

9-18-1976

## Interview no. 416

Fernando Oaxaca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews>



Part of the [Oral History Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Interview with Fernando Oaxaca by Oscar J. Martinez, 1976, "Interview no. 416," Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Oral History at ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Combined Interviews by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact [lweber@utep.edu](mailto:lweber@utep.edu).

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO  
INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Fernando Oaxaca (1927- )\*  
INTERVIEWER: Oscar J. Martinez  
PROJECT: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 18, 1976  
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
TAPE NO.: 416  
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 416  
TRANSCRIBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE TRANSCRIBED: \_\_\_\_\_

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

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

Born in El Paso; attended Lamar Elementary and El Paso High Schools, and Texas Western College; has worked as an engineer for private corporations before being appointed to the OMB.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Recollections of young adulthood in El Paso; work experiences after college in the private sector and later with the government; assessment of Mexican American progress or lack of it; the Chicano Movement.

\*See also No. 196

Length of Interview: 2 hours Length of Transcript: 55 pages

Fernando Oaxaca  
by Oscar J. Martínez  
September 18, 1976

M: Mr. Oaxaca, let's begin this interview with your recollections of what you would do on a typical Saturday night, growing up in El Paso when you were a youth.

O: Well, I think you have to remember that when I was in high school, this was during the peak of World War II, and things were not particularly right as far as income. And we didn't have television, of course; certainly not in El Paso. I think that if it were in the summertime, why, I might be out with some of the fellows playing touch football or just visiting other people at their houses; nothing very exciting. We didn't have cars, we had bicycles. I think towards the very end of the war, I did finally get my first car. I had saved up from my paper route and other jobs, and I think I may have put together a hundred dollars or so. But I do remember struggling to get tires and gasoline. We'd go to Juárez and buy terrible, cheap gasoline, but at least it would keep the car going; and then you could go out with the other guys, or from time to time with a girl. I think in those days, if I remember correctly, it was not particularly a custom to go out with a girl by yourself; at least in my circle, you went out in a group, and people would concern themselves if their daughter went out with you in a car all by yourselves. I mean, that just wasn't done in the circle that I went around with--not, say, at 16 or seventeen.

M: What about in college?

O: Oh, in college, that's different.

M: Let's see, you graduated from high school and then went on to Texas Western for a couple of years before going into the Service.

O: Right.

M: Well, when you were in college, did you do much individual dating?

O: A little bit more. I was working pretty hard. I didn't have a lot of money to spend on dates, and the change to the college environment was pretty significant. I felt a much greater demand on studying. And also because the draft was hanging over my head, I was perhaps not doing as well in school, certainly not as well in school as I did after I came back from the Army; and so I found myself scrambling academically all the time. (Chuckles) I guess in those days, at least, I don't think high schools did an awful lot to prepare you for the college environment in terms of the academic challenge and the fact that in college you are very much on your own. You don't have much of a discipline, you can cut classes, and, at least in those days, you weren't really reprimanded. It just went in your record and after a while they just dumped you. So it was a tremendous sudden change in lack of discipline, lack of teachers driving you, and I think I had trouble adjusting to it. So, it affected your social life when you were always scrambling to hang in there academically. (Chuckles)

M: Was there much inter-ethnic dating?

O: Not in my circle, not in my circle. Although I ran around with both an Anglo crowd and, in those days, a little less of a Mexican American crowd, a Chicano crowd (because there weren't too many people up here in this neighborhood who were Chicanos in those days), we tended to date our own, if you will, as far as the girls were concerned. The situation for me, after I came back to college from the Army, I actually moved away from an Anglo group and focused more on the Mexican American friends that I had and I got into social organizations that were strictly Mexican American.

M: Did you and your friends get together and go to Juárez much when you were in high school and college?

- O: Oh, yes. Really, in reflecting, I think that a Saturday night was much more often a male group Saturday night, and maybe going over to Juárez. In those days, you could get a shot of bourbon for 15 cents, or a beer for 10 cents or therabouts, so you could have a relatively inexpensive evening. Even though tuition was very, very low, you still had to buy books, you had to buy materials, you had to buy gasoline for your car, and there wasn't an awful lot of income. I was working at the time and I would work during the summers and at Christmas and save up to survive during the college year. So there wasn't a lot of time for carousing that cost anything.
- M: Do you remember going down to Juárez and having a wild time, living it up?
- O: I don't know how wild one would consider it. We used to go down to some of the less expensive bars over on Mariscal Street, and even get to know some of the bargirls there, the "ficheras", and talk with them. We probably couldn't afford to utilize all the available services there, but you'd sit there. And I don't think we ever really got drunk, that I can remember. It was more a companionship and just watching a very interesting scene. I think we felt a sort of bravado of being out with the prostitutes, even though we weren't particularly messing around with them. And just going down there sometimes, if we did take girls [from the bars] with us, why then you could dance and whatever, and it was a relatively inexpensive evening. But if you took a girl [from El Paso] over there, why, then you'd have to go to some of the nicer places, and of course they were more expensive. So that was a much rarer occasion. A more typical thing in Juárez would be, like, on Sunday afternoons, some of my group [would] go over to the Casino in Juárez to the tardeadas, which were sort of like tea dances. And the Juárez girls, we used to call them "apretaditas", which

means that they were a little stiff and very concerned about image and what have you. But anyhow, we would go over there and still have some fun and do a little dancing and try to arrange dates; but generally they were very difficult with that particular set of girls. In those days /at/ the Casino, the boys would all congregate around the bar and shoot dice; then when the music would play, they would leave the bar. The girls would be in the ballroom sitting around the edge with their mothers and aunts, and you'd go dance and talk and what have you. But then both sexes would then separate to their particular part of the building there. It was a very totally different kind of social environment in those days for people in their late teens.

M: Did you speak Spanish fluently then, and could you communicate well with the girls in Juárez?

O: Sure. I've spoken Spanish fluently from as long as I can remember. I grew up in both languages. I was reading Spanish before I was reading English, as a matter of fact, when I was a little kid. So, no problem.

M: That's always been a problem here with the young people who go from here to Juárez, and the "pochismos" that are used over here illicit a lot of criticisms from the people on the other side.

O: Well, I guess it has to do a lot with my family and their background, and the fact that they knew some of the so-called "nicer families" and the refugee groups that had come from Chihuahua and down in the South. So there were certain linkages and you grew up sort of being known, your name was known, so you weren't just some bum that came in off the street trying to crash the Casino on a Sunday afternoon. I think the same kind of standards prevailed over here on this side. The girls you went out with were not

just casual pick-ups or anything like that; either you knew them in school or you knew them through family. But I think the basic language in most of those encounters tended to be Spanish. At least for me; that's my experience.

M: In those days, there were a lot of soldiers here at Fort Bliss, and of course many of them would go over to Juárez to have a good time before they were shipped overseas. Do you remember the troops going over all the tourist strip, the tourist area, in Juárez?

O: Yeah, very much so. In my group we tended to sort of avoid them or sort of look down on them, frankly. A lot of them tended to be hillbilly types and they would get drunk and very obnoxious over there; you know, young kids turned loose for the first time in their lives. A lot of them tended to be very countrified, and we, of course, were in college, and didn't have an awful lot of respect for them, particularly with the way they were always getting into fights and misbehaving. I think also from time to time when some of those soldiers were trying to date Mexican girls, or girls that we knew over here, why, we sort of looked down on that. Girls who went with the soldiers were put on a lower scale of acceptability for a while by our group. (Chuckles) That was just the sort of reaction. It's sort of a strange reaction, when you think back on it, because a lot of us ended up (either before or later) in that same condition. But I think perhaps it was the type of soldiers that you tended to be exposed to in Juárez, who were lower socio-economic level gringos, who got very raucous and rowdy and often got in trouble with the Mexican cops and bartenders and what have you. Of course, they were some of the prime customers for some of the girls that we used to communicate with in the bars. (Chuckles) So we sort

of looked on them [as] what we would call today turkeys.

M: Are you familiar with the Zoot Suit Riots in L.A. in the early '40s?

O: Only in having read about them. We had no relatives in that part of Los Angeles. As young kids or teenagers, we would often go in the summer to Santa Monica or on the west side of town, or sometimes drive up to San Francisco. So all I know about them is what I read now. I'm very familiar with the Zoot Suit environment and the habits here, because a lot of the kids that I remember sometimes having dealings with on the Southside of El Paso, of course, that was the deal--the big pants and big, long chains. I still have memories of that. We didn't [wear them] over on this side of town, on the north side of town. But if you went downtown shopping, or if you were [one] of the kids that used to deliver paper routes, once in a while I would see some of their older brothers decked out with the duck tail haircut, lots of grease on the hair, stuff that now you read about and you see, and it brings back some memories; but not as far as riots are concerned. I remember some of the gang kids with the tattoos on their hands, between the thumb and the first finger. Some of the various gangs that were here in El Paso had some membership at El Paso High where I went, but mostly, of course, they went to Bowie in those days. Bowie High School was sort of the Mexican high school. And I don't believe there were any other high schools other than Ysleta and Austin, which of course were very far away. When we had football games at El Paso High, I remember when we lived on Nevada Street a block away, that starting from about 5:00 in the afternoon you would see mobs of kids and families coming up to the El Paso High Stadium who had walked all the way from the Southside of town and were coming up to the football game. Once in a while there'd be fights, battles after a football game, always with Bowie. That seemed to be the



problem.

