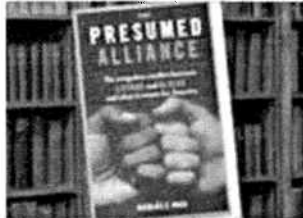




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THE PRESUMED ALLIANCE

May 24, 2004



The author of "The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and What It Means for America," examines the economic, social and political realities that create tension between these two groups.

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RAY SUAREZ: The book is "The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict Between Latinos and Blacks and what it means for America." The author is Nicholas Vaca, an attorney in the San Francisco Bay area and a visiting scholar at the University of California at Berkeley. The book examines the economic, social and political realities that sometimes unite and often divide the country's two largest minority groups.



Unspoken conflict

Nicholas Vaca, I think a lot of people from outside these two groups might say, "look, they've got a lot of the same battles, whether it's housing, education, employment, access to elective office." How did it end up being an unspoken conflict?



NICHOLAS VACA: Well, I think actually you had this conflict going on even in the '60s and the '70s, though in a subdued basis. What has happened, I think, is largely the Latino population explosion. I was really piqued to do the research and write this book because of the 2000 census, which predicted that Latinos would outnumber African Americans by the year 2005. In fact, in 2003 that came to be the fact.

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So I was intrigued by that. I think what has happened now is Latinos are growing and trying to assert their own political empowerment, you're having this conflict, even though you're absolutely right-- they both suffer from the same kind of racial profiling, discrimination, prejudice. Those similar kinds of problems affect both groups, but in fact you still have a conflict because it is to some extent a zero-sum game, and each group wants to have its own for its own.

RAY SUAREZ: In a lot of the places where these two groups live in large numbers, they're large metropolitan areas, and the ones that you cover in the book, they are also much, much the goal, city hall is much the goal of both groups. How come it ended up not being an alliance but a battle?

NICHOLAS VACA: I think because there is a perception by both groups that if one group gets into power, the other group is shut out. Let me give you the example of Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa thought that he could be able to sway the African American voters to vote for him.

Now, it didn't turn out to be the case. When the election came about, 80 percent of the African Americans voted for James Hahn, a white candidate.

Now, one of the reasons why they did that is because the African American community in Los Angeles had a long history with the Hahn family, beginning with Kenny Hahn, James' father, who represented south central, delivered for south central year in and year out. But the other reason why the African Americans were afraid of the Latino and didn't vote for him was they thought that if they got him into power, that he would throw them out. This is something that I quote in the book.

There was an unfounded fear, as far as can I make out, because Antonio Villaraigosa has a history and had a history of working with African Americans from high school through college. So I think it was a misperception but it was a perception that really affected the way the African Americans voted in that mayoral election.

The situation in Houston

RAY SUAREZ: You tell



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NICHOLAS VACA
Author

the story of Houston, where in the way you tell it, it looks like ethnicity trumped ideology, that Latinos voted in large numbers against a black candidate who might have shared a lot of their views on the issues.

NICHOLAS VACA: Yeah, I thought in fact what Lee Brown did in Houston as the incumbent mayor was what every African American thought he should do in terms of relating to the Latino community. He had a Mexican-American political adviser. He created a Latino advisory committee that he met with on a weekly basis. He had done everything that he should have done to extend a helping hand, to build relations for the Latino community.

But I think what happened in Houston was that you had a growing frustration with the Latino population, who saw their numbers in rather significant portions of the population, but not reflected in the big issue or the big office, which was the mayoral office. And it's a frustration that grows from the fact that even though you have large Latino populations in many areas, you have a lot of immigrants-- whether they're legal or illegal-- and if they're illegal, they certainly can't vote; if they're legal, they don't always become U.S. citizens; if they become U.S. citizens, they're not always registered to vote; and if they're registered to vote, they don't always vote.

So you have this large number of disenfranchised Latinos who think that somehow they should be enfranchised because of the numbers, but in reality don't have the voting power to put their own into office. In Houston I think they saw the opportunity for doing that even though the candidate was a Cuban American, not a Mexican American.

Two different cities

RAY SUAREZ: In Miami you tell stories of how a Latino majority seems not to be politically open to the entreaties, the efforts to make inroads by a black population that is of longer duration.



NICHOLAS VACA: That's correct. That is a really good example of what is going on in the United States. I'd like to

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compare Miami with what is going on in Compton. In Compton you have an entrenched African American power structure that is not willing to open up and include Latinos.

In Miami, you have the reverse: You have Latinos who are not willing to allow blacks to come in and share the power. The difference is in time the Latino population will become large enough in Compton to put their own into power. That is not going to happen in Miami.

And I think for the African American community, this book represents a real challenge because it really addresses what is going to continue to go on and grow in the coming years, and that is the Latino population is going to increase dramatically and continue to affect the African American population.

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Looking ahead

RAY SUAREZ: You purposely shy away from making prescriptions for these two groups of aspiring people. But when you look at the demography, when you look at where populations are going and changing, and the power structures and balances are changing in the country, are we just set for more of the same in urban America, or will there be coalitions based around issues instead of ethnicity, around winning political power instead of figuring out who's going to divvy it up?



You are going to have, unfortunately, a painful process of readjustment as the Latino population grows and dominates. By the year 2050, it is predicted by the U.S. Census that Latinos will represent 25 percent of the population. I happen to think that's a conservative estimate.

NICHOLAS VACA
Author

NICHOLAS VACA: Yeah, I think that's true. I think eventually you are going to have a situation where the groups may come around and rally around certain issues.

You are going to have, unfortunately, a painful process of readjustment as the Latino population grows and dominates. By the year 2050, it is predicted by the U.S. Census that Latinos will represent 25 percent of the population. I happen to think that's a conservative estimate.

We've seen demonstrations already that that number will increase based on changing policies on immigration -- the most recent example is Bush's proposal. It is going to be a painful process because there is going to be a realignment. And there's going to have to be a reassessment of each group towards each other.

You know, in the '60s and '70s, even in the '80s, these two groups kind of understood their histories and their backgrounds and the fact that there was a mutual struggle at one point to work for better housing, affirmative action, et cetera, et cetera.



That's... that is not always a common history anymore, particularly with the new immigrants, who have no sense or no concept of the history of the African American in the United

States. I see it is going to be very difficult, particularly as the Latinos come into areas that they traditionally have not occupied, such as Atlanta, North Carolina, South Carolina, which have been traditionally African American.

RAY SUAREZ: Nicolas Vaca, the author of "The Presumed Alliance," thanks for being with us.

NICHOLAS VACA: Thank you for having me.



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