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Interview no. 196

Fernando Oaxaca

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Fernando Oaxaca (1927-) **
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martínez
PROJECT: Bicentennial
DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 23, 1975
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Associate Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Washington,
D. C.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Biography; the terms "Chicano"; origin of the name "Oaxaca"; school years at Lamar and El Paso High schools; poverty in South El Paso; relations with Anglos over the years; experiences at Texas Western College and in the Army; the effects of World War II; beginnings in politics; conversion to the Republican Party; Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking.

**See also No. 416.

1 hour.
25 pages.

BICENTENNIAL

M: This is an Oral History interview with Mr. Fernando Oaxaca, Associate Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Washington, D.C., October 23, 1975. Conducting the interview is Oscar Martínez, Department of History, University of Texas at El Paso.

Mr. Oaxaca, could you first tell me when and where you were born?

O: I was born in El Paso in Hotel Dieu in 1927, August the 8th.

M: Could you give me a little bit of background about your parents and grandparents?

O: Well, my mother comes from Galeana, Chihuahua. [It is] a little town near Casas Grandes. My father comes from El Placer de Guadalupe, a tiny mining community (I think it's still there) near the little town of Aldama, which is 40 or 50 miles from Chihuahua City. My grandparents on my mother's side are also from Chihuahua. My grandfather was Francisco Nevárez and my grandmother was named Concepción Castillo de Nevárez. On my father's side, his parents also came from El Placer and I don't really remember their names. I never knew them. I knew only my grandmother on my mother's side. My father lost his father when he was only about 8 or 9 years old and then lost his mother before he came to the United States, so I never knew either of them. My father was born in 1888, so he's 87. My mother was born in 1900; she's 75. So I have [little] knowledge, other than that I know where they came from on my father's side.

M: Do your parents live in El Paso now?

O: Yes, they do.

M: What was your father's primary occupation?

O: I guess you would say [that] all his working life he was a salesman of different things. He began when he first came to the United States. I believe he worked in a department store in South El Paso. Then he went into the furniture business as a furniture salesman. He worked at that for 40 years or so, although there was one period during the Depression when he sold insurance. So, he always worked for someone else all his life and never owned his own business. My mother worked as a salesgirl before she got married, in various stores in downtown El Paso and down in the South part of town.

M: Before I turned the tape recorder on, you mentioned something about how you recall the term "Chicano" used when you were a youth. Could you elaborate on that, please?

O: Well, I remember as a very small boy [that] the term "Chicano" was used by my mother to describe people of a relatively low economic and educational level, who still lived in Juárez and who, perhaps, would occasionally come to work in the house or where we could observe them when we went over to Juárez as a family. It was not a derogatory term, but rather sort of a caste distinction of people of a lower class. That's really the way I grew up understanding that term. My mother would often say, "Esos son los chicanitos," which was sort of an endearing put-down, if you will. [Laughter]

M: That's a good way to put it.

O: Now this may have been influenced to some degree by the fact that my mother came from a relatively wealthy background. My grandfather was a typical Mexican feudal baron. He owned much land and had many, many hundreds (or perhaps thousands) of acres under cultivation; cattle and the whole thing. When she was growing up as a girl, they had all the conveniences that were available in the early 1900s. Of course, he was a refugee from the Villistas, and came to the United States with whatever they could carry. As a matter of fact, he died very soon after they came to the United States and El Paso. So she considers herself [to be] from somewhat of an aristocratic background. Perhaps that had something to do with it. But I think it was pretty common terminology when I was growing up, to think of [a Chicano] as someone a little less equal than you.

M: In those days, if someone would have called you a Chicano, would you have been offended?

O: I doubt it. I think the awareness or the sensitivity to the term really wasn't in my head [and wasn't] in most of the heads of people that I grew up [with]. I don't know who would have done it necessarily; it wasn't a big issue. So I don't think so.

M: You also said that you have not yet adjusted to the term "Chicano." Could you elaborate on that?

