

THE CHICANO MOVEMENT

1965-1975

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concentrated on direct action in the schools, launching a series of student walkouts in Denver. The Crusade also participated in Dr. King's 1968 Poor People's March on Washington, DC, where Gonzales and Tijerina led the Chicano contingent.

By now, the idea had gained currency that militant student groups throughout the country needed a unified organization; and Gonzales, the self-appointed leader of the movement, took the initiative in sponsoring a Chicano Youth Liberation Front, a national convention of barrio youth, in Denver on March 27-31, 1969. The convention attracted more than fifteen hundred Chicanos. It was there that the *Spiritual Plan of Aztlán*, a call for an autonomous Chicano homeland, was unveiled, and the formation of an independent Chicano party was projected.²⁸ A second youth conference met in Denver in May of the following year. Gonzales was now firmly committed to the idea of a separatist political party, and immediately after the 1970 conference, he and his allies launched the Colorado Raza Unida Party.

The genesis of the Raza Unida initiative occurred four years earlier. On March 28, 1966, a number of prominent Mexicano delegates walked out of a conference in Albuquerque sponsored by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in protest of that agency's failure to address the pressing problems of the barrios. "The walkout in Albuquerque," it has been observed, "marked the first time that the middle-class leadership had engaged in an act of collective protest against the government."²⁹ President Johnson, looking to placate the dissidents, promised a White House conference of Hispanic leaders to deal with Mexican American issues.

But it soon became obvious that LBJ was having second thoughts about the concession. He had other worries at the time, first and foremost, the conflict in Vietnam. Moreover, he realized that at the proposed meeting, delegates would pressure the administration on a number of potentially embarrassing issues, including the war itself and recognition of the UFW. As the historian Julie Leininger Pycior has ably demonstrated, while he was sympathetic to many Mexicano causes—a compassion stemming from early teaching experience at a "Mexican" school in Cotulla, Texas—LBJ also had to assuage conservative Democrats and political supporters back home who represented agribusiness and ranching interests.³⁰ Moreover, he realized that many Hispanics, especially outside of Texas, were leaning toward his rivals for the Democratic nomination for the presidency, senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Mexicano leaders pressed for the conference, but the administration was evasive. Frustration set in. Even his most staunch Mexicano allies in Texas, Dr. Félix García, Vicente Ximenes, and other G.I. Forum leaders, counseled that he extend some kind of olive branch.

Eventually, the beleaguered Johnson offered a compromise. He would establish an Interagency Committee on Mexican American Affairs, to be chaired by Ximenes. The Committee, in turn, would sponsor a conference in El Paso in late October 1967, when LBJ was scheduled to meet Mexican president Gustavo Díaz