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Fissures cracking the black-Hispanic bloc

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Last summer, the Census Bureau announced that Latinos had surpassed blacks as the nation's largest minority, with blacks making up 13.1 percent of the population in 2002 and Latinos 13.4 percent. Years in the making, that statistical shift came as no surprise. Yet it has captured the attention of pundits and social commentators - Latino, black and white - who have been grappling with its meaning.

*Nicolas C. Vaca argues in his new book, *The Presumed Alliance: The Unspoken Conflict between Latinos and Blacks and What it Means for America* (Rayo, 2004), that the groups are very different and growing further apart as both focus more narrowly on their own interests. As a political tract, *The Presumed Alliance* heralds an American future in which "The size of the Latino population as well as its diversity demand that its voice be heard and given the weight its numbers merit."*

A practicing attorney, Vaca graduated from Harvard Law School in 1981 after earning his doctorate in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He was in Denver recently and spoke with Thom Beal, deputy editorial page editor.

Beal: Address if you will the demographics of the Latino "tsunami," as you call it. How will it change the dynamics of race and ethnicity in America?

Vaca: As the Latino population expands - right now it's 38 million and growing - the paradigm for race, ethnic and religious relations in the United States is going to have to necessarily change. Traditionally, it's been a black-white paradigm. For some time now, Latinos have been left out of the equation. Today, that's no longer possible. The Latino quest for inclusion can no longer be ignored. How this impacts race relations is the main concern of my book.

The growth is significant numerically in a sense that we are now the largest minority. There are certain African-American journalists who will argue that at least a million of those Latinos identify themselves racially as black. It's also true that if you subtract that million and look at what's left, you can't say there's a lot of cohesion in the larger Latino community. Latino is made up of numerous groups - Cuban-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Rican-Americans, Dominican-Americans, Guatemalan-Americans, and on and on and on. But the impact in terms of sheer numbers can't be denied.

The president's guest-worker proposal is a good example of how the numbers alone are having an impact. There's little doubt that the result of such a program will be an increase in the number of Latinos in the United States. And yet, I think with or without it, you'll still see the numbers grow dramatically. The prediction was that the Latino population would outstrip the African-American population between the years 2005 and 2010. In fact, it happened in 2002. More significant however is the trajectory. By the year 2050, Latinos will be a quarter of the nation's population.

Beal: Do you support the president's proposal for immigration reform?

Vaca: I don't know that I support it exactly. My take on it is that it is very much like the old *braceros* program of the 1942-to-1963 period. It doesn't lead to permanent residency, it doesn't lead directly to citizenship, it only allows people to work on a temporary basis to fulfill the country's labor needs and then go back to Mexico



Stephen Chemin © AP/2001

The Rev. Al Sharpton, left, and New York Democratic mayoral candidate Fernando Ferrer, right, walk along Brooklyn's Fulton Street following a news conference at which Sharpton announced his support for the Brooklyn borough president in the 2001 mayor's race. A subsequent feud between Ferrer and eventual nominee Mark Green chilled Green's relations with black leadership and splintered the city's traditional black-Hispanic coalition, thus contributing to Green's loss to Republican Michael Bloomberg.

or whatever their country of origin.

I've spoken to a lot of Latino journalists and business leaders, as well as the leaders of Latino organizations. The more conservative of them favor the proposal. They say, what's wrong with this? It legalizes long-existing channels of immigration. In authorizing people to work here legally, it allows them to emerge from the shadows. If they can work, they can continue to send money back home. And for many, that means they can go back and forth without having to worry about getting deported or getting stuck on one side of the border and being unable to cross back over. For some this means earning enough to go back to Mexico and live in relative wealth and comfort.

But most of the liberal Latinos I've talked to don't like it. They say it doesn't lead to enfranchisement. They say it's a repeat of what happened in the 1950s, when there were roundups of immigrants and mass deportations.

But I think those times are long over. We just don't have the same type of labor needs or the same kinds of attitudes. I think the rise of the civil rights movement also makes a difference. Fewer Americans can accept the idea of just bringing people here to work temporarily and then demanding they go back to Mexico.

Personally, I don't think the president's proposal as he's outlined it is going to fly. I don't think it's going to see the light of day.