O: Well, I don't know that I have any problem with being called one. It's become popular. If you want to be in a national origin peer group, you have to tolerate being called all sorts of things. I think of the term as having been generated and used mostly by the younger people. I'm approaching 50 years old and I'm talking

of people that are 15, 20, 30 years younger than I am. But it is still a little foreign to me because all [during] my formative years I didn't think of myself that way. I thought of myself as [being] an American of Mexican parents. More often than not I think I always call myself Mexican. My parents are from México, my old cultural background and feelings are of México, and so I would much rather be called Mexican or Mexican American. I don't like the term Spanish American; I'm not Spanish or of Spanish background, although clearly there's a large part of the blood that is Spanish. But when I talk to young people and they talk about how "Chicano" has a connotation of an almost international sense, and that it implies an acceptance or even a desire to have the large Indian blood component, I just have never really thought of myself that way.

M: In identifying your Mexican background, have you ever thought of yourself as a norteno, as opposed to other people who have come to the United States from the central part of México?

O: Not really, not really. I just haven't thought very much about it. I always thought that my parents were from México and [from Chihuahua], and that's something on the other side of the Río Grande River. So if anything, we're chihuahuenses.

M: I'm curious to know the origin of your name--Oaxaca.

O: I have tried very hard to find out. Many years ago I was in México City and I tried very hard. I went to the Anthropological Museum there and talked to one of the curators, or one of the people in authority there, and tried to see if they had some information that would help me. What I found out (and I later verified it with a gentleman in Los Angeles who had made a study of Mexican names and Spanish heritage) was that the name "Oaxaca"--and it was

surprising to me--is not an Indian name; it actually came from Spain. There was a district which no longer exists in the northern part of Spain; and that its origin is probably Basque. When it came to México it had a "j" rather than the "x." In the 1500s, in that whole period, people would take a name related to where they came from. The guy in México embellished it a little more by saying that there was a valley of Oaxaca in Spain. The individual who came to México, either with Cortés or whoever, came to the valley of Oaxaca in México; and it reminded him of home and named it for that. But how much of that is myth and how much is fact, I really don't know. I was very disappointed that I couldn't find out. But I never pursued it any further. I've looked in American libraries and I could never find anything.

M: When your parents came to El Paso during the time of the Revolution, where did they settle?

O: Well, they came at different times. My father came first, if I remember correctly. I think he came about 1911 or 1912, and my mother came over about '14 or '15. I believe that my mother settled in what we used to call the Segundo Barrio, down around 4th or 5th Street--southwest of downtown. My dad, if I remember correctly, first lived over in what natives still call Sunset Heights. I have no knowledge of what kind of neighborhoods they were in those days, and so I really don't know for sure; but certainly near downtown and generally to the south or slightly to the west.

M: What did your father do at that time? What kind of employment did he get?

O: As I said, the only thing I remember that he ever talked about [was] that he was working in a store.

M: He started working in a store right away?

O: Yes. My father had a reasonably good education, although in today's terms it would be considered very deficient. He was educated by Jesuits in Chihuahua and so he could read and write, and speak Latin. He spoke Catalán. He worked for many years in a bank in Chihuahua City before he came to the United States. He was already in his early 20s when he came. He had studied some English. So he came with, in my view, a fantastic intellectual capacity. [He was] very quick to learn, and obviously he picked up English and was doing fine for those days and for the amount of access that there was to Mexicans in El Paso in those days.

M: Mr. Oaxaca, where did you go to elementary school?

O: I went to Lamar School, which no longer exists. It was on Yandell and Dallas Streets, on the 1600 block. I went through all 8 years there.

M: [Are there] any incidents or experiences that stand out in your mind from your elementary school days?

O: I don't know about any specific incident. I think that I always enjoyed school. I remember it only as very happy days. It was what today we would call an integrated school, in that there were Anglo kids as well as ourselves. I have nothing but very happy memories of my principal and all the teachers. They were more busy in those days doing the job rather than worrying about the ethnicity of their kids. I remember that most of the teachers were relatively elderly and very kind to the kids. Some were tougher than others; but I was taught to respect my teachers. When I came home with any stories of having been punished or chewed out, I got absolutely no

sympathy at home. I was probably guilty as I told my story to my mother. [Laughter] I was a very studious little kid and I was sort of the teacher's pet in those days, and so if I had any discomforts it was only with the other boys who didn't have as much respect for that kind of prominence.

