The Genesis of Binational Latino Advocacy on Trade

From Central America to Mexico

By Antonio Gonzalez, September 4, 2018

“Oh no that “carancho” is at it again,” blurted SVRI President Andy Hernandez. I was surprised because back then Andy was a United Methodist Reverend and intertemperate language was unusual for him. But I had to agree.

SVRI’s Latin America Project – my responsibility had been focused on Central America for three years now, and Andy had been focused on legislative redistricting.

Thus, SVRI was distracted as the Bush Administration moved rapidly to clear a path for negotiation and approval of a free trade agreement with Mexico.

Into the void had stepped National Council of La Raza whose President Raul Yzaguirre had been a longtime rival of (SVRI deceased founder) Willie Velasquez and his top hand Hernandez.

SVRI and its parent group Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP), saw themselves as loyal to the interests and values of the US Latino community, while NCLR was viewed as too close to the DC and corporate establishments.

It was spring 1991 and Fast Track Authority to approve trade agreements between the US and other countries without any legislative amendments was coming up for a vote in May.

Insiders knew Fast Track was to be used to negotiate a trade deal between the US, Mexico and Canada (known as NAFTA in shorthand).

The inability to amend a trade deal meant the ability for labor and environmental advocates to shape the pact would be nullified. Therefore, the issue was hot in DC but in the Latino community (as well as the rest of the country) it was barely on the radar screen.

In early 1991 Mexican Americans supported a NAFTA in theory because it meant the US respected Mexico -which was big in their eyes. Furthermore, NAFTA was favored by the government of Mexico which was de-linking itself from Latin America and seeking economic incorporation into North America, a profound change on their behalf. This too gave the NAFTA proposal legs among many Mexican Americans.
But knowledge of the potential benefits or impacts of a trinational trade deal was nonexistent. The other two relevant groups back then were Puerto Ricans and Cubans and they didn’t much care (Central Americans and Dominicans really hadn’t emerged as significant Latino subgroups yet).

Yzaguirre made a media splash by endorsing Fast Track Authority (as had LULAC and the US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce). “There he goes again,” complained Hernandez, “cutting deals at the expense of the community. I wonder what Bush is giving NCLR?” he ranted. “I don’t know Andy but let’s come up with a strategy to get involved before the damage is done,” I answered. “Ok Antonio give me plan, and fast”, President Hernandez ordered before returning his attention to his myriad responsibilities.

I had just come back after spending much of the last year in Central America with SVRI’s Latin America Project, but I had to get my head out of El Salvador and Nicaragua and into Mexico.

A few days later I gave Andy an initial five-point plan to get SVRI into the NAFTA mix immediately. The plan said SVRI should:

• publicly oppose Fast Track Authority;
• sponsor a series of pro-con educational conferences on NAFTA;
• commission “white papers” on the impact of NAFTA on the Latino community; and
• gather US Latino opinion data on NAFTA;

I figured if we did this program we’d not only have the pulse of the Latino community on NAFTA, we would have a group of Latino organizations and leaders that accepted SVRI leadership on the issue. That was key. If we wanted to influence the behavior of the DC-based groups and federal legislators, we had to speak for more than SVRI. SVRI needed to build a community consensus on the “trade with Mexico” issue.

The truth is we didn’t know if NAFTA would be good or bad for Latinos. As progressives we were suspicious. We knew that at that moment no one was advocating for the community’s interest. We had to arm ourselves with Latino-specific information and get into the debate.

Andy Hernandez liked the plan and then told me “Ok go raise the money, cause I’m not spending our other funds on it.” “Well then let me get to work,” I responded thinking this project just got a lot harder. SVRI had ample funds for certain projects, but zip for NAFTA.

Interestingly, when SVRI founder Willie Velasquez launched the Latin America Project in mid-1987 he scrupulously avoided mentioning Mexico. It was always Central and South America. I asked why one time and he told me “Mexico is too complicated. There are no good guys. It’s just bad guys versus even worst guys.”

Yet here we were preparing to jump into US-Mexico relations, though really, we had no choice. To do nothing would have been dereliction of duty. I’m convinced Willie would have come to the same conclusion.