M: Bowie against El Paso High?

O: Yeah. I was in the ROTC at that time and we were supposed to "guard" the football game. We were out there with our fake rifles and uniform, and we would surround the stadium around the parking lot, just to sort of be around.

M: That was your official duty?

O: Well, it was a way to get into the game and see it for free, and it was sort of a standard thing if you wanted to do it.

M: But it was seen as necessary, as a deterrent to this post-game violence?

O: I think it was more to help. You acted sort of as ushers in leading people into the game. And I think just the fact that there was someone around might deter people from trying to break into cars or become unruly in the stadium. The cops were there as well. But it was a high school affair. We would march during the halftime with the band. It was very much accepted by the students; it was not a repressive kind of thing at all. It was just part of being there in the school, and it was accepted that the ROTC got in free. But for the price of getting in free, to see the game free, you had to be there in uniform.

M: The other day I was interviewing a person and he was telling me that in El Paso, as he was growing up, because he was Mexican and he was dark (not that dark, but nevertheless dark), that prevented him from associating and mixing in socially in school with the Anglo community. But then later on as he left El Paso and went to school somewhere in the Midwest, he was seen as a novelty there, sort of as an exotic person, and people would accept him more and in fact would play up the fact that he was Latin, and

that made him popular with girls. Have you come across this idea of the "Latin lover" and becoming more accepted as a result of that?

O: Well, I know I didn't have his experience here in El Paso. Now, of course, I'm not particularly dark, but in this neighborhood here, I grew up with a lot of Anglo kids--this was very much an Anglo neighborhood--and I was accepted right from day one. A very intimate friend of mine is a guy named Dick Lea, who was the son of Tom Lea, who was a former mayor. Dick's brother, Tom Lea, Jr., was a very famous artist from here in the Southwest. They lived two blocks [from me]. There was quite a group of kids here, and some who went to Dudley, then we all ended up at El Paso High. So I never felt that problem. But I must say that when I got to Los Angeles later, in the early '50s, I moved into the Westwood Village area around UCLA, and the fact that I was bilingual, that I obviously had some amount of education and a good job and [was] living there in some of those neighborhoods, there seemed to be some attractiveness to me on the part of my acceptance and the fact that I was Latin, that I knew some songs, and I knew some history, because there weren't an awful lot of them in that part of town in Los Angeles. In those days I was also with the university groups and some lower-level showbusiness groups in West Los Angeles and West Hollywood. And we were a rarity, you know--Mexican Americans from Texas with education and ability to be reasonably articulate. So we were perhaps popular; there were a couple of us like that. That's as close as I can come to his story.

M: Let me ask you about the different jobs that you've had. Could you trace your employment history since you left Texas Western?

O: Oh, I think so. The very first job that I had was with a construction

company where there was a group building a subdivision called Valley View, which is just south of the El Paso Airport. I worked there for a year and a half or so as a staff engineer, going out there and laying out curbs and gutters, keeping track of the progress of the sub-contractors who were building the houses--just a general, very junior engineer on the construction job. Subsequently when that project died down, I did a few other things. I was the original layout designer of what is now the Caballero Motel, because one of the owners of the construction company was Manuel Caballero, who has since died. This particular piece of land was adjacent to the subdivision, and Mr. Caballero asked me to think about a way to fit a motel into that piece of land. So I just laid it out and I thought of the idea of the fountain in the front, 'cause there wasn't any motel with a fountain. I had seen one somewhere in another part of the country. So we laid it out. Now, of course, it's so expanded, you can hardly tell what it was like in those days. Anyhow, I worked on that and some other projects of that type. Then I went to work for the Ramsey Steel Company as a structural steel designer and just doing office engineering work. I liked the previous work a lot with the construction company 'cause I was outdoors most of the time. This one then became an inside job, sitting there with a drafting board and laying out steel designs and what they call detailing the steel, which in a blueprint you lay out the description of the structural steel so that then those prints go out to the shop. Then they actually cut it up and weld all the pieces together so that eventually those pieces are shipped to the site and erected into a building. So I did that for maybe another year, year and a half. And then the owner of the steel company felt that he needed somebody to do saleswork, and I said, "Hey, I'd

like to do that." I wasn't that entranced with sitting there working over that drawing board all the time. So I became a traveling salesman for them as a sales engineer, and I traveled all over Southern New Mexico, Eastern Arizona, up into Bisbee-Douglas area, Tucson, to Albuquerque, Silver City, Carlsbad, etc., West Texas, Amarillo, and tried that for about six to eight months.

Soon after I had gotten into that traveling business, the Lockheed Aircraft people came through town on a recruiting trip. They were looking for engineers to go work in their Burbank design operation. So maybe by then I had a wanderlust or a desire for a change; maybe I felt sort of trapped here. I didn't feel that the long haul opportunities in El Paso made a lot of sense. I could see distinct limitations in the steel company I was working for. The alternatives were to go to White Sands Proving Ground and go work for the government, which didn't attract me. The only other major major engineering activity here, short of going to work for R. E. McKee or one of those outfits, was the gas company, El Paso Natural Gas. And I had heard that their hiring practices were pretty limited towards Mexican Americans. I didn't know how true that was, I never really tested it.

M: I've heard that from several people.

O: So that even if you went to work there, you'd come in in a very junior level and you'd be stuck there forever. So I figured, well, why not try the West Coast. So I did interview with Lockheed.

M: Was this common for Mexican American young people starting out in careers, to go away from El Paso because of limited opportunities here?

O: Well, I know that in my circle of contemporaries... You just met Mike Grado. Now, Mike is still with Ramsey Steel Company today; you know, 26 years later.

If I think about my immediate contemporary graduating class, I would say that the majority stayed in El Paso. Now, it may have changed. I know all of my family left--my brother and my sister left. I think that a lot of it had to do with if you settled down very quickly. I think if you got married and what have you, the probability of moving went down significantly. I enjoyed life and wanted to do a lot of things. I had a lot of relatively undirected ambitions. I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, but I knew that what I was doing was not where I wanted to stay. So the grass seemed greener on the West Coast and I had known the West Coast as a kid. I think the fact that I had been in the Army for over a year and a half and traveled to Europe and gotten quite a bit of exposure to other worlds besides El Paso, it may very well be that I came back to El Paso, and the shock of all of a sudden having to go to work and then to think of the prospects of being here the rest of your life--it was sort of anti-climactic, I think. Having tasted the fruits of Europe and the East Coast, it just wasn't enough. Anyhow, I went to work for Lockheed in Burbank, and the first place I lived was in Hollywood, right in the heart of Hollywood, two blocks from the Capitol Records Building. I got into engineering in a serious sense, designing airplane designs. I worked on the Lockheed Electra and the F104 fighter, a very top secret airplane in those days, which is still around.

M: You had to get a [security] clearance.

O: Oh, yeah. No problem with that. I had clearance in the Army. I was with Lockheed about two and a half years, strictly in the airplane business. During this period of time, the missile industry really started to burgeon, about '56, '57, and by then I had developed a significant circle of friends out there, both in the world of work as well as in the social sense. Some of

the people that I knew in professional circles were starting to get into the missile business, and it sounded exciting. So I figured, maybe I'll look into that. The project I had been on at Lockheed sort of tailed off, so I went to interview at Douglas Missiles and they offered me a job at a very nice raise, so I moved to the missiles division of Douglas in Santa Monica. And by the way, in those days, transfers /from/ company to company in the aerospace industry were very common. People went from project to project in different companies and it was a floating population of professionals. It wasn't necessarily to your discredit to have gone from one company to another. So I went to work at Douglas and I liked it there. I eventually moved to Malibu and I got a little place on the beach; in those days it was still inexpensive. I was leading a pretty ideal bachelor's life with a little pad on the beach in Malibu, working in Santa Monica for Douglas. /I was/ doing exciting work; started progressing, getting a few promotions as a professional, and had a delightful time for about four and a half years at Douglas.

Then I heard that a new organization was being formed called the Aerospace Corporation, which was a non-profit think tank that had evolved from the old space technology laboratories of Reynold Woodbridge, which was the lead in the the systems engineering and design phases of the new ballistic weapon systems of the Air Force. This new corporation was supposed to have a very highly professional environment. They had some beautiful new buildings and it was going to be a very elite kind of place to try to bust into. So I decided to try to bust into it, and I did. I applied with them and interviewed /with/ several people and finally managed to get a job there, again at a raise. I got into a totally different kind of environment,

because what we did at the Aerospace Corporation was in effect oversee the work of contractors like Douglas, Lockheed, North American, or what have you. So in the short space of about six and a half years or so in the aerospace industry, all of a sudden I was in a role of overseeing the work of other companies. I was with them almost six and a half years and progressed very satisfactorily, for me, within that organization.

M: Were you the only Mexican American around that company, Douglas?

O: There were very few, there were very few. I don't recall a single one, frankly, certainly that I had anything to do with. There were a few draftsmen and obviously the people who swept the place; you'd see a few, but...

M: Were you conscious that you were the only one?