M: You don't remember any incidents of an ethnic nature taking place in school or in the neighborhood?

O: Not really, not really. As I've gotten older and as I've become more sensitive to those kinds of issues as they apply to our community, I've thought about why didn't I? One reason, perhaps, that comes to mind is I'm not very dark skinned, and I am told that I always spoke perfect English. I learned both languages simultaneously, so I never had a Spanish accent in my English. I didn't look much differently from the other kids and I always had Anglo friends, and we had little clubs and little things. In fact, many of my Anglo friends who were much better off than we were would take me to their home, and their mothers would pick us up. I had a lot of interchange with both kids of Mexican background as well as the Anglos, so I don't recall any problems.

M: As you were talking on the phone, I noticed that your English was extremely good -- no trace of an accent. Of course, I wondered how you had been able to master English pronunciation so well. Have you thought about how you did that?

O: Well, I grew up in it. I went to school in it. I've thought a little bit about it; I think, for instance, I always got straight "As" in English. My dad encouraged us tremendously to read because I was a sort of a studious little kid. I wore glasses when I was

very young, and I was a bookworm. I learned the language beyond the normal vocabulary. He taught us a lot about Latin, and so I was interested in the roots of words and often I would revolt the other little kids by being able to raise my hand and ask questions about the origin of a word in English, where I knew the answers and the other kids didn't. Also, my mother spoke English, as did my dad. I never remember them speaking only Spanish. So, I had an opportunity to practice. This sounds self-serving, but I was reading and writing both languages almost before I went into grammar school. I used to read El Continental in those days. When I was about 4 years old I read the comic strips. I shouldn't say just myself, [but] my brother as well as my sister [had] a tremendous amount of push from my parents to learn--the value of education, and to accomplish and to achieve in school. These pressures, obviously, were good for all three of us; because we've enjoyed many nice things, and I'm sure to a large degree because of those parental pressures.

- M: In reflecting back to those days, can you identify a need to achieve that you may have had? Was there a strong feeling toward succeeding?
- O: I think I always had a feeling that I wanted to come up to my parents' expectations and to my parents' desire that we be successful. I didn't like to come home with a "B" or a "C" in school. It was that sort of thing. We always were taught by our parents to strive for excellence in whatever we did. And when we screwed up, we were dealt with accordingly besides.
- M: What did you want to be when you grew up back then?

O: Oh gosh, I guess it's like all little kids. I can't remember all the different aspirations that you go through. I don't really remember what I may have wanted to be before I got into high school. I think that it [wasn't] really until I was in high school that I really began to think that I wanted to be in some profession. I think that I wasn't typical in saying, "I'm going to be a farmer," or "I'm going to be a doctor," or "I'm going to be a pilot," or whatever. I don't recall having that specific kind of aspiration. I just knew that I was...I think I had a lot of self-confidence and I knew I wanted to do something well. And so I really can't answer that too well.

M: Could you tell me a little bit about your high school years there at El Paso High?

O: I guess they were reasonably happy years. I worried about the fact that my parents were telling me that I had to go to college; and I would wonder how I was going to accomplish that. I remember the very first time that I went to high school, the first day, they handed you a little card and there were two boxes [on it]. One box said "College Route" and the other box said "Non-college Route." I remember putting an "X" on the "College Route" and wondering...I felt it almost a matter of pride that I would never check the other box. And so, I think, all through high school I worried about what would happen when I got out of high school--would I be able to make it? At the same time, however, both my brother and I, from the time we were 11 or 12, were encouraged to deliver groceries; I had a paper route for years; we were saving. And my mother would save for us. She enforced savings programs where the idea was

that we had to somehow accumulate money in order to go to college.

M: The money that you made in these jobs was primarily for this purpose and for your own expenses rather than helping out with family bills?

