). His first few chapters focus on the Chicano Movement as a whole in which he introduces the origin of the movement, its influences, major players, and the key concepts that were unique to the movement. Ultimately, his focus on the national Chicano Movement culminates in the formation of the group known as Movimiento Estudantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) and La Raza Unida Party and their decline due to factionalism and internal power grabs. Navarro

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[11] Piñon, Fernando. *Patron Democracy*. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.

then shifts his focus to the history surrounding MAYO stating that while MAYO did play an active role in the greater Chicano Movement, it retained its own individualism by not converting its name to MEChA as a form of solidarity, and to a certain extent can be seen as a movement all its own distinct yet similar to the rest of the Chicano Movement. He also goes on to argue that MAYO was the most effective organization in gathering support from both the barrio youths and students. Navarro places an incredible amount of detail on the conception of MAYO and its overall organization. He provides insight on the goals laid at the outset of its creation, the loose organizational structure of the organization, the inevitable contradictions that formed within the movement, and its shift away from the grassroots organization it had used in the past in favor of party politics. I have used this primarily as an introduction to the overall Chicano Movement and the MAYO organization. The focus on MAYO provided much of the context for the Chicano Movement in South Texas as it was the most influential grassroots organization in the region. Navarro's work also includes a great deal of primary source information that will surely prove to be invaluable in this study. Further secondary research on this topic will also be centered around Navarro's other works that focus on South Texas, *The Cristal Experiment: A Chicano Struggle for Community Control*,and *La Raza Unida Party: A Chicano Challenge to the U.S. Two-Party Dictatorship*.[12]

This research will attempt to tie in Laredo's history to a greater national narrative. As a result, this will introduce the topic of poverty by starting with the era of American affluence after World War II. It is important to consider the rapid expansion of the American economy as it shifted away from wartime production and towards peacetime consumer

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[12] Navarro, Armando. *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas*. Austin, Texas. University of Texas Press, 1995.

driven production. Within this, there will be an echo of Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumer's Republic* as it showcases how American economic prosperity and consumer focus created a new American identity in the face of the Cold War and Communist advances. Afterwards, the focus will move to Laredo to provide a brief history of the city during the 20th Century and to detail the social, political, and economic situation that Laredo found itself in under the control of the Old Party. This should conclude with the rise of the Reform Party in Laredo as it tries to usurp power from the Old Party only to ultimately fail. These two chapters will serve to show the difference between Laredo and the United States.

The following section will focus on the initiation of the War on Poverty and its shortcomings in the face of the divisiveness that it caused with minority factionalism within larger cities. This will focus predominantly on the major cities in Texas such as Houston, San Antonio, and El Paso. The following chapter will focus on the grassroots activity that grew out of the War on Poverty, Laredo's failure to play a larger role in the South Texas Chicano Movement with La Raza Unida, and how this was able to secure a weakening of the political machine. The last chapter will briefly place Laredo within the greater national context. At the time the Martin political machine was collapsing, Texas was undergoing a political shift from being a Democratic State to a Republican State. By the time that J.C. Martin Jr. was out of office, the transition on the state and national levels had concluded. With the War on Poverty being such a divisive political issue for the latter half of the 1960s, it is important to place the events that unfolded in Laredo within the national context of the War on Poverty and the state of liberalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Texas as a whole was on the forefront of a major political shift in national politics and the challenges against the remains of the Texas

Democratic establishment from the first half of the century provide insight to this political shift.

Laredo provides an interesting case study for looking at the Community Action Agency and other War on Poverty programs and also presents an opportunity to advance several different histories. The primary focus will be on Laredo's history, but by extension, I will be looking to advance the narrative of the War on Poverty and the Chicano Movement in South Texas. The norm in the historiography surrounding the CAA is focused around its incorporation into the grassroots Civil Rights movements of cities in their attempts to expand democracy and gain political power in their cities. I will be looking to see how the CAA came to influence the grassroots movements in Laredo. In order to do this, I will look at the patron system under J.C. Martin Jr. and the social class system developed by Laredo's economic ties to Mexico and the ongoing flow of immigration into the city. By looking at Laredo and the patron system, I hope to provide a useful study on how the interplay between grassroots movements and political machines are shaped by the socio-economic environment established in the city. In both cases, the social class structure and economic activity both hindered and supported each side. It may be difficult to accurately depict how the nuances of Laredo's structure shaped the activity of local agencies and grassroots movements, but it is critical to understand this not only for the sake of understanding Laredo but also for showing why there were so many varied outcomes for CAAs throughout the US.

CHAPTER 2

THE AMERICAN IDENTITY

Laredo, Texas, at the dawn of the 1960s, was one of the poorest cities in the United States. Education, literacy, income, and infrastructure lagged behind the rest of the country. This was not uncommon, as rural areas across the United States still lacked much of the basic infrastructure that had become the norm in more developed parts of the country. Laredo during the 1950s, like many other small rural towns, displayed a pre-Progressive Era view of the United States. However, unlike many other parts of the country, it did not share a similar history with the United States after the events of World War II. It had its own internal struggles that mirrored the earlier movements of the 20th century, and as a result of its unique socio-political history, the grassroots movements in Laredo would take on a very different shape from those that developed around the United States. Laredo was plagued with classism that shaped the political arena towards the Martin political machine. The machine's patronage was in turn used to maintain the power structure through control of the local economy using local offices to influence employment, city planning, or business contracts. Because economic patronage was the bread and butter of the Martin machine, it was necessary for the local government to maintain a large poor population rather than aid in the growth of the city's middle class. Due to the machine's strong reliance on the maintenance of a large poor population in the city and the lack of any racially motivated divisions within the city, the War on Poverty programs instituted within the city would face few obstacles and have more success in Laredo.

To understand the goals and developments of the War on Poverty, it is important to understand its most basic roots. While there has been a great deal of historical work on

Johnson's War on Poverty in recent years, few historians take the time to question what it meant to eradicate poverty in the United States and what was perceived to be the roots of poverty at the time. While poverty is normally associated with having less income than a set government minimum, liberals of the period had a different perspective on what it meant to be poor. John Kenneth Galbraith, in the *Affluent Society*, posited that "People are poverty stricken when their income, even if adequate for survival, falls radically behind the community. Then they cannot have what the larger community regards as the minimum necessary for decency; and they cannot wholly escape, therefore, the judgement of the larger community that they are indecent. They are degraded for, in the literal sense, they live outside the grades or categories which the community regards as acceptable."[13] The War on Poverty is directly linked to the perception of American identity at the time. The Postwar Era for the United States was an era of self-identification. The United States had remained culturally and ideologically divided since the Civil War. The failure of the Reconstruction Era allowed the South to retain its traditional socioeconomic views. The Second World War, and the establishment of the United States as a new superpower after the war led to the creation of a new American identity. Through the Industrial Revolution, the first few decades of the 20th century had catapulted the US from a regional power to a world economic powerhouse. A collective American identity had not yet formed for the country. In its place was a patchwork of regional identities that were largely based upon their economic contribution to the union. Each region was loosely stitched together through a series of railroads that had connected the union, albeit only physically. The United States prior to the Second World War was politically and economically unified, but any sense of nationalism

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[13] Galbraith, John Kenneth. *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998. p. 234.

for the country devolved to regionalism in the face of scrutiny. The Second World War was the greatest unifying issue of the 20th century. The first decades immediately after the war led to the creation of a new American identity defined by mass consumerism, which became the main focus of the Cold War for the United States as it increasingly became the talking point of the US against the Soviets. As the competition over standard of living went on, the US government became more and more pressured to provide everyone a proper standard of living. What resulted was an intense shift in economic policy to promote American industry through internal and external spending.

The threat of communism that remained after the Second World War spurred the United States down the path of creating a new national identity on the basis of having a strong national economy and individual wealth. The answer to many of the government's problems at this time, for both foreign and domestic issues, was to pop out the national checkbook and let the world's strongest economy bear the burden of maintaining the peace. With the goal of post-war peace and prosperity, the United States continuously supported revitalizing the economies of Western Europe and Japan, even when support seemed disadvantageous. This unwavering belief in the American economy gave rise to new and prosperous industrial centers in Western Europe and Japan. With no doubt in the potential of the US economy, the only question that remained was how the United States would balance its own economy in the face of the new global challenges and its own past fears. After all, the goal of its post-war planning was to establish a secure world for US prosperity.

Domestically, the economic balancing was no different as the government continued its support for consumer spending. With the Cold War as the backdrop, the United States faced its own domestic challenges as it adapted to post-war society. The first and most

immediate was the return of veterans from World War II, as well as the shift from war production to consumer-based production igniting fears of a return to the Great Depression prior to WWII. Keynesian ideology, originally adopted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, placed the burden of navigating the United States to prosperity in the post-war world on the shoulders of the US government. It quickly became clear to policy makers that demand, the answer to the Great Depression, would also be the answer to avoiding a future one. "As liberal economist Robert R. Nathan put it in his treatise for the post-war era, *Mobilizing for Abundance*, 'Only if we have large demands can we expect large consumption,' [v]itality in both realms, he argued, promised 'abundance for all.'"[14] Promoting purchasing power in the hands of consumers became the goal of the US government fulfilling its domestic obligation of a healthy economy to the people, as well as promoting US superiority over the Soviet Union abroad.

Government involvement in the economy had already been established under the Roosevelt administration in the decade leading up to WWII. The Great Depression itself had pushed the government to actively balance the economy in hopes of generating prosperity. It was the lessons learned from the application of the New Deal that provided much of the support that policymakers had in their willingness to curb the economy to their own ideals. Immediately after the surrender of Japan, on September 6, 1945, Truman issued a special message to Congress concerning the shift to peacetime production. Within the message, he touched upon the issues of the surge in unemployment that came after the war as well as the need for an increase in the minimum wage beyond 40 cents. He continues to note the

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[14] Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003. p. 124.

importance of promoting the post-war economy not only for the good of the nation but also for the good of the world:

> I ask that full employment legislation to provide these vital assurances be speedily enacted. Such legislation should also provide machinery for a continuous full-employment policy--to be developed and pursued in cooperation among industry, agriculture, and labor, between the Congress and the Chief Executive, between the people and their Government. Full employment means full opportunity for all under the American economic system--nothing more and nothing less.[15]

In human terms, full employment means the opportunity to get a good peacetime job for every worker who is ready, able, and willing to take one. It does not, however, mean made work, or making people work.

> In economic terms, full employment means full production and the opportunity to sell goods--all the goods that industry and agriculture can produce. In Government terms, full employment means opportunity to reduce the ratio of public spending to private investment without sacrificing essential services. In world-wide terms, full employment in America means greater economic security and more opportunity for lasting peace throughout the world.[16]

It was well understood by the Truman administration that the shift to peacetime production relied primarily on fostering consumer spending. Truman acknowledged as much in a broadcast on October 30, 1945, when he explained the risk of the government's hand in the economy. He explained how the government needed to maintain ongoing price controls and increase wages in hopes of balancing the economy.

