

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

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THE WHITE HOUSE  
PRESS CONFERENCE  
OF  
FERNANDO DE BACA  
SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT  
JOSE ACEVES  
PRESIDENT AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE  
LATIN AMERICAN MEMBERS ASSOCIATION  
JOSE CASANOVA  
NATIONAL HISPANIC ASSEMBLY  
ANTONIO MORALES  
AMERICAN G.I. FORUM OF THE UNITED STATES  
THE BRIEFING ROOM

2:02 P.M. EDT

MR. ROBERTS: Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, the President met today with 18 Hispanic American leaders to discuss concerns of the Spanish-speaking community.

The President was with the group for more than an hour, and we have with us after the meeting to give you a little information on what transpired, Fernando De Baca, who is the Special Assistant to the President, and three of the participants in the meeting -- Jose Aceves, who is President and Executive Director of the Latin American Members Association of San Leandro, California; Jose Manolo Casanova, who is Chairman of the National Hispanic Assembly of the State of Florida from Miami; and Antonio Morales, who is the National Chairman of the American G.I. Forum of the United States from Fort Worth, Texas.

And I think Mr. De Baca will lead off with a summary, and then the other gentlemen will have something to say, and then you will be able to get your questions in.

MR. DE BACA: Thank you, Mr. Roberts. We have just concluded a one and a half hour meeting with President Ford. This event was a continuation of the President's desire and willingness to meet with significant special groups.

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Now last April, as Vice President, he met with a cross section of Hispanic organizations and community representatives.

On September 4 of this year, he met with the Hispanic American Members of Congress and with major Hispanic Administration appointees. Today's meeting included the heads of all major Hispanic organizations in the country.

I am very pleased, in addition to the people who have been introduced to you, to present to you Mr. Luis Alvarez, who represents the major Puerto Rican organization in New York, who is to my right here, Luis Alvarez.

We also have with us Mr. Joseph Benites representing the largest Spanish-speaking organization of Hispanic Americans, organizations of Hispanic Americans in the country, LUAC, the League of United American Citizens.

We have a number of other leaders here -- the President of the IMAGE Organization, Mr. Edward Valenzuela, who is present here as well.

While the population statistics on Spanish-origin people differ, the Census Bureau currently estimates that the National Hispanic population is close to 11 million people.

Now we believe that there are probably somewhere between 14 and 16 million Hispanic Americans in this country. Hispanic Americans are the emerging minority in this country with actual projections, physical projections, placing them in a very large percentage in California, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona.

Additionally, we have very, very large percentages of Spanish-speaking people in the Middle West, certainly in New York, in Connecticut, and Florida with the Cuban population, and many other parts of the country.

Despite the large number of Hispanics in this country, the Hispanic American ranks at the bottom of almost every demographic enumerator when compared with other racial and ethnic groups.

Spanish-speaking Americans suffer from the highest unemployment rate -- 40 percent in some areas -- highest school drop-out rate in this country, and the lowest level of educational attainment. Not only that, but we rank among the lowest in median income of any segment in the U.S. population.

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Now today's meeting was devoted to a number of issues. It was a very substantive meeting. It was a very productive meeting, I feel, and you will certainly hear from the national heads present with us this afternoon.

We spoke about problems of employment, the need to have a Presidential communique emphasizing the Spanish-speaking program formerly known as the President's Sixteen Point Program for Spanish-speaking Americans, the need for more appointments to commissions, boards and agencies in the super grades, and policy-making categories.

We spoke about the problems posed by the recent CETA legislation, the need for more manpower programs for our Hispanic people, particularly bilingual manpower training programs.

We spoke about bilingual education and the need for strong funding and sufficient funding for that program, about grants to Spanish-speaking schools and colleges, recognition of foreign degrees, particularly in the Cuban communities.

We spoke about housing problems and problems of the health delivery system. We mentioned to the President our feelings about any Bracero program that might be under discussion or consideration.

We spoke about the problems of normalizing relations with Cuba, Castro Cuba; and strong objections were voiced in that regard.

We spoke about economic development and about the illegal alien problem in the Southwest.

And the gentlemen who are here with me this afternoon will certainly be pleased to answer your questions. Perhaps I should now turn over the podium to Mr. Luis Alvarez.

MR. ALVAREZ: Thank you, Mr. De Baca.

My name is Luis Alvarez. I am the National Director of Aspira. Aspira, as you may know, is the largest private Puerto Rican agency. It is primarily an educational agency, leadership development, and we presently have major operations in New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Chicago, Illinois, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

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Today we are servicing over 7,000 youngsters and last year we placed over 2,000 in colleges and universities. It was particularly a pleasure for me to meet with the President. I found the meeting to be both very warm, candid, and very constructive.

We were rather emphatic in our support for the bilingual education bill. As you know, it is a major bill that has been closely identified with all the Hispanic people in this country, and we urged him to support it.