O: No, I really wasn't. I do remember at Aerospace Corporation there were a couple. At Douglas, there may have been one or two I remember vaguely. But I was in such a hard-working environment. Plus in my social environment I was living up in the Malibu area, where, believe me, there were no Mexican Americans<sup>7</sup>; or if there were, they were in show business, like Enrique Iglesias and some of these guys that were breaking into the industry. You'd see them once in a while at a party maybe. But as far as plain folks living there, there were none. So in my social or work circles, I really didn't choose to seek them out, but I didn't particularly miss them either because I was very busy and very happy and content in the swing of things. I'm sure that if I had been living in East Los Angeles or in other places, I might have been more sensitive to the fact that I didn't see them at work. But since I didn't see them in my social life, I didn't even think about it.

At this place called the Aerospace Corporation where I did spend six and a half years, I eventually ended up being the director of the Mark 12 Program. The Mark 12 was a re-entry system; it was the portion of the Minute Man Weapons System that carries the bombs, the nuclear weapons. It's now called MIRV, the Multiple Independently-Targeted Re-entry Vehicle, a very fancy, technical term. What it means is, it's a warhead that is really three warheads, and it can be guided to drop a warhead in three different cities. It flies along, drops one bomb; flies a little longer, drops another, and so on. It's a very sophisticated system, still very highly classified. I can't talk very much about it even today, after almost 10 years that I was on it. But it was the most sophisticated system in design at that time, and I had an awful lot of fun directing the development of that system. While I was in the middle of directing it, when we were doing our flight tests in Florida and at Vandenburg, the Air Force decided to make it an operational weapon. In those days it was strictly R & D when I was on it, it was in the research and development phase. The Air Force decided, okay, we have proven that it works, now we're going to go operational with it. Well, in making that decision, they had to move the project from the Aerospace Corporation, which was a strictly a research corporation, to TRW Systems, which had the responsibility for the operational part of the Minute Man Weapons System. So the Air Force people talked to my management and said, "Oaxaca's got to make a decision. We want him to go with the project because he's essential. Now that we are going to move the project to TRW systems, we want him to come because he's the director and he's got five years of developmental knowledge on it." I didn't want to go to TRW because the fringe benefits at Aerospace Corporation were fantastic--four weeks vacation a year and this sort of thing. But the



President of the Corporation said, "Boy, it sure would be nice." Anyhow, they conned me into going to TRW, that I was essential to the national interest and that I really had all this knowledge, etc.

Well, the reason I'm a little bitter about it is because, as it turned out, when I went to TRW, I'd been there about a month and a half and an individual at a higher level than mine was transferred by TRW to another part of the country and they came to me and offered me his job. So as it turned out I got another promotion, another change; but my alleged essential job on the Mark 12, they were quickly willing to give that up in order to have me take that other job. So then I became the director of all the flight test programs, and all the testing operation of the whole Minute Man Weapons Systems nationwide, and I had all the TRW people at Vandenburg Air Force Base and down at Cape Canaveral. I got involved in a whole bunch of really new, fascinating experiences. But I think I might have been just as comfortable staying at Aerospace Corporation. It was a more relaxed environment. I might even still have been there, I don't know, because I was progressing nicely /with/ very good pay and /was into/ very exciting, new developmental things all the time. As it turned out I went to TRW, and after about two and a half years I got restless there. I had gotten to know more friends, different friends, and we got to talking about forming a company--busting out, in other words. By then I'd been working on weapon systems for almost 12, 14 years, so I guess I was a little tired of that. These other two fellows and I started thinking about a new company, /and/ we eventually did break out of TRW and formed Ultra Systems Incorporated in the very early part of 1969. And then of course, from there, I went to the government.

M: How long were you with this company that you formed?

O: Well, from '69 until the spring of '75, when I joined the Ford Administration.

M: What was the nature of this company?

O: Well, the company began as engineering services, doing software studies in the computer field. And my part of the deal...I didn't want to do any more defense-related work. I wanted to build up a part of the company that would deal with either taking the skills we had developed in the aerospace industry and applying them to programs that would benefit society, or maybe in a purely civilian kind of activity--either in developing computer services or anything that was not related to the defense department. That was the premise on which we put the thing together, the other two guys and myself. I didn't want to mess with that other stuff that I'd been doing.

M: Was that in reaction to the Vietnam War?

O: No, I was just tired; I'd given that industry 14 years or so from '55 to '69. That's a long time in the people-killing business. I think I just felt, "Gosh, there's got to be a better way to make a buck." I think it was more of a personal decision. If I had skills and talent to just work towards developing nuclear weapons, it seemed like a self-defeating purpose, and I wanted to try something new, something different. I didn't really know whether my engineering skills would apply in these other fields. As it turns out, it took a couple of years for me to discover how to unlock an application to what I knew and had learned, and how to really apply it in the world of social programs. I had trouble understanding how those things were done, how they developed, because they seem so undisciplined and so mushy compared to the more precise world that I had dealt with for

so many years. I think at first I was almost contemptuous of loosey, goosey muddle-headed social scientists (chuckles), which I learned later to respect, of course, as I understood them better. In my collegial relationships with social scientists--many of whom eventually I hired to come to work for me--I think /they/ eventually came to respect me in professional terms and we began to understand that there were two separate worlds but that there was an opportunity to blend talents to solve problems.

M: What kind of problems was this company solving?

O: Well, we were doing things like designing better manpower delivery systems for the state of California or for the federal government, evaluating certain federal programs. We had contracts in education. We did an evaluation, for instance, of a bilingual program in East Los Angeles that had some new techniques involving some innovative classroom arrangements and a very free environment within the classroom, at a time when this was sort of pioneering back in '69 and '70. It was certainly pioneering in East Los Angeles to have an open classroom approach for little Mexican kids with Anglo teachers. Believe me, that was unheard of. And /we did/ things of that nature that were often related to governmental programs. But then as we started to grow and prosper, we got into more complex things. We eventually acquired a firm in Phoenix, Arizona, that had a test track for testing automobiles, where we became the major contractor for the Department of Transportation to do safety testing of automobiles. We were the original test facility for the development of these airbags in automobiles to protect you in a collision. We can crash cars into each other at 50 miles an hour into a stone wall, using anthropomorphic dummies with instrumentation on them, to find out how badly people would be hurt or whether they would survive

certain speed of crashes, both head-ons and side by side, etc. We got into the environmental field and even began developing some hardware ideas for devices to cut down pollution from industrial plants. The company is now engaged in several things in the energy field in developing new kinds of applications like the gasification of coal, to take coal and convert it into natural gas--a lot of very advanced engineering and scientific research work tied into some commercial applications. The company this year will do about \$12 million, which doesn't sound like a lot; but when you built it yourself, that's a lot of money.

M: And it's been growing every year?

O: It's continued to grow very well. I had to sever all connections with it formally when I went to the government, when I went to the White House, but I was permitted to keep my stock. That was not considered a conflict of interest. But I still, of course, get the reports and talk to the people that are running it.

M: What is the name of the company?

O: Ultra Systems Incorporated. It's in Irvine, California.

M: What does TRW stand for?

O: It stands for Thompson Reynold Woolridge, but you've probably seen the ads on TV, TRW. It's a two and a half billion dollar corporation now. It's a major firm.

M: Then from there you went to the White House through Martin Castillo?

O: No, not really. I had known Martin in L.A. When he started dragging me into Washington as a free consultant to help design the Cabinet committee and then to work out problems, to just frankly sit around and talk about the challenge that he had in forming the Cabinet committee, I started to

become very interested and involved with a better understanding of federal programs. I got to know people in some of the agencies and in the White House through Martin that otherwise I would not have met.

M: Could you describe your involvement in forming that committee?

O: I guess the main role that I played was not so much in the forming of the committee in literal terms but in just sitting around with Martin and other people are talking about what could happen, what could become a new form of that inter-agency for Mexican American affairs, as the committee notion evolved and it finally converted to legislation. The legislation was written, of course, on the hill, and it incorporated the language that Martin and his staff eventually had created. I think it was just myself as an outsider coming in and sitting down with these people who were in government in a very political environment and just talking about how one might organize to perform a mission--the mission being to have a staff group headed by a chairman who would then also head a group of Cabinet officers to perform a liason function between the White House and the different departments of government and among the departments of government to pay more attention and do a better job of serving Hispanics with federal programs. That was the basic notion. What I got involved with was in just sort of think-tanking how to organize it, how to formulate it. Eventually I got to the point of once they had gotten their go-ahead and were starting to operate, I would come in and sit down, like you, and tape open, loose conversation back and forth with different members of the staff, then take those kinds of ideas and discourses and try to convert them into different organizational arrangements or different ways of attacking the kinds of problems that existed--breaking the barriers in the Office

of Education, for instance, that the language problem was really in inhibition to learning; getting the Department of Labor to appreciate that job training was essential for our people, and yet it had to be coupled with language training in many cases. Just to teach people skills is not good enough. You take driver's license tests in English, you have to file job applications in English, and in many cases you had people with such poor language or reading skills in many Mexican neighborhoods around the country that just to give them job training was not enough.

