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Interview no. 412

George Rodríguez, Jr.

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: George Rodríguez, Jr. (1936-)*
INTERVIEWER: Richard Estrada
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 7, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

County Attorney in El Paso, Texas.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; education; discrimination; jobs held; immigration law and immigration lawyers; Wellington Chew; Mayor Fred Hervey; Bert Williams; U.S.-Mexico relations; El Paso-Cd. Juárez economy; South El Paso business; Chicano/Mexican relations; shoplifting; President Echeverría of Mexico and his attitudes on Mexicans leaving Mexico; politics; Mexican American politicians; justice for Mexican Americans in El Paso; the Bicentennial.

Length of Interview: 55 minutes Length of Transcript: 30pages

**SEE ALSO NO. 217 B

George Rodríguez, Jr.
by Richard Estrada
August 7, 1975

E: Mr. Rodríguez, where were you born, sir?

R: Here in El Paso.

E: In what year?

R: 1936.

E: Could you tell me something about your parents' background?

R: Well, my dad was born in Washington, D.C. My grandfather was an attaché to the Mexican Consul in Washington at that time, so my dad was born up there. Then they moved to San Francisco. And then because of my father's health, they moved to El Paso. My grandfather was a federal judge in Mexico. He never was a Mexican citizen, by the way. My grandfather was from Nicaragua. He was not too thrilled with the Mexicans from Mexico. He always told the story that if you've been to Mexico City, you see all these statues, and they always build these statues. My grandfather always used to say they ought to build a statue to the burro, because he's done more for Mexico than all the politicians. My father had two brothers. One went to the University of Texas. He was a pharmacist, but he didn't stay in that profession. He's with General Motors now in Mexico City. And I have another uncle that is a doctor, a dentist; he went to Baylor. And then my father went to University of Arizona Law School. I'm fifth generation lawyer. All our family are lawyers and judges. (The Supreme Court judge of Nicaragua is my dad's first cousin.) And then I went to school here at UTEP, then I went to University of Houston, then I finished out at South Texas College of Law, and got my degree in 1965.

E: Could you tell me something about your mother?

R: Well, my mother was born in Torreón. My grandfather came from St. Louis, he was a German; and he was a mining engineer. He went down and married a Mexican girl in Torreón, which was my grandmother. Both of them died very young, and my mother came to El Paso with her sisters and a brother, and just started living here. They had no other relatives. We had my father's aunt who was in Washington, D.C., and she was kind of interesting. She was a secretary to Teddy Roosevelt, many, many years ago. /But/ on my mother's side, the Hagues, that was my mother's maiden name. She came to El Paso and opened up a hat shop in conjunction with Conrad Hilton. When the old Hilton was downtown, my mother had the hat shop there. There's where she met my dad. She used to go back east on buying trips. This has been a long time ago, before they had Women's Liberation, but my mother was in business for herself. And then, of course, they got married and she retired.

E: Could you tell me something about your formative years in El Paso--the elementary school you attended and so forth?

R: Well, I attended Rusk Grade School, and then from Rusk I went to Austin High School. And I had a lot of fun. Got in a lot of trouble.

E: What was the nature of that trouble?

R: Well, I was in Juvenile Home for, oh, just various things. We're talking about 25 years ago. El Paso was not that big and there were only four high schools. And I guess just plain old fights is what we used to get in trouble with. Nothing with knives or anything like that. They had the southside gangs, which was the Seven X. We never fought them, because they were kind of tough for us. But we'd go down to Ysleta and they were basically cowboys at that time. We'd go over there. And then El Paso High, we used to go over there, too. That's just plain old high

school stuff, but I did my share of fighting and getting in jail and being booked many times.

E: While you were in grade school, was your English pretty good?

R: Yeah.

E: You've never had any trouble with the English language?

R: No, not at all.

E: How do you handle Spanish?

R: I handle it a hell of a lot better than I used to, because, number one, my business, because my practice is primarily 60 percent Mexicans. And of the 60 percent, about 30 percent from Juárez. I do a lot of immigration work. So, my Spanish has actually improved since I've been practicing Law. And since I've been married also, because my wife speaks perfect Spanish.

E: Where is your wife from, sir?

R: She's from here.

E: Did you ever have any problems of discrimination when you were going to school in El Paso?

R: No, I never did. I don't recall any, let me put it that way. I don't recall any discrimination in my formative years at all. In fact, I've never encountered too much discrimination. I've been very fortunate in that area.

E: How could you handle Spanish while you were going to grade school?

R: I probably was not very fluent in Spanish. As a matter of fact, I hardly ever even ran around with any Mexican kids.

E: You ran around mostly with Anglos?

R: Yeah, mostly with Anglos. All of my friends that I have, we started grade school together; they're still my friends, and they were Anglo.

So, if I had to say, I probably didn't speak that much Spanish in those days.

E: Do you recall any particular authority figures--say, perhaps, teachers--that might've had any particular positive or negative influence on you?

R: Well, I'll have to say, probably I never had one good teacher in Rusk or Austin. I didn't have anybody that I could say was outstanding, that I can recall, that had any influence on me at all.

E: What kinds of jobs did you have while you were a teenager in El Paso?

R: Well, my dad used to get me jobs. Old Ray Olstein used to have a barbecue place about two blocks from the courthouse, and I was a busboy there.