O: That's right. I think that if I look back at our whole family history, we always had the essentials. We were certainly not wealthy. During the Depression, when my father was selling insurance, he was making about \$25 a week. Now that doesn't sound like a lot today, but it was not too bad in the mid-30s; and somehow we always had plenty of food and we had a roof over our heads, and we even had a car. I remember the first car we had was a 1928 Chrysler which my father bought new somehow after he got married. They got married in 1925. We had some rocky times. I can remember that I didn't like the fact that we would go to Penney's to get our clothes, and during the summer we went barefoot like a lot of kids; but it wasn't just the fact that we wanted to. When I was a little kid, most of the time you had your clothes for school; and as soon as you came home you had to take off those clothes and put on some overalls or something you didn't really like to wear. But that was because we were supposed to look neat and clean when we went to school.

M: You were saving shoes for school?

O: Well, I don't know. You know, you're really probing into old, old [times]. What I'm getting at is I really don't remember the details. Actually, I think I enjoyed going barefoot in the summer-time. But we didn't get new shoes every time we wanted them. And we didn't get lots of things every time we wanted them. I can remember getting a nickle on Friday night to go live it up on Saturday.

M: Do you recall noticing poverty and suffering on the part of the lower classes there in El Paso--this would be in Chihuahuita or in South El Paso? Do you recall noticing the differences of wealth among the different groups that lived in El Paso at that time?

O: Well, I think so. I think I noticed the differences of wealth just within my own, the other kids in school. There were a lot of kids at Lamar who lived in Kern Place. In those days, Kern Place was "it." Or [those] who lived on the northwest side of town. Their families always had very nice cars and the kids had new bicycles at Christmas. We earned our own bicycles and had to keep them in repair. When we would go to Juárez, if we drove over we would drive through South El Paso. I remember the tenements and I remember seeing the kids. We used to do our shopping down on South Stanton Street. In those days there were a lot of vegetable markets. There were no supermarkets in those days. Vegetables and tortillas were sold literally on the sidewalk. You would go down in that part of town and you would see the very dirty, very poorly dressed little kids. We'd go to Juárez on Sundays; we would always go to Juárez after mass and you'd see the kids in Juárez begging--a little girl 10 or 12 years old carrying a 2 or 3 year old baby, all snot-nosed and dirty, and with their little hands out. I have those memories of seeing tremendous poverty. It was rampant in Juárez, and a little less in El Paso.

M: Did that concern you?

O: I don't really remember. I know that we felt fortunate. Whenever Christmas came we would always try to put a few dollars together to give to the church, to the little nuns that would come around

asking for charity. My parents would tell us that this was for those who were less fortunate than we.

M: Do you recall any experiences or incidents during your high school years that stand out in your mind?

O: I guess one thing that I remember is that once you went to high school--I used to walk the 8 or 9 blocks I guess from our home on Nevada Street up to El Paso High--that I always had to carry a lunch in a little brown paper bag. A lot of the other kids that I felt a little envious of could go to the cafeteria. I used to feel bad that I couldn't go with them to the cafeteria, that I had to bring my own lunch. And so I remember a little shame of not quite being able to hack it like they could. [Laughter]

M: Did you get involved in student activities, sports?

O: Not in sports. I was involved in academic things and I belonged to a few clubs, that sort of thing. I wasn't particularly active in an extra-curricular sense. Every afternoon I had to go out and deliver my paper route. I ran around with a relatively small group of kids. I enjoyed just coming back to the house and playing with the kids in the neighborhood. We engaged in a lot of sports in the neighborhood sense, you know--playing hockey in the street with tin cans on roller skates, and playing touch football, and that sort of thing. But as far as being involved in formal sports in high school, no. But I was still sort of a bookworm in high school and I was very concerned about achieving and getting good grades, in particular because I felt that maybe by getting very, very good grades that it might help me in college, possibly through a scholarship. So I was sort of a drudge, really, when I was a kid. [Laughter]

M: Were Anglos included in your circle of friends?

O: Very much so, very much so.

M: Did you have close friendships with Anglos?