Although consumer spending proved necessary, it also proved to be dangerous. Rapid increase in the demand of goods could have led to the threat of economic inflation. Truman

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[15] Truman, Harry. Special Message to the Congress Presenting a 21-Point Program for the Reconversion Period. September 6, 1945. http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=136
[16] Ibid.

acknowledged this in a broadcast on October 30, 1945, when he explained the risk of the government's hand in the economy. He explained how the government needed to maintain ongoing price controls and increase wages in hopes of balancing the economy.[17] Despite this call, companies across the United States refused to raise wages. Just the day prior, it was reported that Bethlehem Steel refused the wage increase demanded by the United Steel Workers and the CIO for a $2 per day wage increase for more than 70,000 employees.[18]

In maintaining the balance between unemployment and the threat of inflation, the Truman administration came to deal with several labor disputes that shook the faith of the American people in him as president while navigating the tightrope of economy policy. The support that labor unions received from Truman in pushing for raising the minimum wage would come to cause Truman several problems. The back and forth between labor unions and corporations fostered several labor and consumer strikes throughout the United States since the end of the war up through 1946. In hopes of keeping the economy on the right track, Truman found himself constantly mediating between the labor unions and the corporations that went up against one another. Despite his initial support in favor of the labor unions, Truman only alienated them as he used his presidential powers to bring an end to strikes that had called for the same higher wages Truman himself advocated, all the while using all of his resources available to steer the economic statecraft of the nation.

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[17] Truman, Harry S. President Truman's Broadcast Address Explaining His New Policy on Wages and Prices. New York Times. Oct. 31, 1945. http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9D02E0D61439E23ABC4950DFB667838E659EDE
The complete text of Truman's wage policy speech from October 30, 1945recorded and transcribed by the New York Times. Outlines Truman's intention to use government controls to stabilize economic production during the reconversion period after WWII.
[18] Bethlehem Steel Refuses Pay Rise. *New York Times*. Oct. 30, 1945. P. 13.

Truman also continuously found himself under the attack of the more conservative faction of politics who sought to bring an end to the New Deal Liberalism that had already come to define the era. Perhaps the biggest challenge came at the hands of the Labor Management Relations Act of 1947, better known as the Taft-Hartley Act, which intended to cut the power of labor unions in the country and effectively curtail political backing that laborers had gained since the onset of the Great Depression. Truman first vetoed the act when it was presented to him for signing, but it ultimately won passage from Congress. The Taft-Hartley Act intended to weaken the bargaining power of unions across the country. This, at least in theory, limited the striking capabilities of unions and, as a result, would protect the American economy. In a radio address to the nation, Truman outlined the dangers the Taft-Hartley Act posed to unions and industry in the United States. Truman ultimately ended this address with a further push for progressivism and reminder of the responsibilities of the federal government. Truman's stance on Taft-Hartley ultimately won back the favor of the unions just in time for his reelection, but the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act as well as the passage of numerous Right to Work Laws across the United States came to weaken labor unions and spur the shift towards a service industry based economy.

The need for restructuring of the US economy from wartime production to peace-time production while suffering as little loss as possible required a dramatic shift in focus towards consumer spending. The new identity of the United States began to form as the state becomes fractured over the transition from secondary to tertiary economic activity. While the industrial workforce suffered under the weight of new competition and political attacks from the right, the service industry expanded through increased government spending like the G. I.

Bill. What resulted was a culture that was focused completely on the consumption of new

materials.

> In a special issue on "The New America" in 1957, Newsweek
> magazine explained the way that suburbia benefited both the larger
> economy and individuals within it. It pointed to a consensus among
> economists that "the suburbanite is tomorrow's best customer and a
> firm foundation for future national prosperity." It went on to praise
> suburbia's success in offering ordinary Americans a bigger piece of the
> pie. The typical suburbanite, Newsweek asserted, is fast becoming "a
> man of property. His savings may be in the form of equities in house
> and appliances, but month by month he is becoming a man of
> substance" as "his goods, his desires, his income, his numbers—all are
> going up and up." 3 As suburbanization gave a majority of Americans
> for the first time ever the opportunity to become people "of property,"
> it also seemed to promise a surefire way of incorporating a wide range
> of Americans into a mass consumption-based middle class.[19]

The middle class quickly replaced the working class as the backbone of American prosperity

and came to represent American identity in the postwar period. Thee economic growth at the

hands of lack of post-war competition for American manufacturing and consistent economic

tinkering had risen the standard of living in the United States and ushered American society

into an era of unimagined prosperity. However, the rise in the standard of living was not

uniform for all Americans. Senator Paul Douglas, a former economics professor, became

interested in Galbraith's idea that poverty could be defined in comparison to social standards

despite having enough to get by. "As co-chairman of the Joint Economic Committee,

Douglas hired Robert Lampman, a young economist at the University of Wisconsin, to dive

into deeper into the subject. The result, a report titled "The Low Income Population and

Economic Growth,' found that poverty remained a persistent challenge and that wealth and

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[19] Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America.* New York: Knopf, 2003. p. 202.

income distribution had grown more unequal in recent years... It shocked the liberal

conscience to learn that even by the government's tight definition thirty-four million

Americans—more than one out of sic—lived beneath the poverty line and that three-quarters

of these individuals were children and senior citizens."[20] The roots of the War on Poverty are

traced to the thought process articulated by Galbraith and later elaborated upon by

Harrington and Lampman. "'Some people would say poverty obviously means lack of money

income,' Lampman told an interviewer.' That had the great merit of being something we had

some numbers on… But other people said that's really no what poverty means…. It's a

spiritual concept; or esteem, sort of a psychological or image problem that people had…. Still

others would say it really has to do with lack of opportunity. It has to do with lack of public

facilities like schools and so on. That's what makes people really poor.'"[21] Beginning in May

of 1963, Walter Heller and Robert Lampman began meeting informally Saturday afternoons

with officials from various agencies with the authorization of President Kennedy to solve the

poverty issue in the United States. "While some participants, particularly those representing

the Department of Labor, argued that what poor people needed most was income… the thrust

of the conversation that summer identified with broad-based themes as a 'culture of poverty'

and lack of 'opportunity'."[22] By the end of the summer the meetings had evolved into an

"informal interagency taskforce. Heller and Kermit Gordon, the director of the Bureau of the

Budget, solicited feedback from cabinet departments on three broad topics: how to prevent

people from slipping into poverty, how to pull them out of it, and how to improve the lives of

those living in its grip."

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[20] Zeitz, Joshua. *Building the Great Society: Inside Lyndon Johnson's White House*. New York, New York. 2018 p. 47-48
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid. 49

The new American identity that became the symbol of post-war United States revolved around the new wave of consumerism. The American lifestyle was defined by the development of strict social standards. The nuclear suburban household became the symbol of what it meant to be an American in the post-war years. This way of life came to define the success of America and as a result also led to the definition of what it meant to be unsuccessful, or poor, in the United States. The Cold War only served to heighten the expectations held for Americans. President's John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson each had their own definition of poverty. Kennedy's shock at the standard of living in Appalachia illustrates the reaction that many Americans had. Johnson, on the other hand, had witnessed poverty first hand during his days as a teacher in Cotulla, Texas. Because each of the two presidents had their own unique view of what poverty was, each had their own unique solutions for resolving it.

The idea of community action was born out of the minds of the liberal intellectuals that made up the Kennedy Administration. However, for the liberal intellectuals that designed the program, it had its roots in the legacy of the New Deal.

> The growth of the federal state during the New Deal and World War II pushed the boundaries of how actively the federal government could manage the nation's economy by pulling the fiscal and monetary levers available to the executive branch. Many postwar liberals came to believe as an article of faith that through careful application of Keynesian economics expert bodies like the Council of Economic Advisers… could calibrate government spending to ensure sustained growth.[23]

Community action was originally at the forefront of what was going to be the Kennedy's approach to poverty. At its core, community action was meant to restructure society's institutions for the betterment of the country as a whole. "Maximum feasible participation of

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[23] Ibid. p. 43

the poor" was meant to involve the poor in the local power structure. Kennedy's assassination and Johnson's sudden thrust to power altered the course of community action and the future of the War on Poverty. Amidst the reshuffling of the White House, the original intent behind community action was lost on Johnson. He and many others came to see community action as a new version of the Works Progress Administration or the National Youth Administration. The assumption was the "maximum feasible participation" meant that the members of the lower class would be hired to work in the program with local leaders taking the role of administrators as opposed to them being granted leadership roles within their own communities. This assumption allowed for the passage of community action with little to no revision on August 20, 1964.

Municipal and state politicians saw this as a way for the federal government to bypass state and local governments and threaten their power. At the same time, grassroots organizations, specifically those associated with various Civil Rights movements, came to see the Community Action Program as a way to help local minority communities plagued by poverty without having to appeal to the local city power structure. Community action quickly became associated with minorities, so many whites avoided association with the program and minority groups seeking to secure federal funds for their own neighborhoods competed with other local organizations. Community action quickly became the most problematic program of the War on Poverty until the OEO began to retreat from the "maximum feasible participation" clause in 1967.

While the immediate threat to community action and the War on Poverty came from the local elites who controlled municipal governments and managed the power structure in their favor, community action also came to deal with the issue of the American identity after

World War II. The various Civil Rights organizations that would take over community action during the 1960s were concerned with the issue of American identity, their exclusion from it, and their attempts at shaping their own. This American identity is based largely on the consumer culture that began forming after the end of World War II as a result of the economic rebalancing that came with shifting from war time production to peace time production. This new American identity, however, remained largely exclusive to middleclass Americans that were predominantly white while minorities were largely left out. As a result, there were several different perspectives on what it meant to be poor and what it meant to not be poor. Emerged from a variety of sources but due to the overwhelming Civil Rights activism, they tended to be defined by racial parameters. It is going to be the variety of perspectives that are going to limit these perspectives' successes of the local organizations. In most cities, instead of the various organizations working together towards a common goal, they ended up competing against each other over government funds. This, coupled with unified support against government funded activism on behalf of local politicians, contributed to the overwhelming struggles faced by these organizations and their underwhelming successes. Laredo did not face this issue due to its overwhelming racial and cultural homogeneity, though at the same time, despite the overwhelming Hispanic culture, was willing to readily accept American culture.

CHAPTER 3

EL PARTIDO VIEJO

Even in isolated cities like Laredo that lacked any real semblance of industry, a new

focus on consumption came to the forefront of social life. The *Laredo Times,* like newspapers

around the country, had its pages filled with sales centered around women's fashion, home

appliances, and stories on local social gatherings. The headline for the Laredo Morning

Times on January 21, 1951, is "Plans Completed for N. Laredo Fiesta" and goes on to speak

about the ongoing preparation for the upcoming Washington Birthday Celebration. Page

three of the same issue features a whole page appeal to Laredoans to spend their money on

local Laredo retail instead of San Antonio.[24] Laredo then presents an awkward situation

which can be highlighted by its newspaper. There is a focus on the sale of retail American

consumer goods and portrayal of an American identity through social gatherings and

celebrations, the most well-known being the Washington Birthday Celebration during

February of every year, but at the same time has a Spanish translation of the newspaper

attached to it as the second half of the newspaper. The consumer culture that developed

around the United States that emphasized an anglicized lifestyle rapidly caught hold of

Laredo's own consumer culture.