I first started working when I was nine years old. Every summer I'd work for my uncle, who was a plumber, and I did a lot of plumbing, a lot of digging. That was from /when I was/ nine to, I guess, when I was 14,

/when/ I went to work for Ray Olstein and I was a busboy there, and learned how to cook. And that's one of my hobbies today, that's when I started. I also worked for Gunning Casteel as a short order cook.

After school I was a sack boy at Safeway up on Fort Boulevard. At about the age of 16, I formed my own painting company, and in fact I painted the old City Hall. Raymond Telles was Mayor at that time and he gave me a contract, and we painted the old City Hall; and we did pretty good. We did some contracts on fences. We weren't really good painters, but it was better than working for anybody. That was in 1953, somewhere in that area. And then after that, of course, I graduated from high school, started college, and did miserable. I think I made straight F's. I didn't go to /class/. I didn't realize what I was doing at that time. I was kind of wandering around. I became Art Director at KELP. At that time it was called KINT Television. I signed that station on the air.

I spent several years in the broadcast field. I was an artist, and then from an artist I went to a cameraman, then a director. We produced "Shock." I don't know if you were here in El Paso at that time, but we did "Shock," those were the old horror movies. We had some problems with our transmitter at that time. And then I worked for a number of years as a director and a cameraman, then I became a salesman. And from television sales then I went into radio sales, and I sold for KELP. At that time, we had about 92 percent of the listening audience. Of course, we didn't have that many stations. It was simply, I guess, a rock station. It was the modern music. It wasn't the Beatles or anything, but it was still more modern than what we had prior to the Beatles. We had disc jockeys and promotions. I stayed there till I went back to school full time, '60.

E: When you first started going to college, did you attend Texas Western?

R: Yeah. I graduated from Texas Western. I started in January, 1955, and I think I made straight F's that semester. I don't think I ever attended a class.

E: What did you finally get your degree in?

R: I got my degree in History with a Political Science minor.

E: What area of History?

R: Well, most of the history that I took was European History and American History. I took some Russian History. But most of my history was in the United States.

E: Did you ever take any Mexican History?

R: No. As a matter of fact, I don't think they had any at that time. We did some in conjunction, I think, with the Western Hemisphere, but it was just a small portion. Dr. Porter, I think, was teaching at that time. I don't recall ever doing any Mexican history at all.

E: While you were going to Texas Western, do you recall, was there much dating between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds?

R: Well, not really, because, see, when I attended Texas Western, for example, I didn't go to /join/ a fraternity, because I knew that a Mexican was not accepted. That didn't particularly bother me, but I mean, I knew that you couldn't get in. Bob García, who is now a Federal Probation Officer, was, I think, the first Mexican to get in and he got in Kappa Sig. But I never wanted to even subject myself to any of that type of thing. As far as dating, I guess I can say that I had some problems once in a while because I was Mexican; maybe some girl wouldn't go out with me. But /for the most part/, no. We had one colored ball player, Charlie Brown, who was there, and he had some problems. He was a good friend of mine, and he used to tell me /that/ on the road trips he had some problems, as far as that.

E: What did you do after your first experience here at Texas Western?

R: That's when I went in the broadcast field and stayed there for a few years.

E: What finally motivated you into going back to school?

R: Well, I knew that I could never buy a radio station or a TV station cause I didn't have the money, and I don't particularly like to work for anybody. So I called my dad one day and asked him if he would send me back to school, and he said yes. And so I went back in January of '60, and I took 21 hours and then I got through right away and went down to University of Houston, in '62.

E: How did you find law school? Did you like it?

R: Well, yeah. I had some problems in law school. I've never been that bright of a student. I don't think that I'm a scholar. I don't think that I'm very bright as far as academia goes, and I had some problems.

I had a professor by the name of Nixon who was a Real Property Professor. He's had great impact on my life insofar as that he talked to my father, and both of them decided for me to transfer from University of Houston after a year and a half to South Texas. Because in law school, what you do is, you have a cumulative system. In other words, if you have a 50, which I got in one course (in the rest of the courses I had good grades), that 50 drew my whole average down. And when I transferred, well, I left that 50 and I brought my other hours, and then I just finished up at South Texas.

E: Do you recall how many Mexican American received their law degrees?

R: In Houston? None. I think I was the only one. There had been some boys from El Paso like Henry Peña who'd been through the University of Houston, but he was already gone when I got there. And then at South Texas, Carlos Escobar had gone through prior to the time that I went through, and Mauro Rosas, who was former representative. They had been sporadic. But, when I was there, no. At University of Houston I was the only Mexican and at South Texas I was the only Mexican--that I recall. I mean, that's the whole school. And South Texas College of Law is the second largest law school in the state of Texas. A lot of people don't know that. I'd think that they probably have more Mexican Americans now, but a very small percent, if they do.

E: Did you ever encounter any problems at all because your name was Rodríguez?

R: No. My roommate from Beaumont asked me one time, if I had it to do all over again, would I want to be a Mexican, and I never even thought of it. Now that impressed me, because I remember the story. And I says, "Well, I never thought of it, but what difference does it make?" And it hasn't bothered me. I think if I really sat down in depth and

looked around, there may have been some incidents because of that. But I never encountered anything bad there. I was in a fraternity down there.

E: What fraternity did you belong to?