O: Yeah, some that are now scattered all over the place. But I ran around with actually more Anglo kids in high school than I did in grammar school. My closest circle of friends were mostly Anglo, I think maybe because the kind of interests that I had, the clubs I ended up belonging to, and also the particular neighborhood we lived in--we lived in the 1200 block of Nevada Street by then. Although today it is almost exclusively a Mexican neighborhood, in those days it was a reasonably nice part of town, and there were very few Mexican families. So the kids that I would walk to school with, or that I associated with, turned out to be Anglos. So, there wasn't anything planned about it; it was just sort of the kind of people that lived around my neighborhood, and the fact that I think I tended to gravitate towards them. They were interested in the things I was interested in. They had read more of the things that I had read. We could talk about magazine articles or books where there was a mutual interest. What I remember of a lot of the Mexican kids is that they came from perhaps poorer families than ours, and I didn't have as many common interests with them. So that's probably the way it happened and why it happened.

M: From El Paso High School you went to Texas Western right after graduation?

O: It was then Texas College of Mines. I got out [of high school] in 1944 and went to Mines for roughly two years, and then I was drafted into the Army. So I had an interruption. But when I graduated--in fact, it was that year that I graduated, in 1950--

that the name changed to Texas Western College. I remember that we had a choice what our degree would read. I chose, if I remember correctly, "Texas Western College" because I figured no one will have heard of Texas College of Mines by the time I'm trying to peddle my degree.

M: I think your degree is up there. [On the wall]

O: Yes. It is Texas Western.

M: Let me ask you about your experiences at that school before you went to the War. How was it? How do you recall those years at Texas Western before the War?

O: Well, I remember that when I finally got into college the country was at war. I was 16. I was no dummy and I didn't know how long the war would last, so I think that those two years before I got drafted, I was hoping the shooting would be over before I got drafted, and also that I probably would be interrupted. So I didn't really know; I didn't have a good clear idea of what I wanted to do. I started out in what one would call a liberal arts direction and I was in the first class of what then was a radio broadcasting curriculum. It was started ~~by~~ a guy named Virgil Hicks who then was with KTSM. I think [it] was headed by Carl Wyler at that time. So I had aspirations of becoming a radio announcer. So I took the typical courses of history, English, and what-have-you, but with this radio broadcasting intent. The very last semester before I got drafted, I did terribly. I blew all my previous relatively good achievement and just did terribly that last year. I really didn't care. I knew that my drafting was imminent and it was clear that I wasn't going to get a deferment; because although the shooting ended in 1945, in order to

bring the boys home they were drafting everybody they could get their hands on. So, I just sort of lost interest that last year. It was a strange time to be in college, in terms of having a nice clear course of what you wanted to do.

M: Were there very few persons of Mexican origin attending college?

O: Very few, very few.

M: How did you feel as an exception to this rule--that you were there while most Mexicans in El Paso didn't go to college?

O: I never thought very much about it. I was running scared in terms of trying to make good grades. It was a new environment; it was a strange environment. I was concerned about achieving, I was worried about what was going to happen should I have to go into the Service. I really don't recall having any concern of how many Mexican Americans or Mexicans were in school. I really didn't think very much about it. I think in general, again, I was still running around more with an Anglo crowd.

M: Then you went into the Service?

O: Then I went into the Service, and I was in the Service roughly 16 or 17 months. I think it was a very significant turning point in my life, as for most people. I got away from home, from a very protective environment and a very controlled environment. I had a marvelous experience in the service in that I quickly found out that the skills that I had developed--like typing--permitted me to seek out ways to better endure being in the Army. I cleverly took advantage of everything I could. The fact that I had a college background, even though it was only two years, was quite an asset in those days, because I remember basic training down in Louisiana with these absolute illiterates from West Virginia and from the South. I was an intellectual giant compared to many of my fellow