We also touched on the need to really think, re-look at the whole underlying strategy around revenue sharing. It has been a strategy that has not met the needs of the Spanish-speaking people because many of the funds are going to the State courthouses and, as you know, our communities are not in the State courthouses. So we urged the President that special set-asides should be considered. I do think this is particularly critical to our community for our institutional life.

As you know, we are an emerging community. Our institutions are fragile, and need long-sustained support because they will be the pillars of our society. I will be prepared to answer any questions a little later on, but for me personally it was both an honor and a pleasure to meet with the President.

MR. DE BACA: Mr. Morales.

MR. MORALES: My name is Antonio Morales, National Chairman of the G.I. Forum, an organization primarily made up of Spanish-speaking Veterans that delves into the field of civil rights in our 26 years of existence.

First off, I would like to say that this meeting today is historical in aspect; that for the first time the Mexican-American community, the Puerto Rican community, the Cuban community, got together to crystalize what we feel are some of the most important issues affecting all of our communities.

In starting out, we know any type of affirmative program must have total commitment from the top level on down to the administrators of various programs. This is our main reason for meeting with President Ford. We want to be assured that that commitment is there so that when we go back to the Hill and participate in any type of hearings, when we talk to the Secretaries -- whether it be the Department of Labor, HEW, et cetera -- we know that we have that commitment from President Ford, himself.

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We feel that we have covered every spectrum. Perhaps more time will be needed, but I think the specific issues are going to be dealt through Fernando De Baca's office, in which the total 18 people that were represented there are in full support of the method in which we can express not only the problems but the solutions as we see them.

Thank you very much.

MR. DE BACA: Mr. Jose Casanova from Florida.

MR. CASANOVA: My name is Jose Casanova from Miami, Florida. I am a Cuban-American involved in refugee work, co-chairman of the Cuban Refugee Assistance Fund and, of course, our concerns are in similar areas, but with one exception, and that was in relation to the Cuban problem.

I was very pleased to hear the President rather emphatically say that the situation as far as the United States is concerned has not changed at all. He did recognize the fact that the OEA is holding a meeting in the near future, and the possibility existed that the votes might be there to lift sanctions against Cuba.

But he said that the United States was not obligated to establish commerce with Cuba because of this. He also called the attention to the fact that Castro's attitude is quite evident in the way he has acted in terms of his recent speeches and those of the Cuban government representations.

We also, of course, are very much interested in other areas such as bilingual education, and we are interested in, as perhaps the newest minority group that has joined the citizenship of the United States, to participate in Government activities and perhaps not only in the private but in the public field to make our contribution to this society.

Overall, I must say that we feel that this is a great first step in the right direction, and that we have had a very receptive, very warm President in the conversations, and also I might add a very cooperative Mr. Fernando De Baca to help us.

Thank you.

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MR. DE BACA: Mr. Roberts, if I may indulge in a little bit of time here, I do want to be sure that we know who is here. Mr. Aceves represents the Latin American Manufacturers Association which is charged with the economic development area and has done a lot in the minority business enterprise area.

So, if you have any questions to be directed in that area, he is available.

In the employment area, the image organization of the government employees' association of Hispanics across the country, the national president is also here, Mr. Valenzuela. And also, as I mentioned earlier, Mr. Joe Benites, the national president of LUAC is seated here with many, many chapters across this country, and many things to offer, I think, in the way of advice and comments regarding the meeting with the President.

We are open for questions at this point.

Q Was there any mention of the reinstatement of the Bracero program, or what was the discussion on the Bracero program with the President?

MR. DE BACA: Yes, there was extensive discussion of the Bracero program, and I am wondering if anyone here would care to address their impressions of the discussion surrounding that question.

MR. ALVAREZ: The point was brought to the President that any kind of Bracero program would be very hypocritical of the immigration quotas that we have in the United States. We have a limited amount of individuals that can come legally to the United States from Mexico and to embark in the new Bracero program would be in direct contrast to that policy.

The organizations there were very much against any type of Bracero program and, of course, President Ford has been getting advice from other areas where perhaps he could go into a limited Bracero program and ask the Mexican government through President Echeverria in his meeting Monday to help enforce the illegal aliens coming into this country.

We see the problem has multi-aspects into it. One is that so many illegal aliens have been in the country long enough now to establish legal residency, yet this is perplexed with the fact in order to attain citizenship in the United States, he has to take a written examination.

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So the organizations have joined in a lawsuit against the U.S. Government through the Organization of American States to remove this barrier so that some of our own immediate parents and their parents can enjoy the full privileges of citizenship in this country.

Q Could Mr. Casanova please tell us exactly what the President said about U.S. relations with Cuba and what is involved in that area?

MR. CASANOVA: I think I covered the subject rather generally, and I have come away with a very encouraged feeling in terms of the Government's position. I think it is still a firm position and the way I interpreted it -- it is my own interpretation -- that there is no appearance of any change in Castro's attitude.