R: I was Delta Theta Phi; it's a law fraternity. Had no problems.

E: When did you get out of law school?

R: 1965.

E: What did you do then?

R: I came here to El Paso. Well, I was going to practice in Houston, and I came out here for Christmas and I had my dad swear me in. Usually when you graduate from law school you go to Austin and the Supreme Court judges swear you in. But since my dad was a judge, I much preferred him to anybody else. So I came out here and I started practicing here.

E: What kind of a practice was it? Did you have any particular specialty?

R: Well, I specialized in Immigration /Law/, because of Wellington Chew. I was in with Wellington Chew. And basically I was a defense attorney. My dad had done so much work over the years. Of course, he was the first Mexican American lawyer in El Paso. His people came to me, and my practice was very lucrative. I did quite a bit of criminal work. And I did that for a number of years, and then got into politics. And I still have my practice, and it's a pretty good practice.

E: You mentioned Wellington Chew. Could you just give us a little information about that gentleman? Is he a good Immigration lawyer?

R: Well, he's probably one of the best in the country. Wellington had the misfortune of getting indicted with Woodrow Bean and Sam Dwyer. They used to have, a /Law/ firm called Bean, Dwyer, Escobar, Chew; and at that time they had all the business. Wellington is a lawyer, born in Chihuahua, Chinese, and he came to the United States and he went to SMU.

In the community, the lawyers will tell you, he's a genius. He had those problems with his income tax, and got suspended for six months, and I think that probably crushed Wellington. When I started practicing with Wellington, he didn't practice that much. He's still an excellent lawyer. He's had some drinking problems over the years, and I never did associate myself with him, other than just rooming together. We still have our offices together, and he's an excellent lawyer. Speaks perfect Spanish, no Chinese at all. But he had great influence on me. That's why I got into Immigration /Law/. Immigration was very good to me. In those days, in 1965, we could immigrate a Mexican citizen into the United States within 24 hours. And then, of course, it started getting harder and harder and harder. Now, I limit my immigration practice not so much to Mexicans any more. I try to help them out and tell them not to spend any money, 'cause there are a lot of these people that will take money from them and get what they call a carta, to work; and they used to do that. And I try to steer them clear. I don't charge Mexican people for immigration work any more.

E: Do you believe that there are many incidents wherein attorneys in El Paso take advantage of Mexican citizens trying to immigrate into this country?

R: I would say, probably not. But I'd say the people that do take advantage are some of these notary publics or some of these secretarias that they have running around.

E: In South El Paso?

R: Yeah, that; and in Juárez. Over at the Continental Building they have a fellow, I used to call him Cara de huarache, but I can't remember his name. You know, the micas they make? They make those things over there and they sell them for \$35, and these people get taken every day.

And it's a very lucrative business.

E: Do they get caught?

R: The people get caught, yeah! What happens to them is, they go over to these notarios públicos, they go to a secretaria, and they fill out all these forms and then these people tell them, "Sure, you can get one. Come back in two weeks. Bring three pictures." They steal the crossing cards from somebody else, and then they just insert the picture; and then they come across and that's what they use. And they come across several times and they think they can come over. They're ignorant, they don't understand. You know, that's just a river there. They don't understand that we're not interrelated, (which we basically are), and they come across and they get caught. I represented Mayor Hervey's maid when they picked her up. That was kind of an unusual situation.

E: Could you tell us about it?

R: Yeah. Mayor Hervey and I were having a war, or he was having a war on me, with pornography, and calling me pretty bad names, saying that I was not doing my job, that I was lax. And I never answered him because I make it a practice never to answer any politician. I think it degrades you. If they start name-calling you, don't answer them. And because of, I guess, my reputation with immigration, she came to me, and paid me a good fee. And she did get deported, but then she got married to an American citizen⁷. I think she's back in the United States.

E: Did she marry an Anglo?

R: Yeah, she got married to an Anglo. She spoke perfect English and had been here for years, and had worked for Mayor Hervey for seven years. But she had one of these false cards and had been caught several times. She knew what she was doing. Immigration's pretty good. Immigration, as

far as their records and everything, they're pretty good on picking up these people. They're a little rude. This crossing here in El Paso is probably the rudest border there is in the world.

E: Why is that?

R: I don't know. And I talked to the Immigration people about that, and most of the Immigration people don't like to come here. It's not any different than if you've travelled around the world. Most of my travelling is done in the United States and in México. But you'll find the Mexicans are very rude, too. We always make a joke: All Immigration people from all over the world go to a school to learn to become rude. And they are rude. They've been very rude to me at the bridge many times. In fact, sometimes I get paranoid, especially during the Hervey administration, 'cause they were jumping on me pretty much. I thought possibly they were going to do something to me and we quit going to Juárez, and I forbid my wife to go for a while. But we're going back now. Everything seems like it's all right.

E: How would you characterize relations between El Paso and Cd. Juárez, generally?

R: Well, sometimes they're good and sometimes they're bad. It depends on the administration.

E: On which administration?

R: Well, for example, the Hervey administration probably did the worst job I've ever seen. The mayor of Juárez, Jáquez, he didn't like Hervey. Now, he got along perfectly with old Bert Williams. Bert Williams did a beautiful job. Bert Williams was a good mayor, and people didn't understand him; and he didn't understand politics. I know Bert very well, he's a good personal friend of mine. But Bert was so flighty that he

just went off and just said something and it got the press against him, and got everybody against him. But he did a beautiful job. We had beautiful relationships with Juárez. We had parties that I attended. Jáquez would come over with his cabinet and we would go over there. And the relationship between elected officials in Juárez /and El Paso/ right now is pretty bad. I don't think that we're doing a good job. I don't think the Commissioner's Court does a good job.