There was a great deal of appeal that lay in consumerism for the recent immigrant

who sought to quickly capitalize upon the economic opportunities available to them in the

United States and establish themselves as American. The appeal of assimilating into

"American "culture was greater for the native Laredoan who sought to distance themselves

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[24] "Plans Completed for N. Laredo Fiesta." *Laredo Times* (Laredo, TX) January 21, 1951.

from recent immigrants by appealing to American culture and distancing themselves from the

Mexican counterpart. Fernando Piñon recalls:

> I had never experienced life outside of my hometown, Laredo, a small
> South Texas town nestled along the northern banks of the Rio Grande
> just at the end (or beginning) of IH 35. At the time Laredo had a
> population of 60,000 people, most of whom were mexicanos an
> appellation used to distinguish mexicanos from americanos, the white
> "Anglo" Americans in the city. It was a distinction of race and
> ethnicity and not nationality, although it also applied to class, since the
> vast majority of mexicanos in the city were poor. While the majority
> of them were first generation Mexican immigrants, many had been in
> the United States for generations—some even before Texas became
> independent from Mexico. Despite all these distinctions, however, all
> deemed themselves to be Americans. [25]

Piñon further describes Laredo's unique situation during the period as an isolated city.

"There was no interstate highway system at the time, and travelers from any of these cities

had little or no incentive to come to Laredo, just as few Laredoans would feel the need to

travel to these metropolitan areas… Highway travel then was done as a necessity, seldom for

enjoyment."[26] Even so, the image of what it meant to be American was easily adopted among

Laredoans. For Piñon and some of the barrio youth, the image of what it meant to be

American became available to them through comic books. Because of this, Laredo remained

largely isolated from the rest of the United States physically, yet remained connected to the

nation through this perception of American identity.

However pervasive this identity may have been in Laredo, or anywhere else in the

United States, the simple reality of economics meant that the "American" lifestyle was not

meant for every American. In Laredo, it took the shape of the Americanos and the

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[25] Piñon, Fernando. *Searching for America in the Streets of Laredo: The Mexican American Experience in the Anglo American Narrative.* Centro de Estudios Sociales Antonio Gramsci A. C. 2015. p.34.

[26] Piñon, Fernando. *Searching for America in the Streets of Laredo: The Mexican American Experience in the Anglo American Narrative.* Centro de Estudios Sociales Antonio Gramsci A. C. 2015. p.35

Mexicanos, where both were American citizens, but there was a clear line distinguishing the life lived by its members. This class division was visible across the country as suburbs became dominated by whites and were situated outside of the city. Higher wages from white collar jobs provided means for Americans to work in the city and live outside of its crowded confines, to raise a family in open spaces and fresh air. What begins to form is a geographic divide based on class and by extension, race.

Minorities were often left behind in blue collar jobs in the cities, and those that did manage to move to the suburbs often found themselves secluded culturally. Oftentimes, after a minority family moved into the suburb, whites would begin to move out leading to a loss in property value. In time, the decline in property value and the push to gain middle class status on the behalf of minorities led to the creation of suburbs dominated by minorities as whites moved to newer suburbs. "In testimony to the U.S. Senate's Select Committee on Educational Opportunities in 1970, New jersey-based regional planner Ernest Erber despaired that… 'vast areas of New York's suburbs are now one-class, one race (often one-religion) in residential composition.'"[27]

When the Community Action Program was created under the Johnson Administration, the racial and socioeconomic divisions that had formed as a result of the economic tinkering and consumerism in the years after World War II had already been entrenched. Cities like San Antonio and Houston had their own ethnic enclaves that had formed along class lines. In Laredo, however, the class divide never materialized into a racial or ethnic divide. The city remained predominantly Mexican-American with an overarching unified culture that was consistently sustained by the constant flow of new immigrants from

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[27] Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003. p. 208.

Mexico. Similar to New York at the turn of the 20th century, which acted as a major port of entry for immigrants, the constant flow of impoverished immigrants allowed for politicians to establish a political machine and entrench themselves in power.

El Partido Viejo, or the Old Party or the Independent Club, emerged in Laredo at the turn of the century as Laredo started to assume its role as a major landport between the United States and Mexico. Recent migrants to the city brought the railroads to the city and connected it to the rest of the United States. In surrounding regions, American migrants to South Texas normally took control of the region and anglicized it as they established themselves politically and economically. In Laredo, however, the city absorbed the recent migrants and brought them into the established socioeconomic system of the city. The party itself emerged as the settlement between a political feud between the "Las Botas y Los Guaraches." It is important to acknowledge that Laredo's political and economic position during the post-war decades was more akin to America at the turn of the century than to post-war American society. Braulio Martinez recollects that cars were a limited luxury in Laredo during the 1950s and 1960s and that everybody at the time "wanted to have a bicycle just to get around because there were no cars." Everything was carried throughout the city on carts. In terms of employment, Braulio recollects that there were very few opportunities for clerical work within the city and that most of it involved working out in the fields, stating that "during the summer every other house was boarded up because they had gone up to the north. Every block had one or two ton trucks that people would take to the north and they would back and park the truck there and it was the family transportation… The city would be lifeless because a lot of the people were going up north to work."[28] In the late 1960s, Richard

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[28] Braulio Martinez Interview with Author. August 4, 2017.

Geissler arrived. He recalled having to begin demonstrations in order to pressure the city to establish fire hydrants throughout the city after a fire broke out in the neighborhood of La Ladrillera.[29] The infrastructure in the city of Laredo lagged behind the rest of the United States in the postwar era. While the rest of the United States was rapidly transitioning into the era of the automobile and building highways that linked the country, Laredo remained backwards, lacking the funds to make the push into the modern America era. Because much of the city's population lived in poverty, it was impossible for city officials to levy higher taxes on the population. Rather than taxes, the city relied heavily on government funding in order to secure the expansion of any amenities for the city, such as the Laredo Civic Center which was built largely with federal aid during the early 1960s. The lack of infrastructure limited the opportunities available to Laredoans who had more contact with Mexico than with the rest of the United States and the tenacious control of jobs on behalf of the Independent Club secured the party's dominance within the city in the postwar decades.

After World War II, José "Pepe" Martin Jr. assumed control of the party and the city. Assuming control of the political machine at the height of its power, Martin Jr. was able to expand its influence under his tenure. The Independent Club found itself in a favorable position to leverage its political control in the state of Texas as a member of the Democratic Party. Martin and the Independent Club were able to consistently provide the state with the votes necessary to claim or retain power. By the mid-1960s, Martin had a direct line of contact with President Johnson through Kazen. Despite the overwhelming influence the Independent Club held in the state, and its monopolistic control of city politics and economic policy, Laredo during the 1950s lagged sorely behind the rest of the United States

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[29] Richard Geissler Interview with Author. June 20, 2017.

economically. Competition with Mexican commuters that could undercut wages dealt a major economic blow to Laredoans. Limited educational opportunities and contact with the rest of the country only contributed to the city's inability to grow with the rest of the nation. The Independent Club, despite its dominance in local politics, had proven itself incapable or unwilling to alleviate the poverty that plagued the city and the class divide created between citizens.

In Laredo, economic and social opportunity were tied to the Independent Club. Braulio Martinez recalls that many of his friends who held teaching degrees and certifications were forced to leave Laredo and find work in the lower Rio Grande because they could not find work within the local school district due to lack of sponsorship. Similarly, when Luis Diaz DeLeon arrived in Laredo with credentials he was asked to secure votes for the party in exchange for a teaching position within the district. In an interview, DeLeon described his first encounter with the Independent Club.

> When I finished my Bachelor's Degree my intentions were to come to work in Laredo. So, I loaded my little traelita (trailer) with our tilichis (things)and our two boys and headed this way. Stopped in Oklahoma, visited with my father's brothers, enjoyed picking up some of the history of the Diaz De Leon family, and then, came on to Laredo. I went to see the superintendent of schools, Mr. Nixon, and, and told him that I was interested in, in teaching. And I told him that I realized that I had to take Texas government and Texas history so that I could, that I could possibly get a temporary credential. And that I could teach in the junior high. And so, he liked what I had from, from Drake and he said, "Well, you need to go see the sheriff" And I said, "Yeah?" He goes, "Yeah. He's the president of the board." So... he went ahead and, and told me that, that he was in the grace, under the graces of the Partido Viejo. (Old Party) He said, `Mira, tienes que hater to mismo. Mira, ve y junta viente o trienta firmas o nombres de familia que aseguras votan por nosotros, el Partido Viejo. " (Look, you have to do the same thing. Look, go a get twenty or thirty signatures or names of family that you assure us will vote for us, the Old Party.") So, I was

very nice to him. I think. "Sr. Martin, estoy muy agradecido. " Y le di
las gracias. ("Mr. Martin, I am very grateful." And I thanked him.)[30]

It is important to acknowledge that simply through the existence of the Independent Club's

system, the political machine limited the natural opportunity available to its citizens. While

the United States boomed economically and spearheaded the rest of the world in all fields,

Laredo seemed unable to capitalize on US primacy. Because the nature of political machines

is to sustain themselves indefinitely through a system of dependency on behalf of its

community, then the system itself limited the opportunities of Laredoans because of its

existence. After his meeting with Sheriff Martin, DeLeon decided that it would be best for

him to seek employment in the valley, refusing to sell himself out for votes. Braulio Martinez

comments "A lot of friends of mine went to work as teachers in Encinal, Cotulla, Freer, away

from Laredo because they were not hired here in Laredo. No tenian un sponsor." In regards

to educational opportunities in Laredo, Braulio goes on to mention that there were none: If

you wanted to become educated, you would have to travel at least one hundred and fifty

miles… only the somewhat well off were able to become educated because the other people

would not be able to make it." The Independent Club's influence over jobs in Laredo was not

solely limited to jobs in the public sector. Because Laredo had yet to experience any

substantial growth as a city, the majority of employers that were not affiliated with public

programs were local business owners and local restaurants.

During the late 1950's, a new political party initiated the first of several challenges

that culminated in the collapse of the Independent Club. The Reform Party was established

by several wealthy leaders of the city and headed by rancher and businessman Charles B.

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[30] Oral History Interview with Luís Diaz de León, 1999 , by José Angel Gutiérrez. CMAS No. 135.
https://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_135.xml

Dick. Dick's involvement in Laredo politics came at the hands of a court case in which one

of his employees, nineteen-year old Julio Lopez, was accused of rape after having an affair

with an older woman that had close connections to the Independent Club. Dick witnessed

first hand the power of the Independent Club as he found that no amount of legal preparation

or defense would allow for the acquittal of Lopez. Several years and appeals later, Lopez was

finally released from prison. Dick's experience prompted him to found the Reform Party with

fellow ranchers Albert and Lonnie Gates and Ricardo Chavana, attorneys Librado Pena and

Virgilio Roel, and customs broker Jorge Villarreal.[31] The founders set out to challenge the

dominance of the Independent Club by appealing to the traditional idea of democracy in the

United States and aligning the machine politics with communist control. The Reform Party

challenged the Independent Club throughout the 1950s since its inception. The Party as a

whole was able to only claim several small victories against the Independent Club but was

never able to secure a decisive win against the Martin machine. The major victories that the

Reform Part was able to secure came during 1958. The Kazen family split from the

Independent Club after Jimmy Kazen announced his candidacy for County Judge challenging

the Old Party incumbent, Judge R. D. Wright, who had held the seat since 1941. The Reform

Party then teamed up with Jimmy Kazen to challenge the Independent Club. Through the

mutual cooperation of Kazen and the Reform Party, the Reform Party was able to secure a

few victories over the Independent Club. The hastily formed Kazen-Reform Party Alliance

proved successful for both sides as Kazen defeated Wright in the July Democratic primary by

a margin of 7750 to 7248. Shortly afterward, Roberto M. Benavidez won the county

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[31] Ramirez, José Angel. El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956
1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000.p.28. José Angel Ramirez covers the actions
of the reform party in more depth in his thesis on the decline of the Independent Club and Pepe Martin in
Laredo.

judgeship over Carlos I. Palacios using the support of the Reform Party.[32] The Reform Party was able to use these victories to secure itself a much-needed degree of momentum as it headed toward the L.I.S.D. board elections at the start of the following year. The Reform Party pit Norma Benavidez and George Byfield against the Independent Club's Joseph Schneidler and Joseph Volpe. The rapid escalation in support of the Reform Party was able to fetch the support of the *Laredo Times* as it hailed the Reform Party as the embodiment of freedom in the face of the tyrannical Independent Club. The Reform Party released several editorials in the Laredo Times leading up to the school board elections. Benavidez and Byfield won the election into the school board by 4,608 and 4,445 over Schneidler and Volpe who received 4,072 and 3,995 votes, respectively.[33] The line of victories for the Reform Party seemed to indicate that the party was destined to topple Martin's Independent Club, as an editorial in the *Laredo Times* announced the ultimate goal of the Reform Party. "Next Target: City Hall" urged the party to continue its challenge and to "keep the victories rolling until all Old Party candidates have been swept from office."[34] However, shortly thereafter, the Independent Club won back the support of the Kazen family and reaffirmed the alliance. The Reform Party had achieved its highest point towards the end of the decade and slowly declined as it entered the 1960s.