It's hard to believe that only six years ago, seven years ago, in Washington in the federal agencies, there were gigantic pockets of absolute ignorance of the Mexican American. And in just six years there's been this incredible progress of the identification of the Chicano. Now, our young kids don't appreciate that. You'd think that the Chicano phenomena has been known for years. Well, maybe there's been some elements of that phenomena in the West Coast or in the Southwest, but in Washington in '69, when you said "minority" it meant black. Of all the people, Richard Nixon is the guy who really brought the Spanish-speaking to the fore in the federal programs, particularly through his appointments; through bringing Hilary Sandoval here from El Paso as the administrator of the SBA, the Small Business Administration; he brought in Martin, of course, as chairman of that Cabinet committee which President Nixon supported and pushed. He brought in Carlos Villarreal as head of the Urban Mass Transit Administration. He brought in Phil Sanchez as Director of OEO, the Office of Economic Opportunity. These were all appointments he made in his first year and a half office, so he can't be accused of

having made those appointments so he could be re-elected. Nixon was from Southern California and he really had an understanding and a feeling that the Spanish-speaking, Hispanic population in this country had been neglected. By the end of his first term there were something like 55 people in policy-making positions in the federal government. Many others of course have been coming in little by little in career levels, so in that five or six year period even that small number of people managed to sensitize the bureaucracy in Washington to our existence and to our needs. Of course, the Congress started picking up on it and they started facilitating with laws and various programs. But if you look carefully into the early days of the Economic Opportunity Act of '64, which led to our poverty programs, they were heavily black oriented, and all the direction and most of the people who were leading that effort in Washington were black. It did change, of course. You may remember that Sargent Shriver came in in the Kennedy years and then stayed through part of the Johnson years. Well, these were Eastern establishment liberals who were very turned-on about helping the so-called "disadvantaged," but who only knew they were the black. That was a great inhibition [to] the Hispanics getting their share when all these programs were being turned on.

M: Did you yourself ever talk to Nixon about the Mexican American situation?

O: I never sat down one to one. I met with a lot of staff, I went to two or three meetings where he was in the room, and there were discussions going on. But as far as my personally sitting down, no.

M: Or Ford?

O: Oh, I have since with Ford. But at the time, don't forget, I was a civilian, I was not in the Administration. I was just a consultant to

Martin and those guys and/or doing things on my own. So that was a totally different situation.

M: What about with Ford?

O: Well, I've had only really one conversation. My role in the Office of Management and Budget is a very mainline kind of role. I've got some very tough mainstream kind of chores and I have not felt it particularly appropriate to go out and become an advocate for Spanish-speaking issues or problems. In the first place, I don't think that is really necessary with Gerald Ford. He is most sensitive and aware of things and I have seen him be very responsive to many things that he's taken a lead on just by being triggered on something. I had the pleasure a few weeks ago of introducing him at a banquet; I was the speaker that introduced him to a group of Hispanics. This was a political evening, a set of people from all over the country from about 20 or so different states. He made a speech at this banquet which really told people all around the country some of the things that he's thinking about as of today and the concern he has. I've been in the East Room or in the Rose Garden with him at signing ceremonies of certain bills and I've written speeches for him, little five, 10 minute remarks, things for some of these gatherings, and this man is together, he cares, and he understands and knows us.

It's a different world. We're not trying to be discovered anymore. The problem now is trying to fit the needs of the Hispanic community in days of very tight budget years and of a general feeling that the day is gone [for] programs that are specifically for special groups. There're so many broad federal programs now that are for everyone that you don't really need so many specific programs. 'Cause when you really think about



it, what are the special needs of Hispanics outside of their language difficulty? They need education, so does everybody else; there are programs for education. If they need food stamps, there's nothing ethnic about hunger and there's nothing ethnic about not having enough income to buy food. The food stamp program is there, welfare programs are there, educational grant programs are there, job training programs are there. The only real unique aspect of the Hispanic need is language and to some degree perhaps this more subtle thing which I haven't really made up my mind about, the so-called "cultural reinforcement" if you will, the building up of cultural awareness that theoretically is going to make you better fit to blend into society. I think the returns are still to come in on the wisdom of that notion. I think if your belly is full and you've got a good job and you understand the language, I think that cultural business is something that would be nice, but I don't think it's essential for your progress in this society. That may be a very elitist position for some people.

M: Could we go back to the process that you were describing before, how you got into the present position that you're in, your initial contacts with the federal government?

O: My work with the Cabinet committee, I guess, really got me interested in the fact that you can cause change through the political process. It sounds ridiculous that I would not have been really cognizant of that; I just hadn't thought about it. But I got to understand, for instance, the Congressional process, the way legislation is written, the way bills are run through the House and Senate. And I began to realize that, gee whiz, it seemed very mysterious when you didn't know about it, but really it's a

relatively simple process. [It] takes smart, intelligent people who are very stubborn and willing to work very hard to cause change, but it can be done. And if our community could get enough interested people knocking on the doors in Washington, there were things that could happen for the betterment.

I guess I got into that game for two or three years before the '72 election and in the process got to know a lot of people in government, on the hill, in the Congress, and in the White House. I became convinced that Richard Nixon should remain in office, that it was very good for the Hispanic community and, I felt, the country as a whole, for him to remain in office; that the challenge by the Democrats was very poorly directed. I saw nothing that they were promising to do that would improve the country more or that seemed a better way to go. In particular I felt that Nixon had been extremely useful and aggressive for the Hispanic community. So I got into politics very heavily, got into a fund-raising activity, and obviously developed some additional prominence with Republican powers that be, if you will. I was not interested at all in coming into the Administration. I was very busy with our company, eventually setting up this little bank in downtown Los Angeles that I became a part of. But nevertheless, after the election was a success, we were very well received in the contributions that we made, myself and others in the organization that I was involved with.

But then in the spring of '73 I started getting called from the White House, that they really wanted me to join the Administration. I told them I really didn't want to leave Southern California to go to Washington. But anyhow, I said, "I'll stop by and talk to you sometime when I'm in town." I did, and in April of '73 I went to see the White House Personnel Office,

and they said, "We want you to meet with Jim Lynn, the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. He's got a job that he'd like to interview you for." I said, "Fine. What is it?" He says, "Assistant Secretary for Administration." So I said, "But look, is there really any point?" "Well, go talk to him." So I went to talk to Jim Lynn, a very charming, delightful guy. He says, "You've really got to come. I need help. I've checked you out with TRW." He'd already checked me out with TRW! "I've checked you out with several of your colleagues here in Washington who know you, know your work, and I'd like for you to come and join the Department of Housing and Urban Development." I told him, "I'll be very frank with you. I'm not a retired General Motors President, I'm still making it. We've got a little company that's progressing very nicely but I don't think my departure would be healthy for it. We just started to organize the Los Angeles National Bank," which was a little venture I had going with a bunch of other fellows. But I promised I would think about it, and I said, "Give me a week to think about it." So I went back to L.A., thought about it, and turned him down, flat. He was very understanding, and he says, "Please keep us in mind if you ever get to the point where you might be willing to come and serve for a year or two." So I sort of forgot it.

In the spring of '74, of course by then Nixon had resigned, Ford was President. I don't know if in the back of my mind was a concern of joining the Nixon Administration in the post-Watergate aftermath. You know, by the Spring of '73 things were looking pretty rocky in the Nixon Administration, but not really to the point that they were in '74. But anyhow, I had other calls over that intervening year and I just wasn't

interested, and I think the Watergate thing affected my thinking. By the spring of '74, while Nixon was in his last few months, I got a call that they were going to set up this Special Assistant to the President for Hispanic Affairs. I was called by Ann Armstrong, who was then the counselor to the President. I had known Annie, and she says, "Fernando, you gotta come and talk to me. This is a super opportunity. The President wants to establish this new position and you're the one guy in the country that can do it." I said, "Ann, that's ridiculous, there's all kinds of guys that can do it. What does it entail?" She says, "I'm not going to talk to you on the phone, you've got to come and see me." So I went to Washington and sat down and we chatted for about an hour. What it entailed was a job that had almost no resources. You were going to be the "in-house Chicano," if you will, Special Assistant for Hispanic Affairs in the White House; the prestige, etc. But it would be strictly an advocate job, and obviously with the political implications. And the upshot of the conversation was--I talked to her and I talked to the White House people--that I said, "Look, I will take the job on one condition. Number one, that you give me a seat on the Domestic Council, that I have at least two professional staffers to handle all the phone calls and letters." 'Cause I knew what would happen. See, by then the Cabinet committee was dead; it had died as of that previous December, and I knew that the Hispanic community had no place to talk into Washington any more in any central fashion. So I knew that this office would become a lightning rod for all these people who want help and assistance and political contacts. So I said, "I want two assistants, two secretaries, a certain amount of travel budget." I wanted a salary equivalent to an

Executive Level 3, which in those days was 40 grand a year, and I had to have a seat on the Domestic Council. Well, my conditions were obviously too much for them, and they did consider it. But I told them, "Why should I leave my business to just become an EEO specialist in the White House?"-- which is the way I had translated that job. So they called me back and they said, "We just can't do it. We don't have the budget to do that sort of thing. We don't have a personnel budget, etc." And you know, they got Fernando de Baca to do it without all those benefits; and, I think, to his dismay.

[Pause]

As I was saying, I turned the Special Assistant job down because it would not give me the resources that I felt were essential to do the job. Fernando de Baca ended up accepting the job. I think he found [that] we were (and are) very good friends, and we exchanged a lot of ideas. I always made it a point to stop by and see him all the time before I joined the Administration, while he was there. He reflected some of the things that I had predicted for myself had I taken the job. It was very difficult to really do very much without resources. Fernando was also affected by the demise of Nixon, which left him in an awkward position for a few months until the Ford people accepted him, because he was a Nixon appointee. I think that that was a problem that I might have faced as well, 'cause I would have been appointed by Nixon if it had been in the spring of '74, and then, of course, Ford came in in August.