E: Do you think it's mostly incumbent upon the El Paso authorities to cultivate these relations?

R: I think it behooves us. You know, we make a lot of money off these people. You know, if it weren't for Juárez, downtown El Paso would die just like every other major city. El Paso's unique in that these people come across to buy. They get raped, they get screwed, all up and down Stanton Street by these merchants. You go down there, you pay more for a dress, and it's not as good. But see, these Mexican people are so oppressed and they're so ignorant, they don't know, and they stay with these southside Jews; and they just rape the hell out of them. The Popular has been doing it for years to them, and The Popular is a very successful department store. They're not doing any good out at northeast El Paso, but this store /downtown/ is successful. The whole downtown area is successful, where your other major cities are not, and it's because of Juárez. But we do not have good relationships. I mean, like I say, we've had some good ones /in the past/.

E: Would you say the majority of the merchants in South El Paso are either Mexicans or Jewish?

R: I think most of them are Jews. Of course, you've got Bencomo's store down there, and there's a guy that's /from/ a beautiful family. They've

helped out the people, and they make a lot of money off the people from Juárez. I know Casa Sonido, Rudy Soto's down there. He does a lot of business with the interior of Mexico 'cause he ships. And of course the Ayoub's, Halem Ayoub of Border Tobacco Company, they're Syrians. But I'm talking about your Central Furniture, Union Furniture; I think all your furniture stores. Those people are just ungodly on their interest rates. And, of course, these people don't say anything. Number one, they're not even citizens of Texas. They're just Mexicans that come over and spend money. You'd be surprised what these people do on layaways. Popular Dry Goods has a hell of a business on layaways and they do an excellent job. The people from Chihuahua come up here and they spend thousands of dollars; they buy all their kids' clothes. We had some relatives in last week, my wife's relatives. They came up here, and they buy clothes. Three weeks ago my cousins from México City came up. They were in Houston for a week, and then they came out here and stayed three or four days, and they bought a lot of clothes. So, that the answer to the whole problem is that we should try to have better relationships with Juárez, and we don't. I think we've got some problems in that the Mexican Mexican doesn't really accept the Mexican Chicano over on this side, and there's probably jealousy. The Mexicans on this side, from what I have seen--and it's evolved over the years--wants to bring in their culture, and the Mexican Mexican doesn't want this Mexican. In other words, we're a different breed. We're not Mexicans; and, hell, they don't want us. Yet, we're trying to draw back and say, you know, "Hey, México, bring in this culture to us." And hell, they don't want it. It's very apparent. You're up at UTEP, you can talk to some of the foreign students from México. And their main topic is, "These people aren't

really Mexicans. You shouldn't call yourselves Mexicans, you're Americans." But then, U.S. Americans are weird people. That's why we have the great country we do have and it's something that they don't understand. I don't know if we understand it. I'm very proud of being a Mexican. To me, it doesn't make any difference. I mean, I've never seen any difference. But then I think sometimes when we go overboard, and I think that we have in some instances in this movement, but just to bring it to light, we've done some good. We've got some Mexican boys that they're going to Yale and Harvard. We're getting some grants that we used to never get. We're getting scholarships. And it was all done because we over-reacted and became radical, if you want to use the term. But all we were doing was just trying to get recognized; I'm talking about the whole situation. And I think it's accomplished its purpose. But now I think we're kind of floundering because I think this problem does exist. Juárez Mexicans call us pochos anyway. They don't like us. And yet we're trying to still draw back to this culture. And I don't know if we're being successful or not.

E: We were talking about business in El Paso a little while ago, and the number of people that come over from Cd. Juárez to buy goods in El Paso. Several people have remarked that the eastside shopping centers have been doing a tremendous business. Have you received any indication, either from your own personal observations or from anything you've heard, that this is true, that a lot of Mexicans are shopping out at Cielo Vista Shopping Center and so forth?

R: Oh, definitely! Sure. We put on some shoplifting seminars out there, and then, of course, we're picking up a lot of shoplifters. Mexicans, by tradition--I don't know why--shoplift. I guess they don't understand

and they come over to this country, and it's just a little old bridge. They don't understand that they're in a different country. And then in México I guess, if they catch you stealing, you still have the old mordida; you can pay off. Here in the United States you can't. We do have a great number of shoplifters we get from México, and /they're/ from the interior of México. But yes, they're buying a lot out at Cielo Vista. In fact, I'll go back to the same thing. If it weren't for Juárez, we'd be economically in trouble. You know, we went through a recession the first part of the year and last year--call it whatever /you want/. El Paso didn't go through that. I mean, we have a high rate of non-working people, because some wetbacks come over here (call them that if you want, whatever), and then, we've always traditionally had labor problems here. But as far as the economy goes, you didn't see any stores fold. El Paso is very prosperous. The groceries, they keep going up, but these people keep coming over here to buy.

E: And that's directly attributable to Cd. Juárez.