Despite the decline of the Reform Party in the early 1960s, Laredo never entirely lost its willingness to challenge the authority of the Independent Club. The next challenge made against the machine highlights several notable changes for Laredo. First, for Laredo, the center of the topic revolved around the recent assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Green, Tom. "Reform Party in Decisive Election Win." *Laredo Times.* April 6, 1959.

[34] "Next Target: City Hall." *Laredo Times.* April 5, 1959.

Laredo, a small city still largely disconnected from the rest of the United States, physically

showed a keen interest in the recent assassination of the president. This may have been due to

the large Catholic community in the city that prompted a lot of support for Kennedy during

his election and throughout his presidency, or perhaps it may have arisen from a greater sense

of unity with the rest of the nation due to the nature of the occurrence. There had been a great

deal of support for Kennedy in Laredo that led to some animosity between him and Johnson.

"Johnson, who was present at the dinner honoring Kennedy, became irate when District

Judge Ed Salinas introduced the Massachusetts senator as the 'next President of the United

States.'"[35] Alberto Luera recalls, "I remember the biggest political thing when I was in the

eighth grade was the Viva Kennedy cubs. And everybody was, and everybody at the schools

were involved with the Viva Kennedy clubs."[36] At the same time, there was a shift in the new

challenge that Martin would face in Laredo. The recent challenges to Martin's authority had

largely been political in nature with the winner decided by the ballot. The new challenge to

the Independent Club was more social in nature and as a result presented more problems for

Martin. For Laredoans, the issue was of great importance to them and had legitimacy beyond

ending the one power rule of the Independent Club. Also, because it was a social issue rather

than a political issue, there was no timeline for the events and no real possibility to justify to

either party the end of the disagreement.

On the eve of the War on Poverty, Laredoans began to challenge the Independent

Club once again. In 1963, Laredo had just authorized the creation of its second high school.

The new school was slated to be named after Superintendent J.W. Nixon. However, the

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[35] Traffas, Joan. "The 'Viva Kennedy' Clubs in South Texas. Master's Thesis, University of North Texas, 1972. p. 15.

[36] Oral History Interview with Alberto Luera, by José Angel Gutierrez. CMAS No. 31. http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_031.xml

recent assassination of John F. Kennedy prompted widespread mourning of the late president in the Gateway City.[37] Superintendent Nixon had long been affiliated with the Independent Club. The name of the school in itself was being done to honor his service to the community. While not directly an attack on Nixon himself, nor against the party, the community effectively put the Independent Club in a position where it would have to justify its continued support of one of its own in the face of community pressure and what was overwhelmingly seen as a morally just issue.

In an attempt to honor the late president, Laredoans Victor Moran Jr. and President Cruz Cabello Jr. of the GI Forum each circulated a petition to change the name of the recently built J.W. Nixon High School to John F. Kennedy High School. The proposal was met with overwhelming support from the community. Victor Moran Jr., who had up to that point received 125 signatures, stated that he "got those names in one hour just downtown… We're going to circulate them everywhere. The people want this. Kennedy was strong for education, and the people should have the say about naming their new school."[38] In response to the petition, Martin proposed the new civic center be named the John F. Kennedy Memorial Civic Center. He argued that "it was through the efforts of our late President that this program under which the center is being built was initiated, and the people of Laredo have civic center because of his programs."[39] In response to this, one Laredoan, Josephine Worsham Garcia, wrote to the Times talking about how the idea of naming the new high school Kennedy High School had been sidetracked to focus on naming the new civic center Kennedy Civic Center. She went on to say:

[37] "Should it be Kennedy High School?" *Laredo Times.* November 26, 1963.
[38] "Petitions Ask To Name High School for JFK." *Laredo Times.* November 25, 1963.
[39] "School Name Petitions Continue to Circulate." *Laredo Times.* December 1, 1963.

> In my opinion, the name KENNEDY stands today and will forever
> stand in our history as one of the great names in the world, if not the
> greatest. Therefore, I ask the citizens of Laredo should the great name
> of KENNEDY be appropriate for abuilding used for Conventions with
> the usual parties? Is it not more appropriate for a building such as a
> new High school, a place of learning, where the very name of
> KENNEDY can be of such good influence to our sons and
> daughters… Most of the good citizens of Laredo, I believe, join me in
> feeling confident that Mr. J.W. Nixon, Superintendent of Schools, who
> has the welfare of the student body at heart, will be the first to sign if a
> petition is circulated to name our new High School "KENNEDY
> HIGH SCHOOL" in honor of our late President.[40]

In the same issue, Ted Delapass also questions the City Council's decision in naming the new

civic center after Kennedy and thereby immortalizing Nixon over Kennedy by naming the

school after him. Delapass ends his commentary by stating, "it is up to Laredo and its

taxpayers what action to take." It should be noted that when Nixon was later asked about his

opinion on the matter, he refused to take any side on the issue. The outpour of public support

for naming the high school after Kennedy was funneled through the Laredo Times. Another

such letter printed in the Laredo Times picks up where Delapass left off and pushes further to

outright attack the Old Party.

> Were the taxpayers ever given an opportunity, before the school board
> resolution was made, to speak out on the naming of our new high
> school? Like so many other things in Laredo, it was done quietly
> behind closed doors. I think, it is action like that which any free citizen
> deplores. It now appears that so many of our "Old Party" citizens are
> willing to name any building, street, lamp post, or alleyway after our
> beloved president, as long as we do not question the right of a select
> few in naming our new high school. [41]

The naming issue had rapidly escalated to apolitical issue. In an open meeting, Cruz Cabello,

Victor Moran Jr., Manuel Barrera, and Julian Herbeck urged that the name of the new high

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[40] Garcia, Josephine W. "Letters to the Editor." *Laredo Times*. December 2, 1963.
[41] "Letters to the Editor." *Laredo Times*. December 2, 1963. Author name withheld.

school be changed to honor Kennedy. In opposition stood Oscar Villareal, a member of the

Guadalupe School PTA, several letters from Mrs. Gilberto Gonzalez, president of the City

Council of PTAs, Fernando Macias Jr., president of the local Texas State Teachers

Association, and officers of the Classroom Teachers Association. Ultimately, the meeting

erupted into dispute when Manuel Barrera charged that he had never been able to get a full-

time teaching job in Laredo despite having both a bachelor's and a master's degree, due to

his political affiliations. It was then stated that Barrera had been unable to find work as a

teacher due to him making a comment that there was no God and being associated with

communism. The meeting then retreated behind closed doors where the School Trustees

made the final decision to name the new school after Superintendent Nixon.

Laredo, despite the recent political activity in the early 1960s remained one of the

poorest areas in the country. The city was still largely isolated from the rest of the country

despite the push to link the country together via the highway system. The 1960s and 1970s

saw the introduction and completion of the interstate highway system in Texas which quickly

became vital for Laredo's economy and identity. Politically and economically, however, the

city was still very much under the control of the Independent Club. Any activism that

occurred could be ignored at will as few political actors remained that could take advantage

of such activism to gain any real power within the city. The events that unfolded in Laredo

after the assassination of John F. Kennedy served to highlight a willingness on behalf of the

citizens to continue to challenge the Independent Club. While the movement did not originate

with that intent, Laredoans were quick to recognize the cronyism that was associated with the

Old Party and did not shy away from putting it on public display despite the overwhelming

influence exercised by the machine in the city. This display of resistance to the Old Party rule

came just on the eve of Johnson's new initiative to combat poverty in the most desperate

areas of the United States. The War on Poverty programs such as the Community Action

Agency and the Volunteers in Service to America began to galvanize and inadvertently

challenge the Independent Club as it sought to achieve its goal of eliminating poverty. For

the Independent Club which had relied on its control of the job market in Laredo for the base

of its leverage, the new poverty programs would begin to erode the machine's influence.

Laredoans had already began demonstrating their willingness to participate politically, but it

was not until federal support would allow for the lower class in Laredo to be heard and

properly represented by their own selected leaders. Throughout the country, many local

leaders who had established control over their cities quickly began to see their bases of

power erode under pressure from both the federal government and the newfound voice of the

poor. The failure of the War on Poverty largely stems from the reaction on behalf of the local

government's efforts to stymie the expansion of federal influence in local communities.

CHAPTER 4

THE WAR ON POVERTY

The War on Poverty was plagued by a general misunderstanding of the issue since the

beginning. As a result, the legislation and programs that came out of the War on Poverty

were varied and vague. Programs like Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and the

Community Action Program (CAP) focused mainly on the development of the poorer regions

of the community through direct participation and volunteer work. Beyond the

misunderstandings that had developed on all levels from local to federal, there was also a

rush to gain access to funds that only added to the confusion. "The theorists who had

conceived community action during the Kennedy administration cautioned local groups to

spend at least one year in program development. Wanting to get the money before LBJ or

members of Congress changed their minds, local officials devoted little time to developing an

understanding of the subtleties of community action. By June 1965 more than four hundred

CAAs had been established. By 1966 there were more than one thousand."[42] Local city

officials like Louie Welch, the mayor of Houston at the time that the CAP was introduced,

saw the program as a way to secure federal dollars for the city's infrastructure projects.[43] He

believed that he could use the War on Poverty to secure the vote of Houston's poor while

acting in the interests of the business community.

This train of thought was adopted by many local leaders who viewed the program as a

political opportunity for themselves, but largely rejected the train of thought held by the

liberal intellectuals that had nurtured the notion of community action during the Kennedy

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[42] Clayson, William S. *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas.* University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 2010. p. 51
[43] Phelps, Wesley. *A People's War on Poverty: Urban Politics and Grassroots Activists in Houston.* The University of Georgia Press. Athens, GA. 2011. p. 13-21.