soldiers. And so, I worked the system and figured out ways to get assignments that were less onerous, although I went through the full 17 weeks' basic training with sleeping in the mud and all that sort of thing. I was shipped overseas to Germany. I remember when I got to Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, which was the embarkation point for Europe, I undercovered where the classification and assignment section was. I just went around and asked questions and tried to understand the system, and found out what the options were once you got over there. I discovered that there were ways (if you had some college training) to work in the system there. So I actually worked in an office for a week or two and found out that by having put in a couple weeks of duty, you could influence your station. So I made a deal with the sargeant that I was working for to include me in a special group that would probably be assigned to the headquarters in Germany. Sure enough, when I got over there, my papers reflected that. And again, it worked in New Jersey, so I worked it in Germany. I went again and volunteered to work in the classification group there. There [I] literally assigned myself to the office of Inspector General in Frankfort. So I had a delightful year or so in Germany. I was assigned to the theater Inspector General's office and I became a flunky to this bird colonel who had been a judge or something in the United States. Very quickly, within a very few months, he promoted me up the line. He made me a sargeant so that his aide had no lower rank than any of his associates' [aides]. What we did then over that year was just travel around Germany inspecting bases, investigating black market activities, and inspecting the military government installations over there. I had a tremendous amount of freedom. When he

didn't want to work, I was free to go to Paris or to go to Berlin or whatever. So those were very exciting and very happy days for a 19-year-old kid.

M: It sounds like you were an operator. [Laughter]

O: Well, I just tried to use the environment as best as possible to my advantage. I remember my Army days as very exciting, at times very demeaning like anyone who's in the Army, certainly in the early days. But once I was over there and I was hobnobbing with Colonels and staff people in the headquarters there, why, I found that you could exploit that position to get certain privileges. I exploited them all the way. When it came time to be discharged, I had been involved in the war crimes trials at Nuremburg, carrying records back and forth and collecting some witnesses and that sort of thing. When it came time to go, I made sure that I was assigned to escort war crimes documents back to the United States. So my trip back was on a very large ship with special quarters; and they gave you a gun to guard the documents. You came back in a relatively luxurious fashion rather than being in a cattle-boat arrangement that everybody else had. [Laughter] So, when I came back, though, as I said earlier, it was a very interesting turning point. I came back, of course, greatly matured and understanding so much more about the world and the way to exploit opportunities. I came back with a much more serious view of my future. I recognized then, of course, that I would be entitled to the GI Bill. I decided that I wanted to be in a profession that had reasonable economic expectations, and I also thought about the fact that it would cost me more if I left town to go to school. So I went back to the college and enrolled in the Engineering School. So, that took me longer to get out.

It took me almost 2 1/2 to 3 years--I had a lot of courses to catch up on because I'd been in the liberal arts route. But I did very well in college. What I think was interesting is that--perhaps because of the maturing experience of the Army or whatever--when I came back I started associating with more Mexican Americans in the college. There were more then, all the returning people from the Army. I developed a whole new set of friends--almost no Anglos. I got involved in college activities in a social sense, almost exclusively with Mexicans. I became sensitive then to the Greek letter fraternities and associations, and recognized that there was a problem penetrating that system. I never even thought about it before I went to the Army. And, so, I and a few others decided to form something called Mu Epsilon Xi, which, of course, is MEX. We formed this group and it became a formally accepted group there at college. For the last two years that I was there--in '48, '49 and '50--MEX was "the" Latin social organization on the campus. We were the elite on the campus. Our dances and our affairs [were] where everybody tried to go.

M: Latinos, you mean?

O: Yes, strictly. When I say it's a sort of a turning point, [I mean that] I really began to feel a brotherhood if you will, an identity with people of my background, which I had never particularly felt the need for in my earlier years. But here I really enjoyed it and reveled in it, if you will, in that it was a fuller life. I was away from just the books and trying to make good grades and trying to achieve. I became much more active with girls and those kinds of things, and it was a totally different college experience--

more self-confident and you didn't have the uncertainties of going into the Service. Also, I really enjoyed my friends. And I still, thank God, I did very, very well in school and got out with a reasonable accomplishment.

M: What was it that caused you to gain that identification with people of your background that you didn't have before?