Beal: The Democrats have put forth a plan with a provision for earned legalization.

Vaca: Exactly. And I think that's really what everybody is saying. Even on the political left you've seen a real change in attitude. We're not going to see 1986 all over again, when we had a blanket amnesty program. About 3 million people received amnesty then, and later their family members benefited from the program. It was a tremendous program in terms of giving legal residency and U.S. citizenship to Mexicans and other illegal immigrants.

Beal: In your book, you argue that blacks and Latinos have never been very united in their struggle against the white establishment.

Vaca: I think it may be surprising to some people that there's never really been a disenfranchised front or rainbow coalition in America.

The idea that blacks and Latinos had to move forward together or not at all is a myth. The two groups have and continue to compete for jobs, education and a voice in the political life of the country. You only have to look at some of the 2001 mayoral races in places like Los Angeles and Houston, or the way the black-Latino coalition fell apart in New York City, to see how these tensions play out in the political arena.

Beal: A significant part of your book explores the perception among African-Americans that Latinos haven't suffered discrimination in the same way they have. That exceptionalism, you say, is another source of tension between the two groups. You in fact take exception to their proprietary claim to leadership of the civil rights movement.

Vaca: It's also been referred to as the "suffering Olympics." But the question is, who suffered more? In the book I say quite frankly that I think Native Americans can trump us all.

No, I'm not diminishing the black experience in any way. But there is indeed a widespread perception among African-Americans that Latinos have not suffered as they have. It is true that relatively new Latino arrivals, newer immigrants, have not. But I also argue that certainly the history of the Mexican-Americans, especially in the Southwest, is replete with discrimination, with the application of Jim-Crow laws, segregation, oppression and lynchings.

Beal: Can you provide some examples?

Vaca: Well, as I write, the magnitude is illustrated by the case of Mendez v. Westminster School District of Orange County, in which these California school districts had engaged in a systematic and purposeful

segregation of Mexican-American children so they would all have to go to the same schools. Here was a blatant school segregation, in violation of the 14th Amendment. It was segregation with same kind of impact felt by blacks in the South. From Los Angeles to Texas there were signs at public swimming pools that would say "No Mexicans Allowed." In Texas it was more often "No Dogs or Mexicans Allowed."

I can relate my own experience when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley in 1961, when I was refused housing because I was Mexican. How did I know I was discriminated against? I knew because an Irish-American friend of mine tried to rent the same room, and he got it. And we both agreed that it was basically because I was Mexican. I cite these only to say that Latinos have experienced discrimination despite the African-American contention that it's just not to the same degree, so Latinos shouldn't have the same expectations for redress.

Entitlement was in fact the reason for the fight over municipal employment in Los Angeles, where African-Americans were saying municipal employment should be a reparation for their suffering in America. In Compton, Calif., where blacks ruled local politics and the school board, with no exceptions for interested Latino outsiders, it was the same argument: "You don't get a payback for being able to cross the border successfully three or four times."

Now I don't make the argument that Latino and black experiences are parallel, only that Latinos have their own history of suffering, discrimination and prejudice. It's a largely unwritten history, though there are a few exceptions, including one I read recently about a spate of lynchings of Mexicans in south Texas in the early 20th century.

So, it is a point of divide and a point of concern for both Latinos and African-Americans. Frankly, I think we have to get beyond it, which is why I also argue in my book that we have to stop trying to trump each other's suffering.

Beal: Can we go back to the influence Latinos had on the civil rights movement? You cite several examples in which Latinos were actually trailblazers.

Vaca: Well, the 1928 case of *Vela v. the Board of Trustees of the Charlotte School District* was one of the first challenges to the segregation of Mexican children in Texas. In South Texas in the 1930s, you had the creation of the League of United Latin American Citizens, whose goal was to enable Mexican-Americans to participate in America's political and cultural life. It also organized to eliminate all discriminatory practice based on race.

The LULAC went on to spearhead groundbreaking school desegregation litigation in Texas that presaged *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The *Mendez* case, which I already mentioned, was rendered in 1946, while another important similar case, *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District of Bastrop County* presaged *Brown v. Board of Education* by approximately six years. Both cases laid much of the legal groundwork for *Brown's* eventual victory.

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