Administration. For example, John Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlessinger were both acutely aware of how public funds had been used for the sake of promoting private industry. "What was especially egregious was how highways were supported by federal tax dollars and yet facilitated the growth of shopping malls, motels, drive-in restaurants, and other private industries. The interstates channeled people, led them to certain paces and not to others. They created a social environment in which public dollars helped buck up private industries and profits."[44] What they advocated for instead was the use of public funds to improve the standard of living instead of the Gross National Product. Schlesinger argued that Americans needed to "end this belief that every dollar spent for private indulgence is good and every dollar spent for public service is bad—that, to put it simply, tail-fins are better than schools."[45] What emerged out of this frame of thought was a new take on liberalism that came to be termed Qualitative Liberalism as opposed to the old liberalism which came to be defined as Quantitative Liberalism. Qualitative Liberalism focused on using federal funds to increase the standard of living for American citizens whereas Quantitative Liberalism focused on using federal funds to expand the economy, resulting in a better standard of living for American citizens.[46] This difference in approach would form the rift that would tear apart the liberal consensus of the 1960s and rupture the consensus behind the War on Poverty. Community action was conceived under the notion of Qualitative Liberalism but was thought to be in line with the quantitative form of thought. It was conceived to directly improve the standard of living of the poor but was assumed to simply be another jobs program to help the poor become involved in the economy.

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[44] Mattson, Kevin. *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism.* Routlegde Taylor & Francis Group. New York, NY. 2006. p. 149
[45] Ibid. p. 148.
[46] Ibid p. 152

The War on Poverty was seen as a force of major change in the country, in particular by

minorities who saw these antipoverty programs as an opportunity to improve their situation

in the country. As a result, the War on Poverty faced two issues with its implementation:

first, the overwhelming resistance to improve the standard of living for minorities and to

include them in the government process; second, the hijacking of the programs by groups in

attempts to satisfy their own agendas. In both situations, the problems that the War on

Poverty faced the issue of the segregationist culture that had developed in the South. The

South saw this division distinctly with segregationist agendas pushing back against the

integration policies embedded in the antipoverty programs. In Texas, this manifested itself

primarily in a competition between the older generation of the Mexican-American

community, who saw this as an opportunity to assimilate into American society, versus the

younger Chicano generation which resisted assimilation and sought self-determination. In

both cases, within the regions in which these programs were initiated, there was resistance in

adapting to the American culture that had developed after WWII. The racial divisions that

had defined their respective regions for over a century hindered the antipoverty efforts within

those regions.

When Johnson first declared his intention of creating the Great Society, he believed

that he was going to be expanding upon the legacy of the New Deal. He recalled how the

New Deal had helped lift impoverished youths in Texas to pick themselves up. However, the

situation had rapidly warped in the decades since Johnson's work with the National Youth

Administration in Texas.

> In Brownsville, the Cameron County Commissioners' Court invited
> the local press to a discussion of the unfolding fight on poverty.
> County Judge Oscar C. Dancy's understanding of the OEO's role
> reflected that of many local officials in Texas: "I'm in favor of

cooperating ith the President and the governor as far as we can on this poverty thing… The beautification of highways, parks, seems to be the first on the President's program." Dancy and many others seemed to believe that LBJ intended more or less to revive the New Deal. When a reporter asked the judge, "Is it a make work program, like the WPA was?" Dancy replied, "Yes, I would say It is, at least I think."[47]

Since then, poverty had transformed from an issue at the forefront of the United States' problems that seemed to plague every American equally to an issue that had been forgotten in the prosperity of the 1950s and was reserved to inner cities or rural towns. Even in the case of Piñon, he did not perceive himself as living in a state of poverty until much later in his life when he was able to compare it with what was outside of Laredo. However, this was a much more noticeable, though easily ignored, problem of larger cities. By the time the Office of Economic Opportunity was created on August 20, 1964, the socioeconomic divide that had developed out of the 1950s mass consumption in conjunction with the growing Civil Rights Movement fostered the idea that equality was not solely a question of political equality, but also one of economic equality. That minorities had by and large been left behind in the United States' economic jump which only added another dimension for activists to organize in. The unity behind the Civil Rights Movement petered off after securing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Pursuit of economic equality for blacks and other minorities all too often fell to the more dedicated and all too often radical members of the organizations that were at the forefront of the movement. The splintering off of the Civil Rights Movement that occurred in the latter half of the 1960s began with this challenge to the

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[47] Clayson, William S. *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas.* University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 2010. p. 50.

American system and national image that had produced disparity in wealth during the 1950s.

Community Action in the Segregated South

The support that minorities had received from white middle class Americans disappeared in the face of the issue of poverty and the remains of what had been Jim Crow segregation. Whether this was due to blissful ignorance or the realization that economic equality threatened their social hierarchy can be debated in its own study, but it remains clear that many of the Civil Rights activists that remained after its successes in the political arena saw that economic disenfranchisement was the most potent threat to opportunity for minorities. For blacks, it came in the form of housing, education, healthcare, and other economic opportunities. However, the culture of racism that was at the heart of white southern culture defied any form of economic advancement for minorities, especially the African American community. The War on Poverty sought to raise the standard of living for all Americans to an equal degree. For segregationists in the South, that was in direct contradiction to the social structure that whites had established in the decades following Reconstruction. As a result, any form of program that promoted parity or advancement of the African American community was oftentimes scrutinized and attacked by leaders that sought to maintain their way of life in the South.

In the Louisiana Delta, where the War on Poverty had taken shape in the form of the Head Start program, an initiative to provide better educational opportunities to the poor fell under attack due to its racial integration policies. The War on Poverty fell under attack by the Ku Klux Klan through various forms of terroristic threats on any participants in the War on

Poverty programs.[48] Domestic terrorism was not the only method employed by

segregationists to undermine the expansion of opportunities available for African American

community. Legislation and influence from both the municipal and state levels of

government oftentimes sought to weaken the influence of War on Poverty funded programs.

In 1965, the federal Office of Economic Opportunity approved the creation of a new

community health center in Mound Bayou, Mississippi with the intention that it would

provide adequate healthcare to Mound Bayou and the rest of Bolivar County. The Tufts-

Delta Health Center (THDC) officially opened its doors in November 1967. Opponents of the

new federally funded center quickly charged that the center was going to be used to create

civil rights activism in the region. Mississippi Senator at the time, John Stennis, promised to

investigate the organization. The THDC also fell under the scrutiny of local black leaders

who "recognized the threats to their dominance posed by the economic and political

empowerment of poor people and joined their white counterparts in efforts to undermine the

project."[49] The program was charged with encouraging agitation within the community and

undermining the social structure of the community, and was viewed as an outside agency

trying to exert its influence on the local community.

Desegregationist policies and support from the civil rights community antagonized a

white southern culture based largely on racism and perpetuated by segregation. The

segregationist culture that existed within the South sought to perpetuate the power structure

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[48] Germany, Kent B. "Poverty Wars in the Louisiana Delta: White Resistance, Black Power, and
the Poorest Place in America." In *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History 1964-1969*, edited by Annelise
Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, p. 231-255.
Athens, GA. University of Georgia Press, 2011.

[49] De Jong, Greta. "Plantation Politics: The Tufts-Delta Health Center and Intraracial Class
Conflict in Mississippi, 1965-1972." In *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots
History 1964-1969*, edited by Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian, p. 268.
Athens, GA. University of Georgia Press, 2011.

within the communities and remove opportunities for advancement in an attempt to preserve

the local power structure. In the case of resistance based on racial issues, the War on Poverty

found itself in a situation in which it could not defer to the segregationist culture that had

developed in the South. The War on Poverty and community grassroots organization efforts

in the South then were hampered by an entrenched segregationist culture that had permeated

the political and economic organizations of the South.

Like with the African American community, Chicanos also saw the economic

advancement opportunities provided by the War on Poverty as the next step in securing a

better lifestyle for themselves. However, Chicanos would push on the forefront of education

and later through the United Farm Workers under Cesar Chavez. It should be noted that

"Chavez never projected himself as being a leader of the CM. He perceived the UFW as

nothing more than a union dedicated to improving the quality of the farm workers' lives.

While concerned about the plight of urban Chicanos, he resisted any attempts to put himself

into a leadership role on issues not directly related to the UFW's causa, the farm worker."[50]

The struggle for equal opportunity continued long after the equality in the face of the law had

been achieved but only because by the time that the Civil Rights movement came to have its

impact on the promotion of equality, the law no longer determined access to equal

opportunity. It was now determined by how well people could fit into the image of middle

class America that had been cultivated under the consumer culture of the 1950s and housed

in the many identical homes that surrounded deteriorating cities. The fight for economic

equality then became a more personal fight that had to be catered to the opportunities of the

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[50] Navarro, Armando. Navarro, Armando. *Mexican American youth Organization. Avante-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas.* Chapter 1. Sub-Chapter: Cesar Chavez and the UFW. Page numbers could not be confirmed for this source due to access through an ebook.

local arena and the capabilities of the individual. Each community had its own unique issues concerning income inequality and wealth disparity, and thus, any national movement putting forth a unifying plan would find competing values and methods at the local level.

As a whole, the Civil Rights Movements became much more militant in their approach towards gaining economic equality. Civil Rights leaders, both Black and Chicano, distanced themselves from integration and began promoting self-determination and emphasis on one's cultural identity. The Chicano Movement best exemplifies the divide that ultimately ruptured the War on Poverty. When Johnson first declared the War on Poverty in 1964, he had enjoyed a great deal of support from Mexican-Americans, especially within the state of Texas. As the War on Poverty continued, the Mexican American support that Johnson had enjoyed began to fracture as a result of the new militancy being adopted by younger members of the Mexican-American community who now called themselves Chicanos.

Mexican Americans and the War on Poverty

At San Jose State, two Chicano student activists, Luis Valdez and Roberto Rubaclava, issued the first Chicano manifesto that utilized this kind of militant rhetoric. It presented the Chicano as a victim of American Imperialism and criticized the current leadership of the Chicano community as "Americanized beyond recall" and disconnected from the greater Chicano community.[51] In Texas, the Mexican American Youth Organization under the leadership of José Angel Gutierrez also resorted to a high degree of militancy and used the Black Power Movement as inspiration in developing the organization's presence.

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[51] Navarro, Armando. *Mexican American youth Organization. Avante-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas.* Chapter 2. Sub-Chapter:The Early Sixties: The Calm Before the Storm of Activism.

Under Gutierrez, MAYO demonized the gringo and criticized the establishment that nurtured

the oppression of the Chicano. MAYO heavily relied on this tactic and event felt the need to

identify the difference between Anglos, who were sympathetic to La Causa, and Gringos,

who sought to maintain the established power structure that only oppressed the Chicano. As

MAYO grew in influence along Southwest Texas, the Civil Rights movement along the

border became shaped by this attack on the white establishment. Much of the land in

Southwest Texas had come to be owned by wealthy white landowners at the turn of the 20th

century. Isolated regions came to be dominated by a white landowning elite that established a

social hierarchy based on class and race despite its overwhelmingly large Mexican-American

population. Because of this, MAYO was able to have a great deal of influence in the region

as far as organizing the barrios and the student community. The War on Poverty only

perpetuated the influence of the new militant Chicano Movement as they received their

training and funding directly from OEO sponsored programs. Despite this, The Chicano

Movement was overwhelmingly critical of the War on Poverty as a whole in particular for

what was perceived as an attempt to assimilate Mexican-Americans into American culture.