R: Sure it is! Definitely. They come over here and buy /groceries/. It's cheaper for them to buy some meat over here than over in Juárez. We shop over in Juárez, and the meat is not any cheaper. The meat's a lot better over here. Although the Mexicans now have some feed pens, they're starting to fatten their cows just like we do. I represent a lot of cattle people. You know, most of our beef in this area comes from México--from Chihuahua, from Coahuila, from Durango. We get a lot of beef down there.

E: Let me ask you, you mentioned that you had cousins from Cd. Chihuahua that came up here to buy clothes and merchandise. Do you have any knowledge, is this a common practice amongst the better /families/?

R: Oh, yes! Sure; oh yeah. The more the affluent Mexicans come to the United States to buy. In México City, they don't come here, they go to Laredo; it's a lot closer. Monterrey, the same thing. But most of your affluent people come to the United States to buy their clothes.

E: Would you say then, in Central North México, that they would naturally gravitate toward El Paso?

R: Oh, sure. Presidio, for example. If you ever have a chance to go down there, I have a client down there; a friend, really--Mrs. Spencer. She's Mexican. She's from around Presidio. They're very wealthy people, and she's got a little store in Presidio. And when you walk in, the lines of clothes, Neiman Marcus carries in Dallas, or Rhodes or Magnum. She's got beautiful clothes, women's clothes. You know why she exists? Because the people from Presidio and the people from Chihuahua go up there, and she has a very damn good business. They do buy in the United States.

E: That's very interesting. Let's go back to what you were doing in El Paso. You were an Immigration lawyer for a while. How long did you do this?

R: Well, I still do some of it, but I've limited it mostly to Europeans and the Far East. It's a little easier. A lot more money.

E: Are there many Europeans and Far Easterners that try to immigrate in El Paso?

R: Sure, sure. I had some Filipinos that we've been working on. Of course, the Vietnamese, I did quite a bit with Vietnamese. I had a very famous case here, a woman. Her name was Vo. She'd been in the United States for a number of years. Her husband and her came and she was a cook, and her husband was something with the Vietnamese. This has been several years ago. And she's kicked around, and a lawyer from Maryland had gotten hold

of the case, and he had a special bill introduced and /it/ never did anything. The poor woman had a child that was an American citizen, and the lawyer and a senator had introduced a special bill to get her in, and it never went through. I don't know why. And then she went to Canada, and then she ended up in El Paso. And I used to represent _____ School of Language. That was out of Washington. And Mr. _____ had a school here and he had a government contract for over a million dollars to teach our soldiers how to speak Vietnamese, to go over to Vietnam and get killed, basically. That's what we were doing here. Well, then, we had all these Vietnamese people come here. And since I represented the school, why, anytime they got in any immigrations problems, of course, I /took care of/ that. Well, Vo got in some problems, and of course, she didn't have anything, and was going to be deported. And Mr. _____, who was at that time the existing judge (he's out in Los Angeles now, very fine man), he worked with me on the case. And they were going to deport her. And in fact, he entered an order of deportation and then gave /her/ 60 days to leave the country. And by some miracle, some lawyer who had handled her got her a number, and she was on a list, and the damn number came up right about that time, and she got to stay in the United States. Other than that, though, she would have been deported. Just because you have an American citizen child does not give you the right to stay here.

E: Why do people like this come to El Paso, of all places?

R: Well, these Vietnamese came because they were teaching; they were teaching the soldiers how to speak Vietnamese at that time.

E: How about Europeans?

R: Yeah, we've had some Greeks come in, some Chinese come in because they

come in through México. It's easier to get to México, then they come to Juárez and then they try to get in. I've had them all the way from San Francisco. I had one come in that had a million dollar business, and she was from Hong Kong. There's a difference between Hong Kong and Mainland China. On a Mainland China guy, he gets in right away. Hong Kong, you can't get them in, because there's a number that... Well, we have a non-quota type thing, but we still have numbers, and it's filled up. You just can't get in. Like the Mexican can't get in right now. If a person makes an application now to get into the United States, it takes him two and a half years before they'll call him. That's plain old government red tape.

E: Bureaucracy.

R: That's all it is. I can't see why. Because I know, I remember the day when old Joe Radford was over there, and I'd call him. "I got this person that can do this, this, and this." "Send him over." And they'd give him the papers right away. The reasoning behind it, and what Echeverria has done, they had a meeting here, oh, three or four years ago when Echeverria first got in with Nixon. And they don't want the Mexicans to leave México. And of course, we don't want them here, you know. So that's basically what we're doing, that's the reason that we're having this harassment. It's not so much that they don't want to come, it's that Echeverria doesn't want them to leave. You know, when you leave México City, now, you have to buy a round-trip ticket. He does not want the Mexican leaving the country. He's probably right. He wants to keep the American companies out. And he's probably right there, too. Because he wants to make México self-sufficient. He's crazy, but he's right in a lot of his thinking.

E: So, you would say that a lot of the harassment that goes on along the U.S.-Mexican border on the part of the U.S. Border Patrol and Immigration authorities, the Mexican government itself kind of condones?