SVRI released a statement opposing Fast Track Authority on pure democratic theory grounds. It didn't make much of a splash - which was expected- except to put NCLR and the others on notice that SVRI was going to get involved and to attract the attention of NAFTA’s critics which we thought was important. It also served to signal our network that more was coming. Fast Track Authority extension passed by 40 votes in the House and 20 in the Senate in May 1991 and the governments of Canada, the US and Mexico accelerated their negotiations.
As it turns out there was interest out there among donors. By summer I had gathered small grants from Ford, Carnegie, Veatch, Irvine, and a few others creating a modest war chest of about $100,000 to start in the fall.

By August we were ready to go with a fact-finding delegation to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico City, Guanajuato and Michoacan led by US Rep. Esteban Torres and LA County Supervisor Gloria Molina and two conferences in San Antonio and Los Angeles in October.

On August 5-12, 1991 the SVRI fact-finding mission went to Mexico:

- Honorable Esteban Torres, US Representative of Los Angeles accompanied by wife Arci Torres;
- Honorable Gloria Molina, LA County Supervisor accompanied by husband and daughter Ron and Valentina Martinez;
- SVRI President Andy Hernandez, San Antonio, TX;
- Honorable Antonio Bracamonte, Trustee, South Mountain Community College District, Phoenix, AZ;
- Dr. Avelardo Valdez, UT San Antonio
- Antonio Gonzalez, SVRI Latin America Project Coordinator
- Martha Samano, Mexican American Political Association, Los Angeles, CA

Honorable Gloria Molina  
LA County Supervisor

Martha Samano  
Mexican American Political Association, Los Angeles, CA

Dr. Avelardo Valdez  
UT San Antonio
Our group arrived in El Paso-Ciudad Juarez first to examine the whole situation with “las maquiladoras” - US assembly factories located on the Mexican side of the border. Maquiladoras had spread like prairie fire in the 1980’s and were thought to be a prologue of free trade. There were thousands of them along the border employing hundreds of thousands of workers from the interior of Mexico.

We met with union organizers and human rights leaders who gave us the horror stories. Most impressive was Berta Lujan of the Frente Autentico del Trabajo (Authentic Labor Front), an independent union trying to organize the factories along the border. The maquiladoras were lucrative profit centers for US corporations that utilized mostly female workers, denied labor rights, and stimulated undocumented migration to the US as the migrant workforce quickly tired of low wages and opted for higher (though still low) wages as “undocumented workers” in the US.

On other hand there was an over-supply of Mexican migrant labor for the maquiladoras. Poor workers and farmers from rural villages were increasingly losing their livelihoods as recent Mexican government policies were squeezing small farms and cutting subsidies to corn and beans – the food staples of the poor. These campesinos mostly from central and southern Mexico rushed to take the maquiladora jobs, which for them was better than anything available in their home states.

Being on the border in El Paso-Ciudad Juarez drove home our binational cultural reality and history as Chicanos. Congressman Torres was a case in point. On the weekend we arrived he asked permission for he and his wife to leave the group and take care of some personal business. As it turns out Torres brother lived in Juarez. Knowing he was headed to Juarez with SVRI Torres did a search for him. Torres father was deported in the 1930’s during President Roosevelt’s infamous “Great Repatriation” that expelled half of all Mexicans (US citizens included) in the US, splitting his family irrevocably. His reunion with his brother was their first meeting in forty years!

Our group concluded that the maquiladora phenomenon was part of an exploitative cycle that would only be deepened if a “corporate” NAFTA was approved. The next day we flew to Mexico City.
Upon arriving in Mexico City our group split in two: half went west to Michoacan state and half went north to Guanajuato state.

In Michoacan our meeting with Governor Cuauhtemoc Cardenas went well. Arranged by Ricardo Pascoe, Cardenas top political lieutenant, it was held in Tzintzuntzan on Lake Patzcuaro (about 40 miles outside the Capital Morelia), the setting was picturesque. We attended a traditional meeting of 50 locals with Gov. Cardenas where in keeping with tradition all were feted with a scrumptious white fish soup from the Lake and one by one they voiced their complaints to Cardenas and made requests—which were written on slips of paper. The visual of a pile of white slips was priceless as after adjournment Cardenas went painstakingly thru every note and ordered actions to his team to try to resolve the complaints or comply with the requests.
It was quite a show of reverence for Cardenas, whose father was arguably the most beloved of modern Mexican Presidents -Lazaro Cardenas (who defied the US by nationalizing US oil corporations in 1938).