As a matter of fact, the President specifically mentioned the recent aggressive stand in public speeches and reference in the last couple of weeks by the Cuban government towards the United States and himself personally and I came away encouraged that the position of the Government, justifiably so, has not changed, because Castro's position towards what he so-calls "imperialism" has not changed.

Q Did President Ford tell you that he is not going to recognize Cuba diplomatically, that there would be no -- what exactly did President Ford tell you?

MR. CASANOVA: The President said exactly what I have just said.

Q I think I understand you to say you made the presentation to him. What did President Ford tell you in response to your presentation?

MR. CASANOVA: I think I covered it and I will repeat that he said there was no change in policy and he did not feel at this time that there was any justification for a change in policy. These are not his words verbatim, but the gist of his conversation.

Q Could I follow that up? You said that the President, even if the OAS voted to keep, or to establish relations that would free the other countries, that he would not establish commerce. Does that mean diplomatic relations, too?

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MR. CASANOVA: He said that, of course, he could not control or be responsible for the actions of other countries and that there was a possibility that at the next meeting of the OEA, the sanctions on Cuba might be lifted if they had enough votes.

But he said that, first of all, that he would oppose it emphatically and, secondly, that even if it were approved by a majority, it did not necessarily obligate the United States to follow through and establish relationships of any kind.

MR. DE BACA: Perhaps I can clarify that last question simply by saying that the President did indicate there was no change in our policy toward Cuba, period. He also indicated that certain member nations of the OAS were discussing this topic actively and that we would have to wait their actions in this area before any formal determinations were made on the part of the United States.

Can we turn now to another question? Yes.

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Q Was the situation about the Cabinet committee for the Spanish speaking discussed with the President?

MR. DE BACA: On the Cabinet committee, there was some discussion of the Cabinet committee. The President, of course, at the September 4 meeting with the Hispanic Congressmen and with the Hispanic American Administration appointees did indicate his support for legislation extending the Cabinet committee through the end of the current fiscal year.

His position remains the same, and there was only some brief discussion regarding the Cabinet committee on that point.

Q What was the position of the group in terms of their support for the Cabinet committee?

MR. DE BACA: Perhaps you should hear from the group.

MR. VALENZUELA: Several of the major organizations did get together to discuss the future, what they felt as far as support for the Cabinet committee. The feeling or concurrence of the group was that we would support--the organizations would support--the Cabinet committee with certain changes, with conditional changes, and that we have the Administration--the President as I understand, has agreed to these changes and, therefore, we are willing to give full support to the Cabinet committee. We wish to see it continued with those specific changes.

Q What are the changes?

MR. VALENZUELA: Number one, that the national organizations be included in some advisory or some capacity to advise and hold the Cabinet committee accountable to some certain degree to have some input into the activities of the Cabinet committee and to always have the information coming back.

Number two, that the position of the chairman of the Cabinet committee be subject to the Hatch Act so that it would not have the problem of politics involved with regard to the chairman of the committee.

Number three, that the chairman not be selected until some final decision was made with the future of the Cabinet committee so that it would continue in existence, so there would not be any jockeying around to try to get someone for the position until we knew what the future of the Cabinet committee was, and four, some structural changes in this Cabinet committee itself.

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MR. ALVAREZ: If I may, I would just like to go on record saying that we at Aspira have still reserved our basic decision regarding the Cabinet committee. We share the concern of the other national organizations, but I am more interested in seeing that the Cabinet committee does function and that it does function effectively and that it begins to undertake activities that support the emerging institutions of our community because, frankly, many of the staffs come and go and we in the community must stay, so I am frankly going to hold back reservation on making a decision until we see clearly how the i's are being dotted and the t's are being crossed.

Q Was the meeting with the President of Mexico discussed?

MR. DE BACA: Yes, the meeting with the President of Mexico was addressed. The point was made we have in this country presently 11 million people, about seven million of those are of Mexican-American descent, and it represents a vast reservoir of human talent that has not been previously tapped in our relations with Latin American countries, and Mexico especially.

MR. MORALES: I think there was one important item that was not brought up yet; that is, the entire organization, the entire group totally and unanimously supported the selection of Fernando De Baca in this position, and we have asked the President to provide proper and sufficient staffing, proper and sufficient authority so that he can address himself to the consensus of this wide community.

MR. DE BACA: Let me say also for the record, Mr. Roberts, if I may, that there are some very serious concerns about the minority procurement area, business procurement area. Mr. Aceves, as I said, is here. He can address that area.

We are particular concerned about the Alyeska project in Alaska, the trans-Alaskan pipeline and the very fact that many of the dollars, the subcontracting dollars with regard to that project have already been committed and very little Hispanic participation was involved. For that matter, very little black minority participation was involved, and there were serious concerns in both the Hispanic and black communities regarding that problem.

Q Will you be traveling with the President to the meeting with Echeverria?

MR. DE BACA: There will be a decision on that this afternoon.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END (AT 2:23 P.M. EDT)