R: Oh, sure, sure; definitely. That's the reason we don't have the streetcars anymore. That wasn't a situation that Hervey made Jáquez mad. It's from México City. See, México City doesn't like Juárez. They just don't like them. It's just like El Paso is not a part of Texas. You go to East Texas and, "What the hell's out in El Paso?" They never heard of us. We don't have any political weight in Austin. We do now, but up until five years ago, we didn't have a damn thing. But we've got it all now, we're in very good shape, politics-wise; in fact, better than any other city in the state of Texas. But, México doesn't like Juárez, so what they did is, they cut off the transportation; they didn't want that. They don't want it at all. They cut off the divorces. You know, the Mexican divorces was a billion dollar business to this area. Hell, my mother-in-law was in the business, and it's a very lucrative business. These people would come and spend money here in El Paso and spend money in Juárez. But because the state of Chihuahua wasn't paying somebody off in D.F. México City, they cut it off. Echeverria and his replacement is not going to reconsider it either. Of course, I have to back up. Even if they did replace it, it wouldn't be as lucrative as it was, because the state of New York, for example, is lax in their divorce laws. Everybody is, because it's a trend. Texas is a "no fault" state since 1972. It doesn't make any difference, you can get a divorce. But it's just that these Mexicans don't know how to do any business with us, period.

E: Do you think it's xenophobia, they're kind of afraid of foreigners?

R: No, I think they want to become self-sufficient. Like General Motors has done. I know the General Motors factory pretty well because my uncle works there. México doesn't produce a car. Everything they send down here, they import it. Volkswagen, for example, had a big, huge plant right outside of México City--huge plant. They make Volkswagens down there. And of course, Nader, in one of his lawsuits, outlawed the Mexican Volkswagen from coming in the United States. Our Volkswagens are not made in México, they're made in Canada. Just like Cárdenas when he expropriated the oil in the '30s. Echeverria is doing the same thing. I think Echeverria wants to do the same thing, and I think he's right. I mean México is a beautiful country. It's got agriculture. For example, in México, on cattle: México gives out so many numbers, and so the ganadero has to go to México City to get so many numbers so he can export cattle. About two years ago, when we had this meat shortage, and we weren't going to have any meat, well, México cut it off. And these guys couldn't sell it to us. They had the beef. And they don't want to sell it to the Mexican people. They make more money up here! But, see, they're starting to cut back for that reason: "Let's keep our cattle here." You know, I think that's the whole thing. They're trying to nationalize México, which is a good thing.

E: Who are the top three or four Immigration lawyers in El Paso?

R: Oh, I guess George McAlmon would be one of the best ones; Wellington Chew. And other than that, I think the rest of them are hit and miss. But George does a very good job.

E: Those are the top ones?

R: Yeah, I would say; yes. Everett Moss does some. Mr. Moss was with the Immigration Service for 30 years and then he retired, and he's a lawyer.

And he does some. But I think George probably does more than anybody right now.

E: When did you become County Attorney, Mr. Rodríguez?

R: Let's see. In 1971 I became County Attorney. I was a Municipal Court judge, I was substitute Municipal Court judge under the Judson Williams administration in 1967. And then in '69 I ran, and then in 1971 I ran. And then in '71 I also got appointed County Attorney; and then in '72 I ran and got elected for four years. And then this next year I have to run again.

E: Do you think, generally speaking, the Mexican American community supports you in these elections?

R: Generally speaking, yes; generally speaking, yes. I've been at it a long time, and I dabble; I think of myself as a professional politician because I'm not that good of a lawyer. But the problem with Mexicans is that money is not readily available to them. I've never had that problem. I don't know why; probably my dad. You know, if I really get down to it, I've never had a lot of problems because of my dad, and I understand that. I mean, I've been very fortunate. But when a Mexican decides to run for office, hell, he's got an uphill battle, and he shouldn't, because he's got 64 percent of the votes! Except Mexicans are very jealous within themselves. You take the more affluent Mexican, when he makes a little money (and we've got plenty of them here), hell, they become conservative. They forget. Just like any other race, but we're just talking about Mexicans now. They forget, and they don't rally around a Mexican, or we wouldn't have any Anglos in office. Every Mexican in El Paso should fill a spot. And what do we have? Very few. We've made inroads lately. I was the first Mexican Municipal Court judge. There's no need for

that, that's wrong. I mean, it shouldn't have been. In the old days we had Mexican county judges. My dad was the first County Court at Law judge, the first Mexican District judge. And you know, we were in the '60s, and we didn't have it. Why? Because the Mexicans don't support their own; never have. You get a faction. For example, it's obvious, you've got a Paul Moreno here that's got his group, and you've got a Tati Santiesteban over here. They don't see eye to eye. And they're completely different. And yet, we ought not to be that way. Call whatever you want Tati's group, I'd call it conservative, vs. a liberal. And we have that. We have it in the Democratic Party. That's why the party's in such bad shape today. But a Mexican has a hard time raising money, one; and number two, trying to get a solid support. Never has had it. It's just there. I don't know why, either.

E: You mentioned two prominent Mexican American legislators, state legislators. Would you care to say which of those groups you would ally yourself with?

R: Well, I work with all of them. The simple reason is that, in the legislature, for example, you got Paul, who was with the "Dirty Thirty." And then you got Tati, who's a...call him a "Tio Taco," which you should; I mean, if we're talking about colloquialisms, that's what happened. But Tati has been more effective. And Paul, maybe morally right or whatever he's done, has not been effective. In other words, he doesn't have any legislation. He's really not doing us any good down there because of his stands. And Tati has wheeled and dealed and [has] done us a lot of good. He's very well thought of in Austin, probably more well thought of than here in El Paso. I think he's probably the strongest Mexican politician in El Paso right now. I don't think he can be beat. But see, we don't work together.

