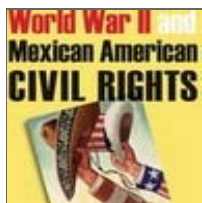

Proving Their "Americanness"

A commentary on historian Richard Griswold del Castillo's book "World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights"

By Kat Avila | Published on LatinoLA: August 24, 2011



I was researching submarines, which led me to the section of the library where all the World War II books are. There I spotted Richard Griswold del Castillo's book **WORLD WAR II AND MEXICAN AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS** (Austin: Univ. of Texas, 2008). Griswold del Castillo is a Chicano historian and a faculty emeritus at San Diego State University, Chicana and Chicano Studies Department. He edited the book and it's dedicated to Richard Steele, whose essays are included.

The Mexican American civil rights movement gained a lot of momentum following the return of servicemen who discovered that despite proving their "Americanness", were still discriminated against. As one serviceman was told, he was just a civilian now. The national origin of his ancestors determined he was a "second-class" citizen.

One of the book's essays, Steele's "Mexican Americans in 1940: Perceptions and Conditions," mentions a 1942 poll where people of English, Dutch, and Scandinavian origin finished first. Mexicans were viewed as "definitely inferior," and even placed behind the Japanese, whose country the United States was at war against.

I browsed Griswold del Castillo's book with interest as it confirmed much of what I knew from stories my father told of growing up in Los Angeles, that is, in Boyle Heights and El Monte. Russian Jews populated Boyle Heights. Not far from my father's childhood home was Little Tokyo, whose Japanese American residents were rounded up and interned in forlorn places like Manzanar.

The treatment of the latter resonated within fellow minority communities. That history still has repercussions. After September 11th, there were Americans who advocated for the internment of Muslim Americans. U.S.-born Japanese Americans who had been children in those camps lobbied against it, as did a coalition of other civil-rights groups.

It is my belief that represented within each ethnic and national group is the full spectrum of human personalities. History is how those personalities play out in the social environments they inherit. When good leaders are able to reach their potential, then society benefits. When ignorance and hysteria inform decisions, then society suffers.

One of the things that stayed with me after I read Griswold del Castillo's book was the role of Mexican American civic organizations and Mexican American lawyers in advancing civil rights. You gotta have lawyers if you live in the U.S.

For some of you, Griswold del Castillo's book will be a trip down memory lane. For a younger generation, the book will help you understand the undertow pulling at Americans to justify and support such heinous legislation as legalizing racial profiling and dismantling minority American programs.

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