Getting back to myself, in the late fall of '74, after Mr. Ford had been in, they called me again and said, "We really think you ought to join the Administration. We need people like yourself. You've got a

track record with the Party, we know that you've been in before, and lots of people think you ought to join us." So I went a couple of times in October and November, I looked at two or three opportunities, and finally one I started settling on that seemed very attractive was Assistant Secretary for Management in the Department of Commerce. The Department of Commerce, I felt, was a very prestigious department and dealt with many important things related to the business and industrial community, and I felt that would be a neat thing to get into. I went and interviewed with Fred Dent, the Secretary of Commerce then. He seemed impressed and I was very impressed with him. It looked pretty good, and I started working to try to get nominated. Now, getting nominated by the President for a position of that level can be a chore. You know, they invite you to come in, and you think, if they invite you then they're going to take care of it. But you are in a political environment. The President is not going to nominate you if he thinks the Congress isn't going to confirm you when your name goes to the Senate. A very interesting, fascinating mechanism that a lot of people are not aware of unless they've gone through it themselves [is that] you become sort of a ping-pong ball between the White House and the Congress as you move towards getting to the point where the President will actually appoint you, even before you actually have the job or even before you're confirmed by the Senate. Well, I got into that ball game all through the late month of November and December, where I was getting congressmen and senators to write letters to the President and to the White House Personnel Office, endorsing me. "I've known Fernando Oaxaca for x years and I think he's better than sliced bread." You know, all that sort of stuff, building

up a body of evidence that told the President, "If I nominate Oaxaca, he will probably get confirmed." In the meantime, in the process of selection like that, the President likes to have three names. That was true for Nixon as well as for Ford. So other candidates are developing. After all, this is a very responsible position and you shouldn't just look at one guy, obviously. So others were building up their own head of steam behind it, and it becomes very much like running for office, [but with] a very tiny electorate with a very powerful set of voters, if you will. Another guy ended up running second. I was being told by the White House as late as mid-December that I was the number one guy; that there were three names, and I was number one. I sort of lost interest, frankly, and dropped off tracking it during the Christmas holidays. I figured, "If they nominate me, fine." I still wasn't that gung-ho to go to Washington.

Then in the early part of January, I got this strange call from the White House saying, "You have now dropped to number two. You should know, maybe you want to crack up your support, because you're now trailing John Eden." Ironically, John and I are very good friends. He is now the Assistant Secretary in Commerce, in a totally different role, and I've got a position that's far better than what both of us were shooting for at that time. But John was being pushed by Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, and the White House was starting to lean in his direction very hard. Well, interestingly enough for both of us, right about then Secretary Dent resigned, and we heard that the next Secretary of Commerce would be Rogers Morton, who, of course, became the campaign chairman. Well, Mr. Morton came in and all those potential appointments had to go back to

zero, because we had been interviewed by and looked at interestingly enough by Secretary Dent. But now Dent's gone and Morton didn't know me and he didn't know John Eden, my competitor. So all that stuff reset to zero and the whole process had to begin again. Well, by then I had lost interest in Commerce. The White House called me, and I told them, "Look, I used up a lot of political chips, getting a lot of senators and a lot of friends to call in for me and write letters in my behalf. When you tell me that just because some powerful Senator from Pennsylvania put this guy in, and that all that work went for nothing, the hell with you. I ain't coming to Washington. I don't want any more to do with you guys. I'm just angry and I don't want to mess with it any more." And that was it. About two hours after I had that phone call (with someone I won't identify), his boss called me and said, "Look, Fernando, I'm terribly sorry about the way this thing worked out. We don't want you to be mad. We really think this was one of those political things that happens sometimes. We would have avoided it if we could have, and we should have given you more advanced knowledge." I told the guy, "Look, I understand, but I really meant it. I just don't want to mess with anything. I don't want to go through this process again. It's too time consuming. It cost me two airplane trips to Washington, and an awful lot of mental anguish, talking with my wife, 'Are we going or aren't we?' And it just ain't worth it." He says, "Are you telling me that under no condition would you come to Washington?" I said, "Well, when you put it that way... Look, if you call me and you tell me that you've got a job, a specific job, that my name has already been looked at, has been bought off, and that that President will make the nomination if I accept, and I won't have to go



through all that B.S. with the congress and what have you, then I'll look at it. And if it's the right kind of job, I might go along on that basis." He said, "Fair enough." So that's the way it went, and in April I got a call from Jim Lynn, who I had turned down in the spring of '73. Jim says, "I guess you're surprised to hear from me, but I'm now the Director of Office of Management and Budget, and there's a particular position that I think you would be ideal for. I would like to talk to you. I'm going to be in San Diego, and I'd like to have the opportunity to discuss this with you." And, you know, the rest is history. We met in San Diego and I accepted the job there in the lobby of the Cortez Hotel, and I ended up at OMB in a far more exciting, interesting, and frankly more powerful position than any of the opportunities that I had looked at before, because it has a tremendously broad, sweeping kind of role. We have the clout of the White House and the power of the budget, so it's really very exciting and very professionally rewarding, and one hell of an ego trip besides. (Chuckles)

M: That's a very interesting process. Could you briefly describe the nature of your job?

O: Sure. I have five basic areas of responsibility. I am one of five associate directors in OMB. Four of those associate directors have specific budget areas where they watch over the budgets of a group of departments. My job is the cross-cutting, general management part of OMB. Sometimes people say that I'm the M in the OMB. I've got the largest shop in the organization. I have about a third or a fourth of the professionals. In that function I take care of all those issues that do not relate to a specific department, but that have to do with the improvement of management in the federal

government as a whole and in dealing with some specific areas. For instance, one of my divisions is the Statistical Policy Division. That Statistical Policy Division oversees the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, all your major statistical gathering agencies of the federal government. We set policies for them, we watch their budgets, we ensure that there is a quality statistical program to support the economic policy formulation to assist the business community, to assist program people in the agencies to run their programs properly. For instance, let's say they have revenue sharing. Revenue sharing requires very up-to-date population data to a very low level of government. Like even a township, you'd like to know how many people live there. So, we have worked out a process through the Internal Revenue Service where now, when you fill out your income tax form, you have to tell them exactly where you live. We take that data so that we can count the number of people in different parts of the country. Anything that has to do with the collection of statistics, I've got some sort of an overseeing or controlling role, as long as it's federal statistics.

I have another group that watches the entire Automated Data Processing kingdom of the federal government. It's a four billion dollar a year business in ADP. We track the budgets of each individual agency, we approve or disapprove what they want to do in terms of expanding their computer operations or the number of people they have, and we set policies for the management of information. There are concerns these days about the privacy of individuals and protecting that information that government has about individuals, at the same time making available to the public on demand certain information government has, under the Freedom of Information Act. Well,

these are all matters that relate to what I call information policy.

So within my Information Systems Division, we not only watch this information policy question and help formulate policy for the President, for the White House and for the government as a whole, but at the same time track and control the actual mechanisms by which information is gathered or disseminated, in particular that that is automated and computerized, and the people associated with it.

A third and very interesting part of my responsibility has to do with why I was here yesterday. I've got a shop and I take a very personal involvement in all inter-governmental affairs: the dealings of the federal government, the state governments, the county governments, and mayors and municipal governments. The federal government spends \$70 billion a year these days in federal domestic assistance, which goes in the form of grants to these different levels of governments. So we have many mechanisms to try to make that process as simple as possible, to insure cooperation among levels of government, to eliminate red tape whenever we can, and to grease the skids when problems develop in certain programs so that specific issues can be resolved. [For instance, if] a grant in job training has gotten screwed up in the bureaucracy and certain people in a given city are expecting those bucks and they haven't come through (even though they've been told that they're coming through), and the mayor calls the White House or he calls me, we try to work out the issues. If there's a catastrophe of some sort and you need immediate aid from four or five agencies, I can put one of my crisis management teams in the middle of the night to fly out and set up the SBA, HUD Federal Disaster Administration and so on, put all the resources of government [out] to solve a problem when a mayor

or governor has called for help. Recently when we had this catastrophic flood in Colorado, when the Teton Dam broke, I had people out there within hours organizing the resources of the federal government to try to help the local officials in solving those terrible problems. So that inter-governmental arena is one that I have a lot to do with, and that's very fascinating for me.

The fourth area that I have is called the Evaluation Program and Implementation Division. This group, with a very fancy name, really is involved in setting policy and designing better processes within the agencies for evaluating federal programs. How good are our programs? Do they reach the audience they're supposed to reach? Are they really worth a damn? Is the money being spent wisely and efficiently? That sort of thing. What we do is, we track how well each agency is doing. We ask them specifically what programs they are evaluating. We see if the ones they are evaluating have any relationships to the agency's priorities. We see if they really do something with the results of these evaluations, and we try to make sure that the agencies are keeping up the state of the art in evaluation design. There are many, many difficult issues, as you perhaps are aware, in how to properly evaluate an educational program. How do you really tell if busing or desegregation has helped the learning of kids? There's been study after study after study; nobody really knows for sure. Has the compensatory education program really helped kids learn better because schools have got more money and they theoretically buy more materials and /hire/ more teachers?