> Throughout the postwar era, a cadre of Mexican American politicians,
> led by San Antonio congressman Henry B. Gonzalez, had become
> stalwarts of the liberal wing of Texas's Democratic Party. They
> championed the goals of postwar liberalism, especially racial
> integration, a view that would become a key point of contention. The
> Chicanos saw integration as a vision that would require them to
> assimilate into an Anglo culture that had abused and oppressed their
> people for generations. When they demanded control of the OEO
> funding in the barrios, they planned to use the money to promote a
> starkly contrasting ideal of Chicano self-determination, cultural
> celebration, and political empowerment. [52]

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[52] Clayson, William F. The Chicano Movement in Texas. p. 336. The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History.

Members of the postwar liberalism faction looked at the problems that Latinos had faced as systemic issues that could be overcome as Mexican Americans integrated into American society, like past immigrants such as Irish Americans. Chicanos, however, rejected the claim, citing that the difference between Mexican Americans and other immigrants was that many of the Mexican Americans that were in the United States had not immigrated to the United States but rather had been absorbed as a result of the Mexican American War and were forced to live lives filled with discrimination as a result. Because of this, many Chicanos felt that Mexican Americans should not try to assimilate into American culture and advocated for self-determination and the creation of Aztlan.

By the time the Chicano Movement began to organize in Texas during the late 1960s, more pressure had begun to be applied on the War on Poverty. Community action and the OEO began to fall under attack from Republican leaders who either felt that they did not have proper control over the agencies created in their respective states or believed that the programs created under the War on Poverty should be moved over to other governmental agencies. Republicans pushed in Congress for greater control of the CAAs in their respective states. In an interview, Robert Perrin, assistant director of the Office of Economic Opportunity , stated that "The governors—certainly not all of them, but a number of them— were concerned about money coming into their states over which they had no real controls… there was a great concern among some of the state officials, or at least those who operated the state economic opportunity offices, that they didn't have enough power, really, over the programs in their states."[53] By 1967, the Office of Economic Opportunity underwent two amendments. First, the Quie Amendment reorganized the structure of CAAs away from the

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[53] Gillette, Michael L. *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History*. p. 376.

"maximum feasible opportunity" clause and created a new system in which boards would be made up of one-third elected officials representing the local government, one-third from the private sector, and the last third was to be made up of the representatives for the poor elected through a democratic process. The Quie Amendment substantially weakened the influence that the poor had over their local agencies. The second amendment was the Green Amendment which gave greater control of community action to the states. According to Bertrand Harding, "The Green Amendment was a conscious effort on the part of this agency and friends of this agency to satisfy some very, very negative attitudes, particularly among southern members of the House, to the end that it was felt that unless some sort of compromise was put into the bill, it would never pass, and this agency would have come to a screeching halt on June 30, 1967." [54] The Quie and Green Amendments effectively weakened the influence the poor had within their agencies and their communities. Governors were relegated the power to do away with any War on Poverty program. As a result of local leaders' greater influence over antipoverty boards within their cities, MAYO began to face greater pushback from city officials.

For MAYO the height of its influence peaked just before the 1970s. The organization had taken advantage of the War on Poverty programs, specifically the VISTA and the VISTA Minority Movement Program (VISTA MMR), to raise funds and expand its influence across the state.

> MAYO's social action efforts during the first half of 1968 were complemented by its efforts to develop resources. MAYO developed resources by involving itself in programs targeting the barrios. These service programs helped to meet four objectives: (1) entry into the barrios; (2) provision of services to the barrio poor; (3) resources

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[54] Gillette, Michael L. *Launching the War on Poverty: An Oral History 2nd Ed*. Oxford, New York. Oxford University Press, 2010.p. 368.

development; (4) salary subsidies for those MAYO organizers who
worked as paid program personnel.[55]

MAYO then decided to concentrate its efforts in the following five regions due to the

sizeable Chicano populations within the respective regions: San Antonio, El Paso, Del Rio,

Laredo, and the Rio Grande Valley. MAYO became over reliant on these programs. In

February 1969, just a year after MAYO began to use the antipoverty programs to its

advantage, unrest in Del Rio prompted the Val Verde county commissioners to formally

request that the local CAA discontinue the VISTA MMR due to alleged violations that

VISTA workers had violated guidelines by becoming involved in political activities. When

the local CAA released the implicated members of the program, the county commissioners

asked Governor Preston Smith to terminate both the CAA and the VISTA MMP programs in

the county. MAYO, which had targeted Del Rio for its Mexican-American population,

immediately became involved. Over the course of the next several months, MAYO's

militancy escalated as it penned a manifesto on Del Rio on March 24 criticizing the gringo

establishment.[56] Just one day prior, on March 23, MAYO and VISTA supporters picketed the

Hamilton Hotel in Laredo. "The aide let it be known [that] Smith had no intention of

confronting the leaders of the crowd outdoors. The aide accepted a rabbit named 'justice,' on

behalf of the Governor, and the MAYO representatives told him another rabbit bearing the

same name had been buried several days earlier, signifying that the VISTA termination

meant justice was dead."[57]

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[55] Navarro, Armando. *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas*. Austin, Texas. University of Texas Press, 1995. Chapter 5 MAYO: Advocate for Social Change.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

Ultimately, the demonstrations did little to save the programs from termination. The incident opened MAYO up for attack from prominent Mexican-American leaders, like Henry B. Gonzalez, and began to give the organization a negative image. This image was further associated with the organization when José Angel Gutierrez stated that it might be necessary to "eliminate gringos by killing them."[58] The backlash forced MAYO to distance itself from its militancy, ultimately paving the way for the formation of the Raza Unida Party in 1970.Ultimately, the Raza Unida made several bids in state elections, the most notable being that of Ramsey Muniz but had little success beyond the early fervor of the 1970s.

The War on Poverty began under Johnson with a lofty goal but little in the way of structured planning to meet that goal. The lack of direction and the rapid administration of the CAA opened the only made the antipoverty programs more susceptible to politicization by already politically active groups. Instead of creating independent organizations that saw to the benefit of all the poor, the programs were coopted in a larger and older conflict of the period, the battle between minorities looking to gain civil rights and better living standards versus the established power structure that found its roots in segregationist culture. However, within Laredo, where a segregationist culture never had the chance to materialize, the War on Poverty was able to achieve more uninhibited success.

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[58] Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

A PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT

However, due to the racial homogeneity of Laredo, the divisions formed in Laredo

never developed to the degree that it did in other parts of the country. Instead, the issue that

plagued Laredo was classism. As a result, Laredo presented a unique situation for the War on

Poverty to take place in and allotted a degree of success for the poverty programs initiated in

the city. Surrounding cities had already developed their own racial hierarchy, the most well-

known being Crystal City due to its walkouts and demonstrations at the end of the decade.

Larger cities like Houston and San Antonio had their politics dominated by local

businessman who actively ran the municipal government in their favor. In San Antonio, the

Good Government League (GGL) managed to dominate politics through both party avenues

often using the opposing parties to divide the constituencies of the Bexar County Democratic

Coalition which consisted largely of minorities.[59] While the GGL was not all white, there

were few minorities that were involved with the group, and there were few initiatives to gain

support from minorities.

El Paso, another border city similar to Laredo, was dominated by a group known as

the Kingmakers who also controlled the economic and political structure of the city. Similar

to these groups was the Independent Club run under the Democratic Party and headed by the

mayor of Laredo, J. C. Martin Jr. Martin was a descendant of a wealthy landowning family

that had been in control of Laredo politics since the turn of the century and was a descendant

of Raymond Martin, a French immigrant who married into one of Laredo's wealthier

families. The difference between Laredo and other cities in Texas lied in the demographics

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[59] Clayson, William S. *Freedom is Not Enough: The War on Poverty and the Civil Rights Movement in Texas.* University of Texas Press, Austin, TX. 2010. p. 68

and the location of the city. Houston and San Antonio had sizeable Anglo populations and was more ethnically diverse than places in Southern Texas like Laredo, so power became associated with race as the city developed a segregationist culture. El Paso, while being similar to Laredo in terms of demographics and its situation along the border was also much closer to the rest of the United States. As Piñon mentioned, Laredo, despite being part of the United States, remained isolated from the rest of the country well into the 1960s. Many whites that moved to Laredo at the turn of the century with the coming of the railroad found themselves infused into the Mexican culture of the city retaining little if any of their own. Ricardo De Anda, a civil rights lawyer in Laredo, recalls that whites in Laredo were generally acculturated to the city. On Martin, De Anda recalls, "Even… Mayor Martin was called Pepe, that was his nickname, and it wasn't because it was easier to say Pepe it was because he was Mexican. He was as Mexican as the other rich Mexican whose name was Sandoval or Gutierrez. He was just as Mexican as that guy and they were in the same social class because they were rich. So, the racialism was never… able to get a footing in Laredo."[60]

Laredo's social class divisions then became structured around three tiers. Wealthy landowners were situated at the top and controlled local politics, the middle class was largely dominated by skilled workers, city servants, and teachers, and a large lower class that consisted largely of a Spanish speaking population that worked low paying jobs in the service industry and on ranches. The constant flow of poor immigrants from Mexico provided a solid foundation for the formation of the political machine during the early 20th century. "Its power

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[60] De Anda, Ricardo, Enriquez, Sandra, Robles, David. *De Anda, Classism in Laredo*. Video Interview.4:52.7/10/2015. https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/classism-in-laredo.

was derived throughout the control of jobs and the manipulation of the people's ignorance."[61]

With the majority of middle class service industry jobs in the government and education

spheres of the city, political control allowed the wealthy landowners to exert their influence

over both of the lower classes, cementing their control of the city. The machine relied

largely on exchanging employment for votes. "The biggest employer in the city for many

years has been the public entities—the city, the county, and the Laredo Independent School

District. Combined they employed over 5,000 people, which meant that directly at least

5,000 households were affected by the Old Party job patronage. Luis Diaz De Leon, a recent

college graduate and veteran and later director of Laredo's CAA, best describes the style of

patronage utilized by the Martin machine. After graduating from college, De Leon returned

to Laredo seeking a job as a teacher for the junior high school. He was instructed by the

superintendent to meet with the sheriff, a relative of Mayor Martin's. In meeting with Sheriff

Martin, he was instructed to secure twenty to thirty votes for the Old Party if he wanted the

job. De Leon politely left the office and the city to pursue positions in San Antonio and

Brownsville.[62] In another case, an unnamed "man who worked as a bailiff for the 111th

District Court said he saw nothing wrong in providing jobs to those who work for the Old

Party. 'So you have a degree, so what? I do not have a degree, and I am earning much more

than you are. If you want to get ahead, you have to go along with the Old Party.'"[63] In short,

any degree of accomplishment or education meant nothing in the face of the machine's

patronage. Even those working outside of the direct influence of the party found themselves

vulnerable to the rule of the machine. "Emilio (Chito) Davila, an attorney who on several

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[61] Piñon, Fernando. Patron Democracy. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.. p. 124.
[62] Oral History Interview with Luis Diaz De Leon, by José Angel Guiterrez. CMAS No. 135.
http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_135.xml
[63] Piñon, Fernando. Patron Democracy. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.p. 129

occasions ran for political office in opposition to the Old Party, said it was 'very difficult to succeed as an attorney here and be against the Independent Club.'"[64] Richard Geissler recalls, "When I came here in '66 they were still doing… when you go and register to vote, 'who was the third president of the United States,' and if you couldn't answer it they wouldn't register you… so they did everything in their power to control the votes."[65] Beyond the use of employment, Martin would often exchange favors such as purchasing medicine, or opening locations within the city for housing in exchange for these votes. For Laredoans who had limited income and limited opportunities at employment, the trade made with the Old Party was welcomed. On Election Day, the Independent Club hosted large rallies offering food and drink often presented a clear reminder of their allegiances. When it came time to vote, citizens were often educated on how to identify their predetermined candidate using folding methods or knotted string.[66] Laredo, then, despite the attacks from the Reform Party during the 1950s, and the willingness of citizens to attack the Independent Club was still firmly under "Pepe" Martin's control during the late 1960s.

