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Remembering a Mexican-American political legend

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On Friday, at age 97, a major Latino leader, Ambassador Raymond L. Telles of El Paso, Texas, died. Most will not know of him, unfortunately.

Telles was selected by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 to be the U.S. ambassador to Costa Rica. He was the first Mexican-American to serve as an American ambassador and one of the few Latinos appointed by Kennedy to an important federal position despite the fact that Mexican-Americans overwhelmingly supported his 1960 candidacy and organized for the first time in a national election through what were called Viva Kennedy Clubs. The Mexican-American vote in Texas was crucial in Kennedy winning this major state.

But Telles' place in American and Chicano history predated his becoming an ambassador. He was born in El Paso and attended Catholic elementary and high schools in the 1930s before serving with distinction in World War II as a decorated officer in the U.S. Army, though he did not see combat action. Instead, he helped train Latin American pilots in San Antonio.

Telles was one of thousands of Mexican-Americans who served in the military during the war. An estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Latinos, mostly Mexican-Americans, were in the military then, and many were engaged in combat duty. Many never came back and many returned wounded, both physically and emotionally. Moreover, Mexican-Americans exhibited great valor and won a number of Congressional Medals of Honor disproportionate to their population size. Having experienced racism back home before the war, these *veteranos*, or veterans, returned to fight another war, this time against prejudice and discrimination against Mexicans in the United States. Part of this battle -- besides fighting against school segregation, job and wage discrimination, and exclusion from various public facilities such as restaurants, theaters and swimming pools -- included struggling for effective political representation. They wanted to

serve in electoral positions denied to them.

In El Paso, as part of this electoral strategy, Mexican-Americans, in particular the veterans, began to look to Telles as their standard-bearer. They first convinced him to run for county clerk in a countywide election in 1948. In an impressive grass-roots effort that brought forth a large Mexican-American vote, this movement paid off, and Telles won the election. He served for the next several years before he was called back into service during the Korean War.

As the 1957 mayoral election loomed, Mexican-Americans once again looked toward Telles. They felt the time had come to elect one of their own to the highest city position in a city with more than 100,000 people, half of them Mexican-Americans. Allowed token representation on the city council, they had never been supported for mayor. This rankled Mexican-Americans, and they mobilized in what I call the "politics of status." While they were raging efforts to achieve first-class citizenship, Mexican-Americans at the same time believed they could never achieve full status as citizens until they also gained political power and political status. This drove them to again convince Telles to be their candidate for mayor.

Telles reluctantly agreed, but once in the race, proved to be an effective campaigner. Relying once again on the *veteranos* along with civic groups such as the League of United Latin-American Citizens, Telles put together a larger and even more impressive campaign than in 1948. Led by his brother, Richard, who was a political genius, the Telles campaign turned out an unprecedented number of Mexican-American voters in the Mexican-American precincts, as well as enough liberal Anglo voters to pull a major upset. Telles became the first Mexican-American mayor of an important southwestern city such as El Paso years before other better-known Mexican-Americans were elected to similar mayoral positions, including Henry Cisneros in San Antonio and Federico Peña in Denver in the 1980s, and more recently, Antonio Villaraigosa in Los Angeles.

When Cisneros and Peña were elected, the mass media incorrectly observed that Mexican-Americans had never achieved such political success. Needless to say, this did not impress many Mexican-Americans in El Paso who were aware of the historic 1957 election. Moreover, these later Mexican-American politicians had the advantage of greater Mexican-American political momentum because of the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s as well as the increased attention to Latino issues. In contrast, Mexican-Americans in El Paso in 1957 had everything against them. Every Anglo institution opposed Telles, with the exception of the more liberal *El Paso Herald-Post*. Still, the Telles campaign overcame these obstacles and showed the hunger by Mexican-Americans to elect a fellow Mexican-American and to achieve electoral respectability. And they did.

Telles served two successful terms before accepting Kennedy's offer. He made history in 1957 and knew he could break down still another barrier for Mexican-Americans by becoming the first Mexican-American ambassador. And so he did. He later served as the U.S. representative to a U.S.-Mexico Border Commission. He then served on the bipartisan Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in the administration of Richard Nixon and later as the head of the Inter-American Development Bank in El Salvador under the Jimmy Carter. He then returned to El Paso in 1982 to serve in the private sector until his retirement in the 1990s.

Telles and his wife, Delfina, later moved to Los Angeles to live with one of their two daughters, Cynthia Telles of the medical school at UCLA. Their other daughter, Patricia Telles, is a university professor in Florida.

Raymond Telles was a path-breaking pioneer in Latino politics. The 1957 election alone is a testimony to the ability of Mexican-Americans to effectively organize politically and to begin to shatter the myth and stereotype of the apolitical Mexican-American or Latino. Telles' victory in that election can be seen as one

of the first major steps in what everyone now acknowledges is the achievement of Latino political power as clearly expressed in the 2012 presidential election when, for all practical purposes, Latinos for the first time elected a U.S. president. There is a direct line, in my opinion, between what Telles achieved in 1957 in El Paso and 2012.

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Finally, I had the pleasure and distinct honor in being the first historian to write about the history and legacy of Telles in my book *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology and Identity, 1930-1960* (Yale University Press, 1989), then again in my biography of Telles, *The Making of a Mexican American Mayor: Raymond L. Telles of El Paso* (Texas Western Press, 1998).

My hope is that in death, Telles will now receive the historical importance he so richly deserves.

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