One very fascinating project right now that I've been leaning on very hard is the whole bilingual program. All the data that's coming out says

that kids who've been in the bilingual programs are not progressing any better or worse than any other kids. Some of them picked up a little bit on the English, but the net results thus far are very negative on the bilingual program nationwide, and we've been dumping hundreds of millions of dollars into that program. The Mexican community thinks that it's just better than sliced bread, and they would be up in arms if anybody said, "Let's just cut it out." Yet the actual evaluations of those programs done by professionals say that it is not really helping those kids. There are not substantive increases in learning skills, in reading skills, in mathematical aptitude, etc. It's a very controversial, very sensitive kind of thing. Well, I'm not convinced that it isn't doing good. It may be that the evaluation methods are not too good; some of the analytical processes that I've looked at look a little fuzzy to me. At the same time, I've been deluged by calls from Mexican American groups saying, "We should be doing the evaluations 'cause the gringos are going to try to make it look bad." You get into very emotional things. Well, there's got to be some kind of rational way of dealing with these things. That's one of the things this group tries to do in setting policy, so that programs can be evaluated objectively and validly as to whether we should continue to spend money.

Finally, the last group that I have is a very apropos group these days in view of the fact that Mr. Carter has been talking about wanting to reorganize the federal government. He's never told anybody how or what, but he keeps talking about it. Well, there is a group called the Organizational and Special Studies Division, which reports to me. We are responsible for all organization or re-organization studies in the Executive Branch.

We have any number of studies going on at any given time. As an example, right now we're looking at a major reorganization of all the energy functions in government, taking anything having to do with energy that's in Interior, in Commerce, in the Federal Energy administration and the Energy Research and Development Administration. We're thinking of combining those into one or two major governmental elements so we can get all these little loose ends collected that have grown out in the governmental process, just by Congress stupidly passing laws and never thinking about the organizational impact in the laws they've passed. I've got another one going on right now in taking all the functions in mapping and charting our country and putting them into one organization. That's gotten scattered through the years. The Department of Defense does some, Commerce does some, Interior does some; it's in the different little pieces. What is fascinating is that the technology that the Department of Defense has developed in their super top-secret surveillance satellites is of tremendous benefit to these civilian programs, and what we want to do is blend those functions from DOD and these other groups so we can get a better product at less money for the taxpayer. This goes on all the time. I could talk for an hour on different reorganizational studies that we do all the time and are doing, some of which have been already implemented. A lot of those have to do /with/ when a new law is passed, like the Legal Services Corporation. That was an organization that was set up here about a year and a half ago by law. My people actually worked with the new director of that, the new chairman, and helped create the organization. We designed the organization chart, we put in a charter for it, decided what the functions would be of the different pieces, and helped them get off the ground in getting

their organization going. That's one of the things that I did.

So those are the five basic functions that I do when I'm not doing special chores for the President, being /that I'm/ the ranking hispano there in the White House, or when I'm not doing my thing in extra-curricular terms, working with Hispanic groups and whatever around Washington.

M: How can you keep track of all that?

O: Well, when you enjoy something, it's no problem.

M: What happened to the Cabinet committee?

O: That's a very complex question. I think the Cabinet committee died from a lack of credibility on the part of both the Congress and the White House, that it could ever really accomplish what it set out to do. I think that its five-year life did some good things, but one of the major problems that led to its demise is that the Nixon Administration, from every perception that I have, probably influenced the staff of the committee to do some things that were really very politically oriented. They politicized the Cabinet committee functions, or at least made the committee do such things that were perceived as being political by the Congress. There were allegations made during some of the Watergate investigations that people in the Cabinet committee staff had worked to provide political appointments, grants or contracts to Hispanics in order to gain favor for the re-election of Nixon. A lot of these things remained in the forefront of attention of the Congress when it came time to review its renewal of the committee, and left a negative view on the part of the Congress that this thing should be continued. In the meantime the Administration itself in the last few months of the Nixon years was very disillusioned because they were continually having to deal with an observed, internecine

warfare within the committee staff--the Mexicans having problems with the Cubans, and the Cubans having problems with the Puerto Ricans; a continual series of personnel issues [such as] who is in charge, and who is going to set the policy. So you saw a disillusionment on the White House side, on the Executive Branch side, as well as on the Congressional side because of what they found was another tool that the Administration could use for political purposes. So at the end it just died. There wasn't enough support on either side. The community made some last stab efforts to save it, but again, the king-making issues came up. Congressman Roybal of Los Angeles talked of maybe setting it up in a different fashion with the Congress appointing certain members of the board. [There were] several attempts to create what the Congress thought might be a safer system, but any of those alternatives would have been so controlled by the Congress that the Executive Branch would never have gone along with it. And in any case, either version would not have really been of too much service to the community. So maybe it's just an experiment that was worth trying, but maybe [it's] just as well that it went away.

M: You mentioned the internal strife within the committee, and you've shown me this magazine, La Luz of June, 1976, where you have an article in which you treat this point of internal divisions within the Mexican American community, internal divisions within the general Hispanic community. Could you elaborate on the problems that you've observed along this point?

O: Yeah. I feel very strongly about it, and I guess the article in La Luz is the first time I've ever really written down my feelings for public observation. But in all the years that I have dealt with Mexican groups, Cuban groups, and Puerto Rican groups, I guess I continue to be amazed at the



lack of professionalism with which Hispanic special interest groups have tackled the problems that we face. That amateurish approach has so often just been totally interspersed with a bringing down of their own leadership, of each individual wanting to be on his own personal ego trip, and an unwillingness to ban together on a common cause and work together without concern about who gets the credit. This concern for who get credit, this concern about who's in charge, maybe it's part of our so-called machismo, or the "Yo mando" syndrome that a lot of Latins have. Maybe it also comes from the fact that so many of us have not had much power in the past, and when we have a little power, we're not experienced in how to deal with it and how to use it wisely. But I'm not a psychologist or a student of human motivation. All I can do is observe that for any number of reasons, we, as a community, have not managed to coalesce our interests in such a way as to deal better with the governmental system and its inhibitions on many things that affect the progress of our part of society. In particular, this manifests itself in the political arena, because I am absolutely and totally convinced that the only way the Hispanic community will ever really progress is to be in office--in running for office and in gaining political office in all levels of government--and to become honest-to-God players in the political process of making contributions, financial contributions to parties to push candidates, to behave like the majority of society behaves. If you're not out there in that political business, you really aren't entitled to yell and scream that you're being had by the system. That's my own personal conviction. In order to do that, we're going to have to achieve a far greater degree of sophistication than we have now.

As strangely as it sounds, I've been an absolute pioneer in Republican politics by Hispanics. I don't say it in a self-serving sense; /I/ only /say it/ because there weren't any when I and a few other of my friends got involved. We've seen the difficulties of trying to get involved with a principal party and trying to get our people involved. And aside from their being so totally naive, we've seen time and time again... For instance, we named someone to be State Chariman of a national organization, and as soon as we named /that/ State Chairman, why then we got four or five people who said, "But it should have been me rather than him or her." They start giving us all the nasty stories they can about this person and how we really should pick someone else. In states where we used a different process of having an open election, it gets very nasty; and even when someone is finally selected, then people start backbiting--the people who lost will backbite the one who won as time goes by. It's incredible what I've seen time and time again among Hispanics. I don't understand it, it makes no sense, but it is absolutely self-destructive to Hispanics really ever participating properly in the political arena. Recently we had a recall election in Los Angeles for an Anglo city councilman, /Schneider/. Well, six hispanos ran against this guy, and instead of getting together and campaigning together against Schneider, these guys killed each other off. They split up the vote and Schneider won in a walk. He came in with about a 50 or 60 percent majority. That isn't because 60 percent of the people in that community wanted it. A lot of people just gave up in disgust because there wasn't one strong latino candidate and /they/ went over to Schneider; and among the others, the vote was so split up that nobody could take him on. You know, why don't we have a mayor in

El Paso or in San Antonio, with a 60 percent population majority of Hispanics? There's got to be something wrong with that system. Why can't we get together? I don't know what the answers are, Oscar, but I feel strongly about it.

M: You've observed this kind of behavior from the very bottom within the Mexican American community to the very top, as you were describing. What is your own gut feeling regarding the root cause of this kind of behavior?

O: Well, like I said, I can try to play boy psychiatrist and say it's naiveté and lack of sophistication in being able to deal with power and affluence as some of our people are starting to come out of the woodwork and starting to be able to be involved. The society will now accept you. The Republican National Hispanic Assembly was just given formal auxiliary status by the Republican National Committee at the time of the convention. That's the first time in a hundred and some odd years that there's been any Hispanic involvement in the Republican party that got official recognition. At this conference here yesterday, my gosh! I was delighted to see the mayor of Eagle Pass, the mayor of Hidalgo, the Mayor of Del Rio, special assistants to the mayor from San Diego, all kinds of Mexican Americans in political positions from many different places. Here is the mayor of El Paso, an Anglo, pronouncing Mexican names very clearly, dealing back and forth, the technical leadership being provided by Graciela Olivares. Things are changing and so our people can now be accepted, they can participate; but in the jockeying for position, because they come from past insecurities, either as individuals or as a group, maybe they just don't know, they don't have the class and the sophistication to be mature. I think it's immaturity, I guess, more than anything else; to be mature in the way they deal with it,

to recognize each other's rights. You may remember that old cliché almost of Benito Juarez: "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz." Well, we haven't learned that. We don't respect each other's rights. All we want is, "I want mine, because it seems all of a sudden available to me and I want to be sure nobody takes it from me." You know, like it's a mad scramble for the door for a very few goodies. That's my gut feeling of maybe why we behave so stupidly.