O: I don't really know. I think I was around them more--there were more to be around with, and I just developed friendships. Not all of these people had been in the Service, and perhaps I reflected a maturity or a knowledge that made me more attractive to them, and I had more respect. Also, perhaps I understood more about what I was and who they were. It's a very subtle kind of process; I can't say that it was this or that that caused it. I just all of a sudden felt very comfortable. In reflecting, as you're asking me questions today, it may be that perhaps in those earlier formative years there may have been a very subtle sub rosa feeling that it wasn't the greatest thing in the world to be what I was. Maybe when I came back with a greater self-confidence of growth and age and maturity, I could more easily accept just being what I was. That's about the only thing that I can think of that might have influenced that feeling.

M: The reason I ask you that is because it goes along with some of the things that I've heard from people whom I have interviewed, and also it's reflected in the historical literature that we have about the World War II experience. In your particular experience right after the War, I wonder if it's related to something that is said; that is, that the War itself was a turning point, because

men came back and felt that they were equal in the battle line. But once they came back, they were not equal in the society that they were protecting during the War. And that in itself was a stimulus for more involvement. You did make the point that there was the problem in penetrating fraternities, for example; and I wonder if there's a relation there.

- 0: Let me look at it this way. I had many experiences in the Army-- certainly basic training and other experiences--where for the first time I lived day in and day out with a majority of people who did not have near the education I had, who were not--what would you say-- of the class that I was. That sounds terrible; but [there were] kids of my age from Alabama, from West Virginia, from all kinds of places, who came from farms. And yet I found that they were [good] people; we suffered the same problems, we complained and bitched about the same food, about the same sergeants. We protected each other in that environment and we helped each other. So I came back perhaps with a much more comfortable feeling with people of any background and of any economic level. I found that because a kid spoke English with a Southern accent and who had a very poor background, that he would protect me in a particular situation that I had to deal with in the Service as a brother. I think that had to have an influence in my general maturing as I dealt with society. I think that's one thing. The matter of the fraternities thing-- I think also that, damn it, you're older, you're more aware of the world about you. The Service makes you aware of the world; and so I came back to college and I was thinking about different kinds of things. I was realizing: why is it that the fraternities were

all Anglos? I saw that once in a while there would be one or two boys that were of Mexican background who had somehow gotten into these fraternities, and they stuck out like a sore thumb. I would look at them and say, "Now what's different between that individual and myself?" Interestingly enough, I think in every case they had come from Austin High School; they had come from the east side of town. I always thought of [the east side] as an all Anglo part of town. I grew up, as I said earlier, in a very mixed side of town. But out there on the east side of town, that was all Anglo. I certainly had no friends or relatives on the east side. So when they came from Austin High School to college, and there happened to be a Mexican kid, they had perhaps a few more bucks and they had grown up strictly in an Anglo environment; and some of them, through sports or whatever, ended up in a fraternity. They were a rarity, a real rarity. So those kids that I ended up banding together with in those last couple years of college, we all had a common kind of feeling, a common kind of reaction to the fraternities--that there was an exclusivity and a feeling that they felt that they were better than us.

M: When did you first become a politically aware person?

O: I guess probably in my late 20s, after I'd been in California a very few years. I was living in a part of Los Angeles very close to the University of California at Los Angeles--UCLA--up there north of Sunset Boulevard. I was living in a very Bohemian kind of environment where [there were] a lot of university people, people from the show business world, and a very broad spectrum of social, ethnic and financial backgrounds. And again, feeling very comfortable living in this thing, I sort of got dragged into becoming, for

instance, a member of the local Democratic club. I got involved more, in the sense that others belonged and it was almost a quasi social thing going in. But also I was older now and I was reacting to the headlines and world affairs with a little more awareness, a little more concern. You know, when you're in your 20s, you spend all night drinking and talking about this and that and the other, and politics begins to become an important thing to talk about. I never voted when I was in Texas. I never worried about it or thought too much about it. Then I got out to California in a much more cosmopolitan environment, and I think that those were the beginnings; although I never took a very active part in politics other than voting as a citizen, participating in a local club and contributing a couple of bucks, participating in arguments in our club meetings about permitting Red China to enter the United Nations and stopping nuclear testing which were big deals back in those days. It was just a very subtle process, a very subtle process. The next few years, until say the late '60s when I began to be a little more active, I was a Democrat during all that time. In California, all the little Democratic clubs were part of what's called the California Democratic Council, which today is considered almost an ultra-left kind of organization. Well, in those days it was the mainstream, grass roots element of the Democratic party. I think that the first time I really, however, got turned on to think in terms of very specific political activity was just prior to the Nixon-Kennedy election in 1960. I really got very concerned and turned on about participating. But I think as I became more aware of political events and affairs, I started formulating a more defined political