For example, oh, you got Alicia Chacon that did a beautiful job, got

in office to beat my compadre, Raymond Telles. El Paso's had too much Telles and they're tired of them. That's a perfect example. Not all the Mexicans like Richie Telles right now, for example. Your young Mexicans hate Richie Telles. But yet, he's done a lot for them. If it had not been for him or his brother, we wouldn't be in the position we are today. Maybe his time's come for an end, you know, because times do change. But we have dissention within our own ethnic group. You know, one party goes this way, the other party goes that way. I recall, we had a meeting before Tati and Paul ran against each other. We were in Juarez. Dr. Gardea, Hector, the Petry's... Oh, hell, we had a bunch of people over there to try to pick a lot; you know, who's going to run. Why run Paul and Tati against each other? And, of course, we got in a horrible damn fight, and everybody stormed out and everybody got mad at everybody, and there we went. And everybody went different ways, and we didn't unite behind [one of them]. We never have united behind anybody--never have. Well, the only time we ever united behind anybody was Raymond Telles, and [he] became the first Mexican mayor.

E: Would you say that Tati Santiesteban is one of the top two or three Mexican American politicians in the state of Texas?

R: Oh, no. I'll tell you, you can't rank him that way because you got Roy Barera in San Antonio, who's very well thought of throughout the state. He was Secretary of State at one time with John Conally. Now he's a conservative Mexican politician. He's an excellent politician. Of course, Carrillo and those guys are going down the tubes now, but they were excellent politicians. Tati hasn't got up to that area yet. He's not...statewide, I don't think. I mean, he can get Eddie Marquez appointed District Court judge, [but] that's because Briscoe wanted it. But, as far as statewide, I don't think he

can get that much done. He is well thought of, though.

E: Do you think he has any prospects of becoming one of the most prominent?

R: You know, Tati years ago said that, and wanted to run statewide. I think that he's lost... I think that the glory has now passed and I don't think that he [could win statewide]. That's my personal opinion. I don't think so, I don't think so at all. He works real hard at what he's doing here, but he doesn't work that hard at... When you talk about a politician _____ in different camps, you're keeping abreast of what you're doing in Washington, not only Texas; but you're looking at everything as a whole.

E: The Big Picture.

R: The Big Picture is the most important thing. This is what we ought to look at, and no one's doing that. I think I did a pretty good job of it. I'm very close friends with Lloyd Bentsen. His press secretary was my campaign manager.

E: Jack DeVore?

R: Yeah. He got me elected every time, and I'm very close to him.

E: I went to UTEP with him.

R: Did you? Jack's a super guy. You know his wife?

E: No, I do not.

R: He's married to a Mexican girl.

E: I didn't know that.

R: Oh, yeah! He's a beautiful guy. Aida didn't like Washington at first, but the kids did. And I don't know if Jack will tell you this, but this is the true story. The kids were at Coronado [High School], you know, where there's not very many Mexicans. And they were just run of the mill kids. Well, they went to Washington, and one of the kids became president of

the class or something. In other words, he kind of blossomed out, and it did the kids some good. Aida didn't like it at all at first because, well, she didn't know anybody. And there was no Mexican food...

E: Tell me, has Jack ever made any comments about the kids suddenly being seen as exotics or something because they were part Mexican?

R: No, he never has. Except that they were very well accepted in Washington, better there [than here]. Well, he actually doesn't live in the city, he lives in Maryland, which is right there.

E: Silver Spring?

R: I guess so.

E: Mr. Rodríguez, am I correct in assuming that you prosecute misdemeanors in El Paso?

R: Yes.

E: In your prosecution of misdemeanors, have you ever noticed a preponderance of defendants from one ethnic group over another?

R: Yeah.

E: Could you elaborate?

R: Mexicans, for example--I never could figure it out. And I tell you this jokingly, and it's very true. You take the Canutillo area. Maybe it's true because there's nothing but Mexicans up there, but the DPS will arrest all Mexicans. Every Saturday it's the same damn thing out of the same bar. I take the position, and I do dismiss a lot of them. I just won't take them. Maybe I'm doing wrong, maybe I'm doing right. I don't know. But I take it upon myself that I try to double-check any time I see something like that. We had an officer by the name of Hammer for a while that was picking on long-haired young kids in the Dyer Street area for pot. And I took it upon myself that I wouldn't accept those cases. I accept every

case that comes in my office, because I think I'm more well aware than these young kids. I know the officers, I've worked with them many, many years; I've seen them grow up. And I can look at a case and I can tell you sometimes--and we do do it--we don't like this officer and consequently we won't take the case.

E: You don't trust his judgement.

R: Not at all. There's some, and I've told that to a lot of people, it's a situation that that's the checks and balances that we're so famous for, and that's where it comes into play. Yes, it has occurred, it has occurred.

E: Generally speaking, Mr. Rodríguez, do you feel that there has been equal justice for Mexican Americans in El Paso within the last 10 years?

R: Oh, within the last 10 years, yes.

E: How about prior to that?

R: Prior to that, of course, they were raped. Hell, they were... Horrible! You know, years ago I tried a little kid (and I don't remember his name), and he had two [marijuana] cigarettes and he got two years to serve in the penitentiary. So, that was about 10 years ago.