The next day we returned to Mexico City for a whirlwind tour that included meetings with human rights leaders Mariclaire Acosta, economic analyst Lilia Bermudez, and leftist intellectual Adolfo Aguilar Zinser as well as various immigration experts.

Aguilar Zinser briefed us on “libre comercio” -free trade- from a progressive Mexican perspective.

The immigration meetings were illustrative and a harbinger of the future. Experts from various universities vehemently argued that NAFTA would trigger massive migration in Mexico from countryside to city initially and then from cities to the US. Their prediction was 6 million. They turned out to be right as by 2007 there were 12 million undocumented persons in the US, 80% from Mexico. This after the 1986 IRCA amnesty law had reduced the undocumented population to only about 3 million, and subsequent smaller amnesties (in 1990 and with TPS) cut that number to under 2 million.

After meeting with the progressives, we went to Los Pinos the Mexican White House and met with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, his Trade Representative Jaime Serra Puche, Trade Deputy Herminio Blanco, PRI leader Roberta Lajous and several others. It was a stellar group and we were well, surprised at being so well received. We learned later that Salinas-Gortari had a whole NAFTA-plan hinged upon outreach to US Latino leaders.

The meeting went very well. By then we were already developing our critique of “corporate” NAFTA and beginning to develop our counter proposal. President Salinas and his entourage was remarkably solicitous of us, and we ended up agreeing to continue the dialogue.

The PRI hadn't maintained itself in power solely thru repression over 70 years. They were quite good at cooption. For example, when we mentioned we were launching a research project to ascertain NAFTA's impacts their ears perked up. A few days later we got a call and an invite from the prestigious Colegio de Mexico. I went to visit one of the Deans: Adalberto Garcia Rocha and voila we had a funder for our initial research. Funny how the world of power works...
After the Salinas meeting we felt like celebrating so a group of us went to the iconic La Opera Bar a few blocks away from the Palacio de Bellas Artes in the Centro Historico.

Coincidentally, a very loud thunderstorm hit. Between “la operas” specialty “sopa de medulla” (they say it raises the dead), the enchiladas de mole, caracoles, tequilas reposados con sangritas and the rain, Congressman Torres got into one of his story telling moods.

For those of you who don’t know Torres (known as ET to his friends), he is one of the great story tellers of all time. He held us spellbound as he wove a yarn of his adventures in Latin America. Unlike most elected officials Torres had a career as a labor leader and community radical before winning elective office. From escaping thru the Andes Mountains (escorted by “guevarista” MIR guerrillas) from Pinochet’s fascist coup in Chile in 1973, to negotiating with the iconic father of Mexican Labor Fidel Velasquez. Anyway, it wound up with Torres pointing to a bullet hole in the ceiling shot by Pancho Villa himself supposedly during the fabled Mexican Revolution of 1910-20. It was one of those crescendo moments, rain and thunder in the background, food and drink to die for on the table, a Viennese string quartet playing (yup La Opera Bar used to have them) and Torres holding court. It was one of those nights you don’t forget...ever.

One of the other highlights of the trip was connecting with the Mexico grassroots left. All these elite meetings were making our heads spin. At one point we stopped and huddled and said have you all noticed that the Mexicans look and have names like gringos. And we the Americans look like Mexicans. It was true. Mexico’s elite was Europeanized: Italian, French and English last names (Gortari, Pascoe, LaJous) were tall and light skinned.
That all came to a halt once we hooked up with “Dialogos” — a progressive group interested in trade issues among other things. We met them via David Brooks who as the US Bureau Chief of Mexico’s leading progressive daily La Jornada had been following our Latin America work for a few years. Brooks (born and raised in Mexico of American parents) set us up with Dialogos thru which we met Berta Lujan, Super Barrio (Marcos Rascon), Carlos Heredia, and many more who were beginning to agitate in Mexico about the downsides of ‘libre comercio.” Fortunately, the Dialogos’ meetings served to balance out the perspectives we were being spoon-fed.

