Center for Immigration Studies

Memorandum

October 2009

Raul Grijalva
From Chicano Radical to Congressman

By Jerry Kammer

In 2006, *Esquire* magazine wrote that Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-Ariz.) represented a "brand of Latino populism [that] will likely become commonplace in decades to come." The observation was an acknowledgement of the growing demographic and political power of Latinos and a prediction about the politicians it will produce. Grijalva, 61, remains committed to many of the ideals he pursued as a young radical in Tucson, even as he has developed a talent for building coalitions among fellow liberals, often across ethnic lines. This profile is a study of Grijalva's political origins and evolution.

When Raul Grijalva was a sociology student at the University of Arizona in the late 1960s, he was inspired to become politically active by Cesar Chavez, the charismatic founder of the United Farm Workers Union who led boycotts, marches, and strikes to appeal to the conscience of the nation and improve the lives of migrant farm workers.

More than three decades later, in one of his first speeches as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Grijalva called for a national holiday to honor Chavez. The labor leader was a native of Yuma, a town in Grijalva's district. Grijalva hailed his dedication to the "historic struggle to give voice to the voiceless and empower the poor and powerless, inspiring a people beyond the limits and barriers that had been artificially placed before them."[1]

Grijalva's life in politics has been defined by his determination to knock down barriers in the way of Mexican-Americans and immigrants and, as their numbers grew, to harness their political power. He is a tenacious advocate for Mexican immigrants, whose numbers surged with their great influx into Arizona in the mid-1990s, particularly after the 1994 peso collapse.

Although he sees himself as an advocate for low-wage workers, he has also championed immigration reforms that would greatly increase the supply of low-wage workers allowed into the country. (He told a group of immigration advocates in 2007 that, "in a perfect, perfect world there would be open borders.") This would potentially aggravate job competition and put downward pressure on wages.

The potential costs of such a policy do not seem to concern Grijalva. But they concern many Mexican-Americans, including the large number who voted in 2004 for Arizona's controversial Proposition 200 to deny services to illegal immigrants. And so, while Grijalva says he is always mindful of his mother's admonition not to forget where he came from, he may be overlooking the negative effects of massive immigration in his own community.

Grijalva's advocacy for expansive immigration policies, legal status for illegal immigrants, expansive social services, strong labor protections, and tough environmental protections place him in the ranks of the most liberal members of the House of Representatives. They have also propelled him to the co-chairmanship of the 77-member Congressional Progressive Caucus.

Grijalva's unpretentious personal style reflects a populism rooted in the barrio where he grew up. Acknowledging his aversion to neckties, he once declared that he owned just two — one for weddings and one for funerals. He frequently comes to his office in casual attire, though he keeps a dress shirt, jacket, and tie ready for a quick change. He is known for his unruly moustache and dry wit. The rumpled Congressman once quipped that when his campaign was looking for a slogan, he had considered "Grijalva: Not just another pretty face."[2]

Early Years

Born in 1948, Grijalva grew up in Tucson as Arizona's population was booming in a way that influenced his initial approach to politics. Mexican-American professor Armando Navarro writes that Grijalva saw "that immigration

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from the East and Midwest had considerably changed the demographic face of Tucson, relegating Mexicanos to a minority" with little political power.[3]

Grijalva was a young man at the peak of El Movimiento, the Chicano civil rights movement. He had been primed for activism by his experiences in public school. "I was actually made to feel I wanted to be an Anglo," he told a Tucson newspaper in 1975. "I realized what I was doing and my embarrassment turned to anger."[4]

In an interview at his Capitol Hill office, Grijalva described a key moment in the transformation. It came at the age of 13 or 14, when he won an award for academic achievement. But because he was embarrassed about his mother, who grew up in the copper mining town of Ajo and spoke no English, he decided not to tell her about the awards ceremony. When she learned about it later, he claimed to have forgotten to tell her. He then felt ashamed of himself.