But on the down side is, if we don't shape up, we might lose the openings that have been made available to us, through being ridiculed, or /by people/ just saying, "Well, we don't want to mess with them anymore because they're more problems than they're worth." Or we're just never going to be effective in exploiting these opportunities that are becoming available. I think that disturbs me more than anything else, because the talent is there, the capacity is there in our people, and all we got to do is figure out how to harness and use that energy, 'cause the energy's there. And we are an exploding population. In California by 1980, we will represent 20 percent of the population of the state of California. There is no reason why we couldn't elect a governor or a lieutenant governor. The black has elected a lieutenant governor with a population that's about 75 percent the size of ours. Why should that be? Why is the black so prominent politically in this country? There are only twice as many of them as there are of us, and they're still only about 12 percent of the total population; but they're all over the place. They have gotten together, they have somehow banded, incredibly enough, behind the racial color business.

I think maybe that's the other part of the equation of why we have

problems, because outside of our language and our culture, we don't really have that much to band together around. We probably have as much a diversity in social and economic status as those of Scottish or English or any other kind of tradition or background in this country. Our color varies from very, very dark to blonde and blue-eyed. So, what are the real bonds? I'll be in Florida tomorrow afternoon and I'm meeting with a group of cubanos that I deal with periodically. And that group, they look like Scandinavians, and all rattling off this very rapid Cuban. They happen to be from a certain part of the Cuban society that came to this country after Castro, and you'd never know they were Cuban. And there's nothing to band them with the Chicanos in East L.A. or here in El Paso. So, I don't know if that answers the question, but I think it's a complex question. Maybe that's an important contribution that people such as yourself in the academic community could make to our Mexican/Hispanic society. Because it's a problem, it is a deep, deep problem. I have yet to talk to anyone who denies that the problem exists universally. And it's crazy.

- M: Why have so many Mexican Americans of your generation not succeeded? Why have they not achieved positions of responsibility, status and high income in the United States? Why are you one of the very few?
- O: Well, I don't know the statistics. I don't know whether the number that have "succeeded" is statistically that different from any other sample that you might draw from any part of our society. If you went to Mississippi or if you go to Hartford, Connecticut and you pick a hundred people at random and try to decide how many have succeeded, [or if] you go to any college and look at a hundred graduates and see how many have succeeded

10 years later, I don't know.

I don't know what I represent. I know that there are very few who have achieved the kind of prominence or notariety that I have because there haven't been that many trying through the political process. I just don't know how unusual I am.

M: Statistically, you are very unusual.

O: I'm sure that the breadth and depth of activities that I've gotten into is an unusual combination, and that may just be a personal thing. But I do believe that I knew enough about statistics, since that's part of my business, to realize that if you look at Spanish origin people as a whole, we have been low on the scale in education, in income, in skills achievement, in academic achievement, and that we are moving upward, slowly but surely. There are more federal and state and other level programs for scholarships. There is no reason why a bright kid today of any background cannot go to college in the United States of America. That's an absolute fact. There is some way, either through community college or through scholarship grants, whatever. There is no reason why a kid can't go if he wants to, if he takes the time.

I think the other problem perhaps that our people face is [that] too many do live in some form of isolation from mainstream society by banding in so-called colonias and barrios, and I think they don't have a good enough touch with the opportunities that are available. I think the other part of our problem is a lack of mobility, a willing mobility. By that I don't mean obviously our migrant workers. They are mobile for survival because they have to go where the crops are. I'll talk about the reluctance, maybe because we are a close-knit kind of community.

We don't want to move to New York to a new world, we don't want to move to Miami, we don't want to move to Chicago if we are comfortable with our family and our friends and we can go down and have our beers and buy our tortillas and our chile and be with our own. How many kids getting out of Texas Western [UTEP] here would be immediately willing to take a job in Schenectady, New York, away from all their friends and relatives, etc? Maybe that is a cultural thing among us. We like to be and enjoy being with our own, and to move into strange arenas is a problem for us. So I don't know if that answers your question.

Now, as to achievement, it sure as hell isn't IQ; it sure as hell isn't anything that's inherent in Hispanics in terms of talent or capacity. It is opportunity, but maybe also some kind of mind-set is in our community about what can be done.

M: Among your Mexican American peers in government and outside of government who have achieved high positions, have you noticed a correlation between light skin and achievement?

O: No, not at all. (Chuckles) If you look at my good friend Phil Sanchez, es bastante prieto, and he's just as articulate, as charming and as accomplished a guy as I would ever hope to be. He's now Ambassador to Columbia. I've know people in industry.

M: In your age group?

O: Yeah. I don't think that's a factor at all. It has nothing to do with it, that I've observed. If there is any overriding trend that I have seen, [it] is people who have worked hard, many who have started through the private sector, who have obviously been willing to tackle a lot of different jobs and who have been willing to move around, who are articulate, [who] have a facility with the language. I think in talking with them, they've

all recognized they had to live with and deal with the majority of society's system. In other words, they forced themselves to behave and think like the gringo in order to play in that ball game. [It's] what I was talking about earlier--you know, to join the club you have to live by the ground rules. The Tijerinas and the Corky Gonzalezes and the Cesar Chavezes, they accomplish themselves, but they can never really belong to the club. And not that they want to, necessarily. But they're trying to cause change; and if you're trying to cause change, the system doesn't want you--not if you're going to play in the system. If I think of one consistent characteristic of my so-called "peers", I think it's a willingness to work hard, to understand the majority of society's system, and to live within the ground rules. I think that's essential.

M: Have you noticed a correlation between success and place of origin--people who come from Texas achieving more than those who come from California, Arizona or New Mexico?

O: You know, as researchers, you and I know terribly spurious kinds of data. (Chuckles) But I am amazed at the number of people I have run into whom I would consider successful who are from Texas, and indeed from El Paso; and I have my own theory about that to some degree. But among Mexican Americans who have been successful, [there is] an incredible number that at some time or other lived in El Paso or close by. Are you interested in my theory?

M: Yes, I am.

O: I view the immigration period and the group of my parents very much like the Cuban immigrants of the very early '60s after Castro--a rather well-educated, formerly affluent group of people, or at least a reasonably



well-off group of people--who escaped from the Revolution and came here to El Paso, and came over with notions of respect for education, no real feeling of social inadequacy or insecurity. They had had it while they were down there in some form or other. And I and a lot of my contemporaries are the children of that group. So we all grew up with a feeling that, okay, so we were Mexican, [of] Mexican background; but if we got education, [if] we went to college, we could make it. We had in our household good Spanish, a love of books, of magazines, of learning, of wanting to progress and be something, driven unmercifully by our parents to get good grades, etc. So I think that on a purely statistical basis, you would expect more so-called "successes" out of that group than you might out of any normal set of agricultural workers coming across the river at random fashion over the last 20 or 30 years.

I think also just the mere fact that Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy was here (which then became, as you well know, Texas Western College and then Texas Western University and now UTEP) [was a help] for people of my generation. I was paying \$25 a semester when I started at Texas College of Mines back in 1944 or '45, and I could literally take a bicycle or drive a car five minutes or so and be there at a very inexpensive price--a good education for a ready-made market of Mexican American young people who had learned at home that it was important to get some education. So it is no wonder to me that there're a lot of folks around that made it from this part of the country. There was a basic resource of people that escaped from Mexico, who came with a certain philosophy and no lack of cultural or other types of security. They had been successful or had belonged to successful families over there, so why shouldn't they make it

here under some temporary difficulties. That's my own stupid theory.

(Chuckles)

M: It makes a lot of sense. In fact, you're just confirming another explanation that seems to make sense for history of the Mexican American in El Paso. But [you are aware of] other people of the same kind of background as yours who've gone on to achieve something?

O: Sure. And some of them exist here in El Paso, have been successful in their own right, here. Take the Peinado brothers, take the Bustamante brothers; all kinds of families that I grew up with and who are now my contemporaries. Bob Bustamante is the Director of the Department of Water and Sewage or something. Kiki Bustamante is the head of the Federal Housing Authority. His brother Carlos is a major guy up there at White Sands, the highest level civil servant up there, I believe. The Peinado brothers, my gosh, they've all been prominent in this town. They have their own engineering companies, etc. They're all graduates of John Hopkins and the University of California, etc. Guys that I run into in California or Washington, I meet them and you start comparing notes, and, by golly, they're from El Paso. Manny Fierro, who we were talking about earlier, [he's from] El Paso, grew up here at Smelter Town.