E: This was a Mexican American?

R: Yeah, he's from Ysleta.

E: How old was he?

R: A young kid. You know, nowadays it's a misdemeanor; and I thought it was very unjust [then]. It really hurt me. But then I think now we get pretty good justice. I don't think we're getting the raw end of the deal. We used to--don't think we didn't. In fact, I was part of it. The old drunks that used to come in in '67, for example, when I was sitting on the bench prior to the time the Short Case came out, why, hell, I put people in jail, I'd violate their civil rights all day long. I did that! And I put them

in jail with no authority, and they stayed in jail 30 days--which was wrong. I've changed a lot since then.

E: I'd like to move into the final phase of this interview. I'd like to ask you some questions relating to the Bicentennial. You realize, of course, that next year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of this nation. I would like to ask you, as a Mexican American living in El Paso in 1975, what are your thoughts about the founding fathers of this country? Do you relate to them, do you identify with them in any way?

R: I think I do. You know, it's an amazing thing that we had so many great men at one time; and then, of course, the fortune or the misfortune of Thomas Paine coming to the United States. You know, Paine probably is the most unsung hero in the world. Here's a man that came from [the] caste system in England, and he came and he was a very poor man. Except by some quirk of fate somebody taught him something in England, because they liked him. He was crazy; I mean, there's no doubt about Thomas Paine. And here he comes, and he goes to Valley Forge. And he writes his "Common Sense," which [is] the more famous one; but I mean, he wrote a few articles because he met a guy that knew Ben Franklin had the press in Philadelphia. So he got it published. We're talking about Valley Forge, when we're down, and there's an Englishman that's about half nuts that doesn't ever take any money--never did the United States government ever pay Thomas Paine any money--and he writes an article, it catches fever, and from then forward this man had great impact on us. He had great impact on Thomas Jefferson, although Jefferson claims he didn't.

E: Tom Paine is one of your heroes, then?

R: I like him a lot, I think he's a good man. I think another great man that we overlook and we kind of just kicked the shit out of is Aaron Burr.

You know, Aaron Burr was a great man and we have glorified Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was all right, he was a pompous man that was just an opportunist. And if Burr had not killed Hamilton, we probably wouldn't have the great nation we have today, because Hamilton wanted to be king. I relate to [Burr] because... I think this is the best example I can give you: Politics are all the same. That's why I say I can relate to him. When Burr was getting tried by John Marshall (who was kin to Thomas Jefferson; they hated each other from the beginning and they were cousins), John Marshall threw a party for Aaron Burr. Now, this is the judge throwing a party for a defendant! Now, we're talking about conspiracy--one of the biggest trials we ever had. And Jefferson at that time was president, and Jefferson manufactured the damn thing against Burr, from what I can see; I think, anyway. And Jefferson know he was beat, and he rode down there for the trials. It's the same type thing that we see with Nixon and his Watergate-type thing. We had the same [thing then]. We've always had it. That's what makes this country great. But everybody is now getting upset and saying that we're all crooks, when it ain't never been any different. Alexander Hamilton stole thousands of dollars from us, and they knew it. Washington rewarded himself with all the fine lands. That's why he became so wealthy. The only guy that died poor was Jefferson. He was probably the smartest, too.

E: Do you read quite a bit of American history these days?

R: Yeah, I like to.

E: How about Mexican history? Do you read much?

R: Never. I'll tell you, the only thing that I have read on Mexican history is Junípero Serra, in that area.

E: The Spanish borderlands.

R: Yeah. That's basically what I have gone into. I know a little bit about it. I never really found a real interesting character. I know a little bit about Pancho Villa, but he doesn't interest me.

E: I'd like to ask you, just briefly, what do you think of the Constitution of the United States?

R: It's got to be the greatest work we ever had. And if we didn't have it, we'd be in a lot of trouble. And the most amazing thing is that we've had judges that have been able to protect this beautiful document--like freedom of the press. These 10 first amendments were great, and then the ones we've had since then are great.

E: If someone were to ask you about your patriotism toward the United States of America, what would your answer be? Do you consider yourself patriotic?

R: Oh, yes; definitely. Never was in the Service, either. You know, that used to be the standard: If you were in the Service, you were a patriot. I didn't go 'cause I was 4F. But, yes, I think I am. And as a matter of fact, I won't even spend any money [in Europe]. The only reason I do go to Mexico is because I have family, but I will not spend any money to go to Europe. Not that I have the money, but my wife has wanted to go and I...we will not go, because we ought to travel in the United States. Europeans don't like us.

E: Do you have any children, Mr. Rodríguez?

R: Two little girls, one 10 and one four.

E: Do they speak Spanish?

R: Yes. My little girl [can] interchange. Libby, who is 10, is getting away from it, and in all probability something at Mesita School occurred. But if you magnify the thing, then I think it'll hurt the child. Now, my little girl Georgina will sing songs in Spanish and she interchanges

very well, and much better than Libby.

E: Do you actually foster this bilingualism/biculturalism?

R: Oh, sure; definitely. Yes, definitely. I am sorry that when I was a youngster I didn't speak as much Spanish as I do now.

E: Mr. Rodríguez, this has been a very informative, very enjoyable interview, and I want to thank you very much.

R: Thank you.