"That got into my head pretty strong….I think it kept building and building," Grijalva said. "The first reaction was anger. The first reaction was to get even with whoever is doing this. And at the time it was racial."[5]

Grijalva wrote for the Movimiento newspaper *Coraje!* (the word means both "courage" and "anger") whose mimeographed front page featured a clenched-fist Chicano saying "My race first" and the motto "Better to die on your feet than live on your knees." In 1969 the paper published a poem Grijalva wrote in a tone of smoldering outrage at a racist's "clammy hand of hate."[6]

In 1970 Grijalva helped lead a confrontation with the Tucson City Council, demanding that a "people's park" be carved out of a city-owned golf course in a largely Mexican-American neighborhood. After months of protests, some of which turned violent, the group prevailed and the city built a park and community center. Twenty-nine years later, Grijalva said the experience helped form him politically. "It gave me a political backbone," he said.[7]

The story has a pointed coda. Through a local vote, the park was named for Joaquin Murrieta, a legendary figure from the middle of the 19th century described in the *Los Angles Times* as "California's first celebrity outlaw" whose popularity surged in the 1960s, as "Murrieta enjoyed a political blossoming of sorts among Chicano activists who read in his banditry an early resistance to white racism against Latinos in the Southwest."[8]

Grijalva called the name change "push back at the mayor and city council."[9]

Grijalva became a leader in such radical groups as the Chicano Liberation Committee, which confronted the administration of the University of Arizona with demands for the establishment of a Mexican-American Studies program and the recruitment of Chicano students and faculty.

He was also active in MEChA, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan, the student group that called the Southwest "Aztlan," the spiritual home of the Chicano people. The acronym, the Spanish word for "fuse," was evocative of the group's confrontational, nationalist ideology, which took its sharpest formulation in the group's motto: "Por la raza todo, fuera de la raza nada" — "For the race, everything, outside the race, nothing."

But even as Grijalva immersed himself in the politics of confrontation, he was also committed to community service programs, particularly those directed at the school dropout problem that has been a lifelong Grijalva concern. He would eventually become director of the El Pueblo Neighborhood Center in Tucson.

In his history of the radical Raza Unida Party (RUP), Mexican-American scholar Armando Navarro writes that Grijalva became a party leader in Arizona. As Grijalva explained to Navarro, he and his fellow activists weren't discouraged that the party's limited base gave it slight chance of winning political power. "We decided to go into elective politics more in the sense of an educational tool rather than an opportunity for winning," he said.[10]

Political Office

Grijalva was so militant that he alienated some members of Tucson's Mexican-American community. After losing in his first bid for elective office, a 1972 run for a seat on the school board, he began to cultivate a less radical image. Navarro writes that Grijalva "decided to dissociate himself from RUP," and adopted "a much more middle-of-the-road image and approach" that included outreach to non-Hispanics.[11]

It was a maturing politician's measured accommodation to political necessity. "I discovered that I can't do it alone and we can't do it alone," he said in the 2009 interview. He studied the activism of the Rev. Martin Luther King and Saul Alinsky, learning that "it was about coalition building; it was about incremental gain."[12]

In 1974 Grijalva won a seat on the school board, where he served until 1986. Three years later he won a seat on the Pima County Board of Supervisors. There he combined populist advocacy for the poor with environmental activism that appealed to the affluent community around the University of Arizona that was

also part of his district. He also built ties to organized labor.

In his 13 years as a Supervisor, Grijalva's signature moments were his clashes with the real estate developers who chafed at the regulations he imposed on their projects. "I grew up in the beautiful Sonoran Desert, surrounded by mountains," said Grijalva. "I could see for myself that because of unrestrained growth, the stunning public spaces I'd grown up with were disappearing."[13]

Grijalva's greatest victory came in a zoning dispute over the sprawling Canoa Ranch south of Tucson where his father worked as a bracero, a contract laborer, beginning in 1945. A real estate developer who had bought the land sought zoning for 6,100 homes. But after resistance led by Grijalva, the project was severely limited and the county bought much of the land for a park.

