

Commentary

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The politics and promise of the Democratic 'dream team'

A month has gone by since Sen. Phil Gramm told the GOP convention in Dallas that "Democrats believe they can divide Texans based on race. This election is about rejecting that dream once and for all." Gramm was speaking about the racially diverse slate of candidates that the Democrats are calling their "dream

team": African American Ron Kirk for U.S. Senate, Hispanic Tony Sanchez for governor and Anglos John Sharp and Kirk Watson for lieutenant governor and attorney general. GOP Senate candidate John Cornyn commented, "I agree to the extent that it is a wrong message that we ought to emphasize those things that divide us as opposed to those things that unite us. Senator Gramm has an unerring ability to coin a phrase and say things in his own unique way."

In Texas politics, almost everything said, uniquely or not, has many meanings. The "dream team" phrase is politically adept, not least because of its ambiguity. It recalls the patriotism, talent and racial diversity of the 1992 Olympic basketball dream team (Barkley, Bird, Johnson, Jordan). But it was also used to describe the talented, racially diverse team of lawyers (Bailey, Cochran, Dershowitz, Scheck) in the O.J. Simpson murder trial. That "dream team" either fought police racism to acquit an African American of false charges or "played the race card" to exonerate a murderer.

The phrase has always sent a message. Its current message is only crystal clear to those who have fixed views on politics and race. Is it divisive or unifying to note that if this "dream team" succeeds, Kirk will become only the third African American senator since Reconstruction and Sanchez will be the first Hispanic American ever elected governor of Texas? Or are those facts

themselves a sad commentary on the lingering effects of past discrimination? Is it "playing the race card" if Hispanic and African American voters turn out in record numbers? Or is it promoting commendable involvement in the political process in what will soon become a "majority-minority" state?

My own feeling is that all citizens of Texas, especially those running for public office, should engage in some distance education. Let's all go back a short distance in time, say 20 years or so before Texas had its last Hispanic American gubernatorial candidate.

Distance education in itself is a complicated issue. But one great joint project between the General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas State Historical Association is already available to any Texan who can access a computer and surf the Web. The Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online>) informs us about the

facts of Texas history, no matter what race or color we are or what dreams we dream.

I recommend starting in the baby-boom period in Three Rivers. Pvt. Felix Longoria died fighting for our country in WW II and his body, recovered in 1948, was shipped home for burial. The local cemetery had a "Mexican" section set off by barbed wire. The director of the funeral home would not allow the use of its chapel for Longoria's services because "the whites would not like it." Sen. Lyndon Baines Johnson "played the race card" and saw to it that Longoria was buried with a proper service in Arlington National Cemetery. A five-member investigative committee of the Texas House of Representatives subsequently found that there was no discrimination on the part of the funeral director. Were those state representatives "unifying" or "divisive"?

Also read online about the careers of brave men such as Hector P. Garcia, who organized the American G.I.

Forum of Texas, and attorney Gustavo C. Garcia. The latter "played the race card" before the U.S. Supreme Court in the Hernandez decision in 1954. The court ruled that local jury selection was more than colorblind: "[I]t taxes our credulity to say that mere chance resulted in there being no members of [Mexican American] class among the over 6,000 jurors called in the past 25 years [in that Texas county]."

Whatever the results of the fall elections, for me the "dream team" controversy recalls the great speech of Martin Luther King Jr. before the Lincoln Memorial on Feb. 28, 1963. King declared that he had a dream: "Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children." Let us not let current political spinning tarnish the splendor of King's martyred dream or make us forget that the doors of which he spoke are not yet fully opened.

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