Because the Martin machine was based on manipulation of the poor, there was little incentive for the local politicians to improve the quality of life of its citizens. According to Ricardo De Anda, Martin never seemed particularly interested in improving the lives of the citizens of Laredo, but seemed more interested in using his political power for his friends or for gaining contacts. De Anda contrasts with Aldo Tatangelo, Martin's successor, who despite being an outsider to the city seemed genuinely interested in improving the city. He recalls how Tatangelo, upon stepping into office, quickly utilized city funds to purchase

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[64] Piñon, Fernando. Patron Democracy. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.. p. 126.

[65] Richard Geissler, interview with author. June 20, 2017.

[66] "One man, Lawrence Berry, exposed Laredo corruption and patron system in 1978."Youtube video. 19:39. Posted: November 15, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEwyWgPVq7k

street paving equipment for the city fulfilling his promise to begin pavement of the city's

streets.[67] At the height of Martin's political influence during the early 1960s, Laredo

remained backward by comparison to the rest of the country that had developed shopping

centers in the suburbs and highways that linked cities together. "The education and economic

level of the vast majority of Laredoans were among the lowest in the state. In fact, Laredo

often claimed the title of the country's poorest city… According to the guidelines established

by the United States Council of Economic Advisers, 52.9 percent of all Laredoans fell under

the poverty level. The median income for the 10,315 families in the city was $2,425 in 1960,

far short of the $3,000 per year income listed as constituting the poverty level."[68] Laredo had

the same issues concerning poverty that many regions of the country experienced. It could be

associated with poverty through its lack of infrastructure, low literacy levels, and below the

poverty line income. However, it lacked many of the issues concerning race and identity that

had managed to take over the War on Poverty in other parts of the country.

By the 1960s, American consumer culture and materialism had come to define the

United States. The purchasing power of the nuclear family had been displayed as the

hallmark of capitalism and ironically came to be used as the main form of propaganda in

deterring the spread of communism. However, due to the shift in economic policy that led to

the growth of the middle class, and the legacy of segregation, a socioeconomic rift emerged

throughout the United States. Laredo, due its cultural homogeneity, proximity to the border,

and established classism did not develop the racialized economic divide. As a result, there

was little interest in Laredo for the various civil rights grassroots organizations that had

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[67] De Anda, Ricardo, Enriquez, Sandra, Robles, David. *De Anda, Marin Machine Part 2*. Video Interview.3:58.7/10/2015. https://crbb.tcu.edu/clips/the-martin-machine-part-2.

[68] Piñon, Fernando. *Patron Democracy*. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.p. 125.

developed throughout the United States. Any form of organized activity that formed focused largely on weakening the Martin machine and putting forth candidates to compete in the following election against Martin backed candidates. Martin was able to limit activity on this front by amending the election cycle. He extended the term for Mayor from two years to four years so that he would have to appeal to the constituents less frequently. Although the nature of the problem was the same in Laredo as it was elsewhere, because the issue of race was lacking, War on Poverty programs did not come under the influence of various Civil Rights organizations as they did in Houston, San Antonio, or other cities across the United States.

While the War on Poverty did not fall to the divisive forces of militant civil rights organizers in Laredo, it found its opponent in City Hall with the Martin machine. The misunderstanding that was at the heart of community action since the announcement of the War on Poverty had complicated the community action issue throughout the United States just as much as competing organizations had. Throughout the country, War on Poverty funds were fought over by competing organizations and city officials who saw the political opportunity. In Laredo, the lack of the race issue made the problem less complex than in other places but remained a difficult issue nonetheless.

Efforts to create a CAA and initiate other War on Poverty programs began in late 1964 when Luis Diaz de Leon, now supervisor of the Laredo-Webb County Child Welfare Unit, began applying for OEO funds.[69] The War on Poverty launched in Laredo in spring and early summer of 1966, when VISTA volunteers arrived in April and after the OEO approved a grant of $18,900 to fund a new organization to head the War on Poverty Programs in

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[69] Ramirez, José Angel. "El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956 1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000. p. 45.

Laredo, the Economic Opportunities Development Corporation (EODC).[70] Martin was able

to avoid much of the backlash that many other officials across the United States had faced

upon initiating their respective CAAs. Mayors often attempted to fill the board with key

supporters in order to manage the funds to their favor, but often the formation of their agency

rejected for not adhering to the "maximum feasible participation" clause. Martin, under

pressure from recent VISTA arrivals, activism in the barrios, and an upcoming election year,

appointed leadership to José A. Valdez, a barrio activist, as president of the EODC, a public

nonprofit organization with the purpose of heading the War on Poverty programs in Laredo,

and Luis Diaz De Leon as its Executive Director. Martin managed to get through the 1966

election uncontested, possibly due to his concessions. Still, Martin was able to gain some

influence in the new EODC by placing Blas Martinez, Billy Hall Jr., and Ramon Martinez on

the agency's staff.[71] The minute gains made by activists in gaining federal antipoverty

support only gave confidence to the increasingly politically active barrios. Martin's efforts to

avoid antagonizing the residents of the barrios managed to keep him in power politically, but

the concessions he offered began chipping away at the source of his power.

> The federally funded War on Poverty didn't bring the political
> machine to its knees, but it chipped away at all the old systems,
> managing to turn it on its deaf ear. Barrio activism, sparked by the
> VISTAS and Minority VISTAs, registered neighborhood victories in
> the form of water and sewer lines extended in La Ladrillera, a much
> needed stop light installed in El Cuatro, and street lights throughout
> the poorer neighborhoods. Barrio residents became aware that it was
> all right to ask—no, to demand—the same utility and street provisions
> that were obvious amenities in better neighborhoods across town.[72]

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ramirez, José Angel. "El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956
1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000. p. 46.

[72] Guerra, Maria Eugenia. *Historic Laredo: An Illustrated History of Laredo and Webb County.* Historical
Publishing Network. San Antonio, TX. 2001. p. 60.

Martin had believed that he had done enough to appease Laredo's poor by granting them a

voice in the EODC, but he underestimated his community. "There was a myth about poor

people that poor people were poor mentalmente (mentally)," José Valdez recalled when he

first attended a meeting for a neighborhood council. However, the War on Poverty began to

introduce a sense of organization to barrio activists and introduced them to the intricacies of

politics such as Robert's Rules of Order.

> Then the VISTA workers came in… the VISTAs were sent to the
> neighborhoods… they would teach us, you know make a motion,
> question, nobody can speak twice to the same issue within a 15 minute
> period until everybody who was on that board had an opportunity to
> speak. Llegamos a la junta y ayi estaba Nixon, el superintendent de las
> schools, state senator este Kazen, y of course el mayor era el
> presidente del board con los jueces Roberto Benavides y Jimmy
> Kazen… y de repente la gente de el barrio comienzan a decir 'out of
> order'… we had these meetings and they were in awe that we could
> speak.[73]

"For the first three months, VISTA volunteer organized neighborhood councils in Laredo's

barrios. These councils made it more convenient for barrio residents to obtain anti-poverty

services and choose representatives for the EODC's administrative board."[74] In total

approximately 14 neighborhood councils were created that acted underneath the EODC

administrative board.[75] "Following the 1966 election, however, the unrest in the barrios

picked up considerably, as Martin had suspected."[76] The War on poverty had made its

inroads in Laredo and had already begun to offer new opportunities for the poor of Laredo.

At the start of 1967, the War on Poverty was being hailed as success by local leaders.

Honore Ligarde, the president of the Bank of Commerce and "Pepe" Martin's brother-in-law,

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[73] Valdez, José A. Interview with author. September 30, 2017.
[74] Ramirez, José Angel. "El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956
1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000. p. 46.
[75] Valdez, José A. Interview with author. September 30, 2017.
[76] Piñon, Fernando. *Patron Democracy*. Mexico D.F., Mexico. Ediciones "Contraste", 1985.

stated that "The massive spending by the anti-poverty programs has given a tremendous boost to our city's economy… there are many intangibles in the programs and the full impact has not been achieved yet. The upgrading in job skills is resulting in a fine increase in the earning power of our citizens."[77] The War on Poverty was effectively weakening the grip that Martin had on Laredo. The War on Poverty also provided financial support for legal aid and had instituted a Neighborhood Youth Corps, and adult education services program for migrants, a Medicare Alert Plan, a hot lunch program for needy children, and the LIFE Downs vocational training program in the city.[78] The successes of the city did not solely fall in line with greater economic opportunities, but the OEO had also started providing funding medial facilities in the city. A few days after Ligarde touted the successes of the War on Poverty in Laredo, the Laredo Rehabilitation Center received a renewal in War on Poverty funding that would allow them to maintain the staff they had on hand. The building of the rehabilitation center had also been partly funded using antipoverty funds and was the only medical rehabilitation facility available to Webb County and surrounding areas.[79] Slowly, the influence that Martin exercised in Laredo by providing favors to the populous began to whittle away as War on Poverty programs began to improve the quality of life in the city.

While anti-poverty programs had proved successful in weakening the Martin machine due to its economic provisions, the VISTA program was what began to step away from providing economic opportunities to the poor and began to push for greater involvement in the local government. VISTA organizers in the barrios began to see that the Independent Club members of the EODC "were only interested in using the anti-poverty program to

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[77] Parish, Jim. "Laredo Financiers See Good Year Ahead." *Laredo Times.* January 1, 1967.

[78] "Local War on Poverty is Defended." *Laredo Times*. January 4, 1967.

[79] Ibid.

distribute patronage and favors to political allies and poor Laredoans.[80] Leading the shift

away from economic aid to political participation were brothers Richard and Bill Geissler.

During 1966, the VISTA organizers were successful in improving the infrastructure of La

Ladrillera neighborhood by securing better sewage lines and fire hydrants after a recent fire.

"In August 1966, he and nearly one hundred residents of La Ladrillera crowded city hall to

demand that city officials provide them with eight new fire hydrants…Overwhelmed and

intimidated by the large and angry crown, city councilmen fount it expedient to act

generously. Within a month, city workers began laying the necessary plumbing for not only

eight, but twelve new hydrants.[81] The VISTA's and the community had achieved their first

victory against the Independent Club. Later that year, Geissler resigned from the VISTA

program after being reprimanded by the Austin OEO office for his activities in promoting a

$1.25 minimum wage in South Texas. However, Geissler's resignation from the VISTA

program only freed him to continue the fight against poverty on his own terms.