Grijalva was instrumental in forging the county's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, which shielded prime desert land from the developer's blade. As a coalition that supported the plan noted, it was an effort to "determine the way the area will grow for the next 50 years while protecting everything that makes Pima County a great place to live."[14]

Ironically, Grijalva's path to the House of Representatives was paved with Arizona's booming 1990s growth, which provided the state with two more congressional districts after the 2000 census.

Grijalva ran in 2002 in District 7, where more than half the population was Hispanic and where Democrats outnumbered Republicans 2-1. Once he won the Democratic field, he was home free. In subsequent elections he has never received less than 61 percent of the vote. Facing no serious threat from the right, he has fortified his left flank with one of the most liberal records in Congress.

Mexican Immigration

Grijalva calls illegal immigrants "economic refugees" whose human dignity is violated by immigration policies that don't accommodate their movement to U.S. labor markets. "I don't care how many fences you build, from one end of the border to the other," he said. "The essential issue and pull that people feel to feed their families and to sustain themselves is ongoing and will continue."[15]

Many experts have said Mexico's more than 100-year history of heavy emigration is a painful legacy of the country's gaping social and economic divide. Former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda notes that Mexico has remained "a society terribly riven by class, race, gender, age, region, and future, where a middle- and upper-class minority segregates and discriminates against the vast majority of the population. It is one of the most unequal societies around, though certainly not one of the poorest."[16]

Mexican scholar Luis Rubio has written that Mexico "has become a nest of privileges where only a very small fraction of people can achieve their aspirations. The rest have virtually no possibility of envisioning opportunities different from those that their social origin imposed upon them…. Everything seems organized and built to make life difficult for the population, to cancel opportunities, and to close spaces for their development."[17]

Rubio has also written: "Emigration is an easy solution to a country whose population and politicians have been unwilling and incapable of making the tough decisions" needed to provide opportunities to its people. "In the absence of the escape valve that the American economy represents, Mexico would have had to face up to its challenges a long time ago."[18]

Grijalva is also sharply critical of Mexico's social divisions. "My dad used to tell me that we're lucky to live in this country (the United States) because if we were in Mexico, half the people wake up every day looking to screw the other half," he said.[19]

But Grijalva says the United States bears much of the responsibility for the decades of mass Mexican emigration to the United States. "Instead of talking about invasions and using fear tactics and putting more military on the border," he said, "we need to talk about root problems — how the Mexican economy has suffered after NAFTA, the historic patterns of migration that have been changed by U.S. policy, the history and culture of the border region."[20]

Long before NAFTA, however, Grijalva's hero Cesar Chavez said Mexico itself was responsible for the mass emigration. In 1979 he declared in a speech at the National Press Club in Washington, "The problem is not going to be solved until Mexico does something about its own rural economy."[21]

Meanwhile, Grijalva wants welcoming U.S. policies for Mexican labor. He invokes the bracero days of his father, whose-sepia toned photograph has a place of honor in his congressional office, to urge accommodation of those still fleeing Mexico's economic misery. "Back then, seasonal migration from Mexico was a way of life," he said, "but now we've put up these horrendous walls."[22]

Of course, illegal immigration has exploded since the 1960s, when it came mostly from a handful of states in Mexico. Its spread led to the 1986 amnesty law that provided legal status to about three million

illegal immigrants. And that amnesty led to even greater expansion of illegal immigration networks on both sides of the border, so that now the call is for legalization of 12 million illegal immigrants.

Like other supporters of "comprehensive" immigration reform, Grijalva wants a path to citizenship not just for those 12 million. He also wants to extend the privilege to hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers who would initially be classified as "temporary."

Even that massive expansion of legal immigration, as envisioned in the 2007 bill expansively dubbed the STRIVE Act, for "Security Through Regularized Immigration in a Vibrant Economy," was not enough for some of Grijalva's oldest and closest friends and allies in Tucson. During a meeting at the El Pueblo Neighborhood Center in Tucson, Grijalva tried to calm their anger at the bill's provisions for border enforcement.