philosophy. I remember during the 1964 election that I thought Barry Goldwater was an absolute nut because he was going to defoliate Vietnam and then use atom bombs and all this sort of thing. And I realized that the American people have a tremendous obligation to think very carefully about the people they elected to office, and to take part in trying to alter or to control the system so that nuts didn't get into office. I look back at Barry Goldwater today, and he looks great in many ways, because today he can say the same things and it's a lot more acceptable. It's only ten years ago, but I think in those days we had a lot less information available. We didn't have so much television and such a powerful medium. So one reacted much more on rhetoric and gut-level kind of thinking rather than with the large mass of information that the American public has today. But by the time that the Nixon-Kennedy thing came along, I got intrigued with Jack Kennedy and what he promised. He had a desire to establish a national purpose and to think about grander issues than Mr. Eisenhower who, in my view, kept the country for 8 years in a status quo. I was, of course, like so many people, greatly shocked and felt so bad about Kennedy's assassination. And as Johnson took over and the Vietnam War escalated, I began to be more concerned about what a terrible thing this was--the fact that we just kept going and going and nothing was happening. By the time 1968 came along, I just felt that it was time to change parties; that I could no longer vote for the Democratic party; that they seemed to have no plan for extricating themselves from this quagmire of Vietnam. I saw Hubert Humphrey as a candidate who had tried to change his spots in the last few

months of the Johnson administration; but he did not convince me. I realized that although I had never really liked Mr. Nixon, at least this was a promise of a change and there were promises of doing something positive about Vietnam. So I converted to the Republican party. I think there was another subtle process that was taking place, too. I had continued to progress in my profession, in salary and relative affluence; and I think it made me more politically conservative. I began to think a lot more about the fact that my income was being redistributed through the tax process to some people who maybe had not worked as hard as I had to get to where I was. As I thought about the Republican party vis-à-vis the plethora of social programs and all the things that came out of the Civil Rights movement (like the War on Poverty), I think my reaction was, "Hey, I was poor, too; but I got out by a lot of sweat and strain and hard work. Why in the hell can't everybody else do that?" Well, that is not my philosophy today, and I don't think it ever was that seriously. But I think that there is something of that still in me. It's very hard, when you're fortunate, to relate to those who are not, and say, "You can have anything I've got because you should be just like I am," unless I see them out there truly, literally sweating like I did. I've grown older, I've become mellow; I still have a tremendous respect for someone who works hard and who busts his tail to progress. But in the last 10 years or so I've certainly become very, very sensitive to the fact that there is that small detail of opportunity, and that in too many cases in our society--no matter how hard some people have sweated and strained--they couldn't make it because of other barriers that were above

and beyond their control. And just coincidentally, in 1969 a couple of other people and I formed this company which was involved in the research and consulting business. I had worked prior to that for about 15 years in the aerospace business where I was an engineer. I was involved in, frankly, trying to build the best hydrogen bombs in the world. For all those years I worked strictly in the defense industry and developing products that had nothing but a destructive output. So when we formed this company, my part of the deal was that I would have nothing to do with defense projects--that I was going to go and try to develop a business that would take some of the things we had learned in the aerospace industry and convert them to the betterment of society. It was through that process that I became involved with people here in Washington, as I was coming here to sell our wares, to try to develop business. Coincidentally, a good friend of mine, Martín Castillo, who was an attorney in Los Angeles, was named by President Nixon to be the Chairman of what then was the Interagency on Mexican American Affairs. He replaced Vicente Jiménez, who I guess is still in Texas. Martín asked me to come to Washington in March of '69 from time to time to just help him set up this agency, which by the end of that year became the Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking. And through Martín a whole new world opened up for me.

End of Tape