     1967 would prove to be a challenging year for Martin. The successes of the War on

Poverty in the year before had begun to erode his influence within the city as Laredoans

began to turn more and more to local barrio leaders and antipoverty organizations for support

instead of the local government. Martin's biggest opponents came from the CAA headed by

José Valdez and VISTA volunteers who began to organize in the city. The Minority VISTA

program was able to launch a series of marches calling for the establishment of a city-wide

minimum wage. The marches achieved a degree of success against the Martin regime by

hurting the consumer flow from Mexico into Laredo. This hurt the merchant's pockets who

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[80] Ramirez, José Angel. "El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956
1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000. p. 48. Interview with Juan Ramirez.
[81] Ramirez, José Angel. "El Processo De La Reforma: Opposition to the Independent Club 1956
1978." Master's Thesis, Texas A&M International University. 2000.p. 49.

in turn placed pressure on Martin to solve the protest issue. Martin was forced to appease the protesters due to the pressure from both of the lower classes. Martin's big bargaining chip remained ineffective in the face of both of these groups. The Minority VISTA Program was largely self-sufficient due to its reliance on federal funds as opposed to municipal funds. The merchants had remained outside of Martin's reach due to their interests lying largely in Mexico and its consumers as opposed to Laredo.

VIDA was created by two brothers Bill and Richard Geissler. According to an interview with Richard Geissler, VIDA was modeled after the "U-Join groups that operated in African American and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York City and Baltimore."[82] When further pressed about the purpose of the organization, Geissler stated "We will dwell on a number of local issues, but the main one will be the minimum wage. Primarily, it is a political education organization—to make the kids aware of the politics of the town. Right now, we want to tell the people what the elected officials are supposed to be doing for them."[83] The recent limitations imposed on VISTAs had hampered what the brothers believed were their efforts in dealing with the poverty in Laredo. The organization originally rallied around the Latin Power slogan which was later dropped as it began to face scrutiny from the public. VIDA, although not directly connected to War on Poverty funds, was a result of the antipoverty programs that were created under the Johnson administration and did receive substantial support from members of the VISTA organization and neighborhood community action agencies. At the same time, the Geissler brothers and other members of program managed to keep in line with the goals of the War on Poverty: to contribute to the

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[82] Gray, Walter. "Editor's Notebook." *Laredo Times*. February 1967.Article was obtained via personal collection of Richard Geissler and exact date could not be confirmed.
[83] Ibid.

extermination of poverty in the United States and to increase political participation in the government.

VIDA's efforts to secure a minimum wage in the city began on February 11, 1967 outside Deleganis Café in downtown Laredo. Just before the start of the Washington's Birthday Celebration, VIDA began to organize a protest against the Deliganis Café for its low wages. "This guy that we went up against Deliganis, was paying about 25 cents an hour to the waitresses… they would charge them for their food, they would charge them for their dry cleaning of their uniform, these poor women were taking home 14-15 bucks a week, of course they were getting their tips, but Laredo and Chicanos aren't known for being good tippers."[84] "TV was just starting to happen as far as local news and stuff, especially down here, and they had a guy at KGNS that were just building a news team and we took advantage of them. If something was gonna go down we'd call him up and he'd send a camera crew over. We were there one time and the TV was there and Delaganis the owner of the cafeteria came out and said, 'theyre lying, theyre telling people we pay the 25 cents an hour and my accountant and I looked at it and we're really paying them 28 cents an hour.'"[85] As VIDA continued with its protests, Geissler was able to convince some of the waitresses in the restraint to protest alongside them for a higher wage by matching their wage in an attempt to cover their living expenses out of an inheritance that was left to him by his grandfather.[86] As the strike grew, anti-poverty programs showed their support. Ted Delapass leader of the Central Neighborhood Council even protested the wage alongside VIDA. Two associates of Geissler, Neil Birnbaum and Donald Ruhe, who were still in VISTA on probation were fired

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[84] Geissler, Richard. Interview with author. June 20, 2017.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

from the program for aiding Geissler by collecting money in the neighborhoods to help cover

the living expenses of the striking workers.[87] The strike then escalated to Southland Café

down the road from Deliganis Café on the corner of Farragut and Salinas Avenue across

from Jarvis Plaza.[88] As the protests grew, VIDAs went to Austin to testify on the passage of a

State Minimum Pay Act.[89] However, the protests outside Southland Café, now the primary

target, continued for over a year.

Manuel "Chaca" Ramirez a local VISTA volunteer from El Cuatro Neighborhood

took the reins in pushing for the passage of a minimum wage ordinance in the city.

Laredoans began to march on City Hall in 1968 for the passage of a city-wide minimum

wage. "Chaca marched every Monday around city hall until there was a response from the

city about a minimum wage."[90] Honore Ligarde, who had touted the successes of the War on

Poverty a year before was now appointed to head a council on the passage of a minimum

wage ordinance. Laredo became the first city in the state of Texas to have an established

minimum wage.[91] By this point in time Richard Geissler had been drafted into the Vietnam

War and would only return after the decline of the War on Poverty in Laredo. Despite the

anti-Old Party activity that had developed under the War on Poverty, Martin dominated the

1970 election with 8,260 votes to Tomas Flores's 1,472. Shortly afterward, the War on

Poverty was overtaken by the Webb County Commissioner's Court and by extension under

[87] "Two VISTA Men Fired." *Laredo Times*. March 13, 1967.

[88] Court of Civil Appeal Fourth Supreme Judicial District of Texas at San Antonio. Appeal from 49th Judicial District Court of Webb County, Texas Richard Geissler v. Peter Coussoulis and William Patrick, Southland Café and Western Grill. No. 14,626. Austin, Texas. 1967.

[89] "VIDAs to Testify on State Minimum Pay Act." *Laredo Times*. March 15, 1967.

[90] Thompson, Jerry. *A Pictoral History of Laredo*. p. 59.

[91] Geissler, Richard. Interview with author. June 20, 2017.

the control of Martin. Despite this the activism remained, though never as well organized or as influential as the War on Poverty activism of the late 1960s.

As Laredo fought for the passage of the minimum wage ordinance within the city, other parts of South Texas were beginning to see the rise of the Chicano Movement as MAYO started to organize under José Angel Gutierrez in San Antonio and Crystal City. In the 1970s, after the retreat from the War on Poverty by the Johnson and Reagan administrations, Laredo's barrios remained politicized. La Raza Unida had evolved out of the Chicano Movement during the late 1960s and built upon the successes of MAYO in South Texas. The focus of La Raza Unida shifted the barrio activism in the city away from local politics, further stagnating the progress made by the Minority VISTA program and the CAA. Alberto Luera, who had arrived in Laredo at the turn of the decade, headed the political activism of La Raza Unida in the city outright stated that the interests of La Raza were not in local politics. In 1972, La Raza put forth Ramsey Muniz for governor and managed to have a degree of success in its appeal to office. For the rest of the decade, La Raza Unida would continue to organize and push along the same agenda.[92] However, despite various attempts the Chicano Movement and by extension the Raza Unida Party was never really able to take root in Laredo.

> The Raza Unida was really San Antonio… Because these guys were powerful very, very powerful, and also by the time these guys came along… the raza [Laredoans] here had gotten single member districts, had gotten De La Garza elected county commissioner, … the guys from Laredo had tasted victory, and unfortunately, especially Ramsey, these guys would come down here and think they were talking to hicks… it felt like they didn't appreciate and they just saw Laredo as the border town. By the time Raza Unida showed up here, the people that were community organizers in this community had had successes, knew what was going, knew what to do, and it was a little bit like the

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[92] Oral History Interview with Alberto Luera, by José Angel Gutierrez. CMAS No. 31. http://library.uta.edu/tejanovoices/xml/CMAS_031.xml

> big city-slickers coming down and treating them like hayseeds… and then they [Laredo leaders] were like hey, "who have you gotten elected in San Antonio."[93]

By this point in time, Laredoans had already achieved a degree of success in organizing against the local political structure. At the same time, Laredo did not have the same issues that surrounding regions had when it came to the local elite. San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and the Valley south of Laredo were areas where Hispanics were overwhelmingly discriminated against by the local elite who often consisted of whites. Laredo, with its majority Hispanic population did not face the same issues that San Antonio, Crystal City, or El Paso did. "José Angel Gutierrez would come down and try to raise hell and nobody would listen to him." [94]"Pepe" Martin was viewed as a Mexican-American just like anyone else living in Laredo despite his status and wealth. As a result, there was little lasting impact on Laredo when it came to the Chicano Movement, and because of that the War on Poverty that happened within the city remained focused on issues concerning poverty as opposed to focusing on cultural and racial issues as it happened in other parts of the state.

It is not until the tail end of the 1970s that the Martin machine faced its first true competition for the office of mayor. In the 1960s, Aldo Tatangelo had seen politics as an unnecessary hassle for himself that would distract him from his entrepreneurial efforts in Nuevo Laredo. He had become politically active in the city through the Evening Optimists Club and a daycare program founded under the EODC. Tatangelo became further involved in the city's politics as he started to attend the local city council meetings. In time, Tatangelo's frequent visits to the meetings and incessant questioning on the use of funds began to open the doors for criticism of the Independent Club once more. Martin falls under attack by

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[93]Geissler, Richard. Interview with author. June 20, 2017.
[94] Thompson, Jerry. Interview with author.

Lawrence Berry who picks up on the internal corruption of the Independent Club's handling

of city funds. Berry exposed the poor infrastructure within the city to the state, in particular,

the sewage plant for the region, and pushed for voter redistricting within the city.[95] By 1978,

the Democratic Party that Martin had helped maintain in Texas no longer exercised the

influence that it once had, another effect of Johnson's programs on the Martin's influence

and power in the city. Tatangelo ran successfully against Martin by pressing the

infrastructure issue and alluding to the corruption of the Martin machine. His victory over

Martin prompted the collapse of the rest of the machine. Shortly thereafter, Martin came

under investigation for mail fraud where he would be found guilty and sentenced to thirty

days in jail served on weekends.

The dramatic economic shift that occurred after World War II created a new

American identity rooted in mass consumerism and materialism. The establishment of this

social hierarchy failed to incorporate many minorities who remained excluded from various

opportunities through institutionalized segregation. The shift away from political and civil

liberties towards economic opportunity on behalf of the various Civil Rights movements

served to distance moderates away from the movement and radicalized the remaining

members into militant organizations championing self-determination. When the Community

Action Program was initiated as a part of the War on Poverty, local Civil Rights

organizations capitalized on the use of federal funds for the benefit of their own communities

and the program quickly became associated with minorities. Whites who sought to avoid

association with minorities at the time distanced themselves from the program making it

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[95]"One man, Lawrence Berry, exposed Laredo corruption and patron system in 1978." Youtube video. 19:39. Posted: November 15, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEwyWgPVq7k Video upload on youtube that interviews Lawrence Berry and J.C. Martin over the events surround the 1978 election.

difficult for the Office of Economic Opportunity to push its stance as non-racially based organization in the eyes of the people. The limited funds available for the War on Poverty created competition among different minority groups who felt that they were not being well enough represented by the program. This was never developed in Laredo due to its overwhelmingly large Mexican-American population. However, Laredo's War on Poverty did encounter its own obstacles in opposition from local elites and the ruling political machine. Community action was able to achieve some degree of success before being incorporated into the political machine at the end of the decade, but would not witness the fruit of its success until more than a decade later when the Martin political machine collapsed after the electoral victory of Aldo Tatangelo. Community action was able to chip away at the poverty base that supported the Patron system under the Martin machine, fulfilling the original goal of its creators who sought to restructure political power in order to improve the standard of living for poverty-stricken areas.

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