According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, Grijalva responded: "In a perfect, perfect world we'd have an open border, but ... with immigration we have to deal with reality."[23] Some enforcement, he acknowledged, was the price for the sweeping reforms he wanted.

Sharp Elbows

Grijalva's pragmatism has its limits. In his determination to defend illegal immigrants, he can be quick to swing the sharp elbows and deploy the angry rhetoric of his days as a Chicano radical.

In 2006, when Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano called for increased National Guard presence on the border to stem illegal immigration and drug trafficking that had spread violence across the state, Grijalva complained that the decision was an insult to Mexican Americans that was rooted in racial considerations.

"Anglo-Saxon men make the strategy for her," he said in an interview with a Spanish-language newspaper in Yuma. Speaking later with an English-language paper, he said that he hadn't meant that the governor's policy was motivated by racism, only that it was "not inclusive."[24]

In 2008, Grijalva blasted Democratic leaders in the House who allowed hearings on legislation to boost border security and crack down on employers of illegal immigrants: HR 4088, the Secure America with Verification and Enforcement (SAVE) Act, introduced November 6, 2007. The move was an election-year tactic, providing cover for the large group of freshmen Democrats who represented conservative districts, including the bill's sponsor, North Carolina's Heath Shuler. He also blasted Democratic leaders as "spineless" for not moving ahead with the controversial, comprehensive reforms he favored.[25]

In the spring of 2009, Grijalva lashed out at Pima County's sheriff, who had linked South Tucson's crime rate and social problems to illegal immigration. Sheriff Dupnik, a Democrat, had said: "Whether you are talking about school performance, or dropouts, or gang affiliation, or one-parent homes or poverty, you name the social problem, that's where they are all concentrated. That has to do with illegal immigration."[26]

Grijalva blasted Dupnik: "To make a categorical statement that all the crime and the dysfunction in Tucson and Pima County emanates from one part of the community is outrageous and it's stereotypical and … creates racial tension where they shouldn't be," he said.[27]

The spokesman for Arizona's other borderlands congressional representative, Democrat Gabrielle Giffords, had a different view of Dupnik's concerns, saying: "Sheriff Dupnik is expressing a sense of frustration that is keenly felt by Arizona's border communities. Illegal immigration is exacting a tremendous toll on our schools, hospitals, law enforcement, and social-service agencies."[28]

Grijalva's sharpest barbs have been directed at armed civilian groups that in 2002 began patrolling the Mexican border to spot illegal crossers and report them to the Border Patrol. He called them "racist" and "cockroaches."[29] They labeled him "MEChA boy."[30]

Ties to Environmentalist Groups

Grijalva has continued to pursue the environmental concerns he developed on the Pima County Board of Supervisors. He has grown increasingly important to environmental groups in his position as chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands. After the election of President Obama, they lobbied to have Grijalva appointed as Secretary of the Interior, a position that Grijalva wanted badly.

But after Colorado Sen. Ken Salazar was named to head Interior, Grijalva has remained active on land and resource issues. He sponsored legislation that would have designated the Tumacacori Highlands, a rugged expanse just north of the Arizona-Mexican border, as a wilderness. That proposal, which drew criticism that it would hamstring the Border Patrol, has attracted little congressional support.

Meanwhile, Grijalva is advancing legislation that would require the Border Patrol to consult closely with federal land managers and tribal governments to

develop border enforcement strategies to minimize the environmental damage caused by border enforcement. That legislation has drawn enthusiastic support from environmental organizations. The Sierra Club has been especially active in promoting it.

In late 2008, Grijalva issued a report that also drew rave reviews from environmental groups. It accused the Bush administration of pursuing a "concerted strategy" to reduce protection for federal lands, "opening up these lands for every type of private, commercial, and extractive industry possible."[31]

But while Grijalva has frequently shown determination to restrain commercial forces in order to protect the environment, he is consistently willing to accommodate their hunger for low-wage immigrant labor. The policies he supports would ensure that American employers, from fast food franchisers to farmers to roofers and restaurateurs, have an inexhaustible supply of low-wage immigrant labor. They would also ensure massive growth of the nation's population over the next 50 years, with enormous consequences both for other low-wage workers and for the environment of Arizona and other states.