I think there's something about this area that in itself... Maybe the fact also that from my experience, [the] so-called discrimination in other parts of Texas has been far more benign in the El Paso area through the years, if existing at all in hard terms, as opposed to, say, San Antonio, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Houston, or what have you. I think this has always been an international town, [and there's been] a warm acceptance even by the Anglo community of the Mexican culture, of the Spanish heritage,

of the language. The Anglo kids I grew up with in grammar school and high school, they had Mexican maids and they learned Spanish, but there was never any feeling of inequality between them and me [because of] the fact that their maid was of the same background as I was. [She] was the maid, but I was their friend; it was different. So that perhaps has also led to a different attitudinal feeling on the part of young people when they leave here that maybe prepares them better to deal with society, and thus the probability of success is higher.

M: I've collected a lot of statistics regarding the position of the Mexican American in El Paso historically, and one sees a protracted concentration of Mexican Americans at the bottom of the occupational structure that we have in this city. In fact, historically, very few Mexican Americans in El Paso have been able to achieve good positions. Let me give you some examples. Historically, we've only had one mayor of Spanish surname in this town. We haven't had a county judge since 1882. The people on the city council have numbered very few. Since the incorporation of the city, most of those years had zero Mexican Americans on the city council, few of those years had one, and lately (in the last 10 years or so) we've had two all along. If you look at the appointments that have been made in city or county government, very few have been Mexican Americans. If you look at the corporations, at the financial institutions, officers of the banks, the law firms, the doctors, and other professionals, you find very, very few. So that presents a problem. It's an enigma here. How do you explain that on the one hand El Paso does seem to be different in terms of the relations that exist between the two groups, and yet when you look at the empirical data of how Chicanos have done, you find that they in fact have been excluded?

O: Let's attack that in two ways. Those kinds of positions you first talked about--mayor, city council, etc.--those are all improvements or movements in position that require group action. It requires votes, it requires political activity. I don't want to reiterate my feelings about problems as a community to deal with the political realities of things, or lack of sophistication. But when you're talking about advancement that requires group action, such as political office, I don't think El Paso is any different than any other part of the United States. I am encouraged, as I said earlier, about what I'm seeing happening all along the border and even down in the South Valley, where I can't think of a more repressive environment for Mexicans than down in Hidalgo County, Zavala County, etc; and yet things have happened. Now as far as individual accomplishment, you say there are no lawyers, there are no doctors.

M: Well, there are; about 12 percent of the lawyers in town are Chicanos.

O: I know there are a lot of individual doctors here that have... I don't believe that doctors have starved to death in El Paso once they got their medical degree. I question how many have wanted to stay here in view of the kind of business there is, the fact that you have competition from Juarez, where a lot of our Mexican people go to Juarez to be treated 'cause they think it's cheaper, and better; or at least cheaper.

But Americans, Anglos, in the medical and legal profession, do tend to form partnerships, firms, either a group of doctors or a group of lawyers. And it would make sense to me that if I'm forming a law firm that I would want to band together a bunch of people like me, or that I know, or my friends, 'cause it's really a business and you want to trust the people you do business with. So the fact that you didn't see too many Spanish surnames

in the major law firms in El Paso doesn't surprise me at all.

M: Zero.

O: Okay. Why should you not bring in your friends? Now, if there are major firms, then you'd say, "Gee, maybe they ought to be trying to find candidates." There's another aspect. I think Mexican Americans are somewhat entrepreneurial in spirit, and would like to do their own thing. Once you've made an investment of \$30,000 or \$40,000 to get a medical degree, or maybe a little less to get a law degree, why not go into business for yourself? Why do you want to go join a gringo firm? So you might try to set up your own shingle here, or maybe go to another town and set it up. So I'm not really too appalled or dismayed by the fact that there are very few that are here in El Paso, 'cause this isn't that big a town. And if you've gotten a good law degree from the University of Texas, or even better from Harvard or whatever, why in the hell would you want to practice in El Paso with that kind of degree when you could probably have two or three times the income in 10 years by going to your major cities or go to a corporation? Particularly today a minority with a good degree, they're snapping them up, you know. You can get tremendous jobs, so why stay in El Paso? So I think there's a brain drain kind of factor that applies here, too.

Now, how many people can you point to in El Paso who have income and affluence and what have you? I would imagine that that performance is not quite as bad, and that you will find people who've made a buck who are Mexican American, that the ratio is a little more appropriate in terms of population. But, let's face it, even that group that I was talking about earlier that came from Mexico, that slightly elitist kind of group,

it was still in the minority within the Spanish-speaking community here, within the Mexican community, 'cause the bulk have been agricultural workers, they have been illegals who became legal, domestic workers for the Anglo, etc. You started out your question by saying, "Of the ones that you've known who were successful, who are they?" Let's face it, they were the cream. And I just think that a lot of the cream has not wanted to stay in El Paso, or has found better opportunities. Mostly they got educated outside of El Paso. You know, you don't train lawyers and doctors in El Paso, unfortunately. So they go to "Paree" and want to stay there. That's my own theory.

M: It's an explanation. (Laughter)

O: An explanation. (Laughter)

M: But let me follow up on this point that you made, that this group that you identify with yourself was the cream. What prevented the rest from achieving something, in your estimation?

O: Well, I hope I don't sound too self-serving about the group I'm saying were the cream. I'm saying that they were of a perhaps better set in initial resources.

M: Sure.

O: I guess I put a tremendous weight and importance on the family and what the family represents to the kids--the concern of the father and the mother for what the kids learn, what they take an interest in, and the kind of ambition they should have. If as an adult you are in a very low-level job [where] you don't appreciate what it's like to make it [and] you don't have aspirations of making it yourself, I think it's very hard to motivate and explain to your kids how to get there or what they should be seeking. I don't know

how many times I have heard parents tell a kid--or kids have told me [that] they've been told by their parents--"Hey, you just got out of high school, and I know you can immediately get a job for five bucks an hour. That's 250 bucks a week. Take it, mijito. What do you want to go to college for? That's a good job; it's a steady job, it's available. Grab it! You don't need all that other stuff. Why do you want to spend another four years for something that may never happen?" Because to this guy who's giving this alleged advice, that's probably 30, 40 percent more money than he's ever made in his whole life. And when he can think of this 18-year-old or 19-year-old kid making that kind of money, it just blows his mind! He says, "Wow! 'A bird in the hand...'" It looks tremendous. But, a parent who has come from a little more affluence, who appreciates, who has hobnobbed and had rosé with doctors and lawyers and politicians or whatever, wealthier people, [they say], "There's another world out there and it is achievable. We know the key to that, and it's education and experience," in a much more extensive and sophisticated sense. And so you drive your kids to reach that, even though you perhaps never reached it yourself; but at least you were close enough to it that you see what can be done, what is possible. And so if you take the bulk of the people down [in South El Paso]... I don't know what shape they're in. Do you still have the tenements down there?

M: Yes.

O: You know, if you took a survey, a scientific survey of those people--conversations, interviews--and found out about the aspirations and the real knowledge of the world of the fathers and mothers in those tenements, I'm sure they're no different than the same people that were living there 20, 30

years ago. You know, [they] probably [have] a very bitter, cynical view of life, of what they think their kids could ever really accomplish. And that's just a supposition on my part, but, you know, think about their life. It's eight, 10 hours a day of hard work with travel in between, for peanuts; miserable plumbing, miserable living conditions in every sense; in some cases relatives staying with them, trying to evade the "Migra", the kids going to school with dope, beat up, etc. What in the hell is there to motivate these folks to push their kids to want to read Time magazine or watch an educational program on TV? Zilch! It's another world. It's like Mars or the Moon. They can't deal with that world. My parents, even in Galeana, had books and there were private tutors, etc. My dad worked in a bookstore in Chihuahua at eighteen. Poor? You bet. But he became a bank clerk. He's in the white collar world, you know. He knew that world, and he wanted us to exploit it. And that's why we did it. That's the key, man, in my view. It's that family and that family environment. And if it doesn't exist there, it's pretty hard for that kid to pick it up from other kids or through osmosis from the system. That's BS. You don't pick it up from the system. You pick it up from other human beings.

M: Let me ask you a final question. What do you think of the Chicano Movement? What have been your perceptions?

O: I think it's been a necessary thing. I have been disappointed with how unprofessional and naive it has been. It has failed to incorporate and involve mainstream, more sophisticated parts of the Mexican American society. It has been a fringe element, if you will; and I don't say that in a derogatory sense--just a very minimal part of the Mexican American society. I think they have tended to insult older members with the term "Chicano." They have



not been understanding enough with the older folks, to realize... It's been an arrogant movement, in my view, and for that reason has failed to exploit a lot of resources that could have been brought into it. Most of the leadership has been young [and] they have been unwilling to exploit a lot of folks that would have been happy to play in the game. They could have brought talent and money and power into it. But nevertheless I think it did help get a lot of other folks off their can and realize that there were problems to be dealt with, and so I think that in balance the effect has been good. But it is now almost anachronistic, and it no longer has respect, because now that the awareness has been more generally brought about, those individuals who had achieved to some degree now sort of look down on it as, "That's not the way to do it." I personally have a great respect and liking for these young people and what they've done, and I think I understand them better than they understand me, and I see where they had to start and where they came from. I don't look on Cesar Chavez at the same time or Tijerina or Gonzalez, on those early folks, as being messiahs or anything. I think they did what they had to do in the way they did it 'cause they knew no better. And obviously they had courage and balls to go out and do things. I would have done them differently, but on the other hand, I wasn't doing anything and they were, so I'd have to give them the credit. In the main, they ended up in ego trips and they ended up losing their impetus.