The SVRI group headed back to the US feeling like passionate about US-Mexico relations, ready to commission research and launch the Latino leaders on NAFTA conference series.

The conferences “Latinos and NAFTA” were a roaring success. Attended by some 500 leaders each at Rio Hondo College in LA County and in Downtown San Antonio Latino leaders welcomed the opportunity to receive information and debate the issue. We had taken care to organize balanced panels with pro and anti-NAFTA representatives from labor, business, community, academia, government, and enviro groups.

San Antonio leaned a little towards NAFTA and LA a little against, but in the main both conferences had the same feeling: we can’t be for something that we haven’t even read, and NAFTA’s supposed benefits would have to be enhanced and its feared impacts mitigated. A one-sided, pro-corporate deal would not be supported. Neither conference trusted that the Bush Administration nor Mexico’s Salinas-Gortari administration would do the right thing absent pressure from grassroots constituencies.

Andy Hernandez was clear about two key components in our organizing around NAFTA. We couldn’t be like the other groups who whether for or against always trotted out gringo experts. We had to find Latino@ experts for our conferences and research! Second, we needed an “it” meaning we needed something to be for. Stated differently what was our agenda? What did we demand?
With that in mind in spring I started searching for Raza experts. I especially wanted to find the rarest of animals: a Latin@ economist. I searched high and low and found a few, but none that were experts in trade or that cared about the NAFTA issue.

One day I saw an article by Dr. Raul Hinojosa and Dr. Sherman Robinson from UC Berkeley on dynamic computer modeling the impacts of NAFTA. It seemed a perfect fit for SVRI. However, knowing who to contact, and reaching them are two different things. I tracked Hinojosa for weeks. It was detective work pure and simple for he was on a worldwide swing giving speeches about his trade analysis.

I finally caught up with Professor Hinojosa in Vienna, Austria at 3am Central European Time. He was awake and was immediately on board with speaking at SVRI conferences and doing some research for us. He was also pushing an eclectic policy proposal for a border environmental bank he called the North American Development Bank (NADBank) which I thought might be interesting to explore within our conference workshops.

Of course, Hinojosa quite the performer, stole the show at the conferences and his NADBank importantly attracted the interest of US Rep Esteban Torres - a member of the House Banking Committee.

By late October SVRI was pumped, ready to build the first truly National Latino Agenda on a significant foreign policy matter in our history. Little did we know we were like a robin with one end of a ten-foot worm in its beak...
Cardenas and Castaneda gave us a kind of cultural lesson. Back then the engagement between US Chicanos and Mexico City's elite political class was virtually nonexistent. We didn't know them, and they didn't know us. They gave us a full download on the current political situation in Mexico and on...Chiles en Nogada.

Apparently, Castaneda was something of a gourmet and ordered us up a sumptuous (and expensive) meal featuring the famous Chiles en Nogada dish dined on across Mexico during August and September. Chiles en Nogada, whose colors red (pomegranate seeds), white (walnut cream), and green (chile poblana) represent the Mexican flag - of course it was a celebration of Mexican independence (Sept. 16!).

At that time political tensions in Mexico City were still high from the 1988 Presidential election where widespread fraud had been alleged against PRI candidate Carlos Salinas Gortari by leftist contender Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the Frente Democratico (a coalition of disaffected PRlistas with socialist groups). Indeed, halfway through the counting the electricity failed. A final count was never revealed. A recount was prohibited, and the ballots were held under military guard in the national palace for a decade before finally being burned.

Note: In 1997 SVRI changed its name to WCVI - the William C. Velasquez Institute and the Latin America Project-LAP was renamed InterMestic Initiatives-IMI.

Note 2: SVRI had met with Cardenas in August 1989 in Mexico City along with his ally Jorge Castaneda a well-known leftist Mexican pundit at Fonda El Refugio one of Mexico City's premier traditional restaurants.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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Over the years Gonzalez has visited Central America and Mexico over 100 times. He recently released seven vignettes called “Tales of Central America” and is now releasing “Binational Tales” on a weekly basis. agonzalez@wcvi.org @AGonzalez1217 www.wcvi.org

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*Chiles en Nogada*