Grijalva's alliances with environmental groups have helped to advance his immigration policies, and to muffle concerns about their consequences. His views on immigration are an extension of the ethnocentric politics he began pursuing as a young student activist in the 1960s. As he said during his first campaign for Congress, "We're not running to remake ourselves. We're running to reaffirm ourselves."

Immigration Crosscurrents

Four decades after he became a student activist determined to knock down the barriers facing Mexican Americans, Grijalva is confident of victory in immigration policy. Advocates of restrictive immigration might prevail for awhile, he told a reporter for the *New York Times*, who wrote: "But with the Hispanic electorate set to swell as the children of migrants come of age, Mr. Grijalva said that history was on the other side." Grijalva drove the point home: "You might be getting a momentary bump," he said, "but in the long run you are going to lose."[32]

Some analysts think such a transformation will aggravate tensions. Mexican-American historian Armando Navarro has written that "as long as the immigration exodus [from Mexico] and high Latino birthrates continue, both the browning of the nation and the re-Mexicanoization of the Southwest will intensify.[33] He added the ominous observation that this process "will continue to heighten conflicts between Mexicanos and other ethnic and racial groups."[34]

But in the interview at his office, Grijalva acknowledged that there are also sharp differences among his Mexican-American constituents on immigration policy. That divide was clear in the 2004 vote on Arizona's Proposition 200, a statewide initiative that sought to curtail public services for illegal immigrants. According to exit polls, some 47 percent of Latinos voted for the proposition, even after a well-funded campaign that branded it as racist, anti-Hispanic, and anti-immigrant.[35]

Grijalva said he could see the anxieties among Tucson Latinos as he walked door to door to urge a vote against it. "I said the feedback from third, fourth, second generation Mexican Americans is not good," he recalled in the interview. "I said once that this is a conversation within our own community that we don't have, about those who just arrived and those who are here. …I think it's a very uncomfortable conversation. I think you can talk to a lot of Latino leaders and they don't even want to touch the subject. It's an uncomfortable conversation, but a conversation that needs to occur."

Grijalva, long determined to knock down barriers in the way of his people, may need to acknowledge that the constant influx of people from Mexico, the land of his father, itself poses barriers to Mexican Americans seeking the American dream. His political role model, Cesar Chavez, was so upset by the use of illegal immigrant workers as strikebreakers in the fields of Arizona and California that he called on the federal government to remove them.

Chavez forcefully repeated that call in a 1979 appearance at the National Press Club in Washington, where one reporter asked a question often directed at those who demand action against illegal immigration: "Do you feel uneasy being allied with the reactionary groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, in calling for stricter enforcement of immigration laws?"

Chavez responded that he would feel the same even if his mother were one of the strike breakers because "people are being hurt and being destroyed, and with the complicity and with the help of the federal government."[36]

Now Raul Grijalva is part of the federal government, responsible for shaping the policies that will shape the future of his state and his country. The borderlands Congressman stands between the lessons of his past and the sometimes conflicting demands of the future.

End Notes

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[4] Adolfo Quesada, *Arizona Daily Star*, June 15, 1975.
[5] Author interview with Rep. Grijalva, September 22, 2009.
[6] *Coraje*, publication of the Mexican-American Liberation Committee, Tucson, March 1969. This is the text of Grijalva's poem, titled "a friend," and written without punctuation or capital letters: "see him reaching for your soul/he hasn't felt your clammy/hand of hate/he hasn't heard you call/him spic/nor ever thinks you should/his father weeds your garden/and picks your fruits/and you bestow on him intolerance/and lies/he dreams of being you/but you've agreed he/never will."
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[35] The Associated Press, exit poll data from the Arizona election for Proposition 200, concerning proof of citizenship or immigration status, November 3, 2004. See also: *Wall Street Journal* opinion archives, April 4, 2005, at http://www.opinionjournal.com/diary/?id=110006510.
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