

Biography: Henry Barbosa Gonzalez



Henry B. Gonzalez

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Veteran U.S. Congressman Henry B. Gonzalez is credited with having paved the way for other Hispanics to succeed in politics. The first Mexican American to be elected to the Texas State Senate in modern times, Gonzalez represented the state's 20th district in Washington, D.C., for more than 30 years. He received numerous honors, including the National Alliance to End Homelessness Award, the Texas Civic Leadership Award, the 1992 National Rural Housing Legislator of the Year, and the 1994 Profile in Courage Award from the John F. Kennedy Foundation.

Enrique Barbosa Gonzalez was born in San Antonio, Texas, on May 3, 1916. His parents-- Leonides and Genoveva (Barbosa) Gonzalez--had fled from Mexico and the revolution there in 1911. Gonzalez's father had served as the mayor of Mapimi in the northern Mexican state of Durango; in San Antonio, he became managing editor of the Spanish language daily newspaper, *La Prensa*. One of six siblings, González was impressed with the importance of education at a young age. He studied at San Antonio Junior College and the University of Texas at Austin and earned a law degree from St. Mary's University School of Law in 1943. By that time, he had married Bertha Cuellar; they became the parents of eight children. During World War II, Gonzalez served as a censor in military and naval intelligence. In 1943, he became an assistant juvenile probation officer, and by 1946, he was chief juvenile probation officer for San Antonio, where he was responsible for getting the deficient juvenile system changed. Gonzalez resigned the position in 1946 after he was

told he could not hire a black staff member. Before entering politics, Gonzalez served as executive secretary for the Pan American Progressive Association; ran a Spanish-English translation service; wrote for bicultural publications; became a director for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and worked with the Housing Authority for the City of San Antonio. In 1950 Gonzalez mounted an ultimately unsuccessful bid to serve on the Texas State Legislature. Three years later, however, he succeeded in winning a seat on the San Antonio City Council. In his newfound political station, Gonzalez aimed to counter the prejudice against Mexican Americans he had experienced since childhood by working to desegregate city facilities.

Gonzalez became a state senator in 1956, the first of Mexican descent in the history of the Senate. The man who had experienced discrimination when he was young now faced it in the senate where he was referred to as "that Mexican." Gonzalez spent five years in the Texas Senate where, biographer Eugene Rodriguez observed, he left an indelible impression for having "[opened] the minds of thousands of Texans who impulsively believed in segregation."

In May 1957, Gonzalez and Senator Abraham "Chick" Kazen of Laredo made national headlines when they set a state record for a 36-hour filibuster that killed all but one of the ten segregation bills. Rodriguez declared, "Gonzalez's uncompromising stand on segregation lifted him into a position of state-wide prominence."

Won Congressional Seat

With the urging of his supporters, Gonzalez ran an unsuccessful race for the Texas governorship in 1958. When U.S. Congressman Paul Kilday vacated his House of Representatives seat to accept a military court appointment in September of 1961, Gonzalez decided to campaign for the empty position. Rodriguez wrote: "González was the best known politician in San Antonio. His fame as an orator, a champion of the people, and a dedicated public official was established." With endorsements from Governor Price Daniel, the Texas House delegation, Senator Ralph Yarborough, President John F. Kennedy, and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Gonzalez won the seat in November of 1961. Thus began a career of over thirty years in the House of Representatives. In Congress, Gonzalez has pursued his interests in banking, insurance, urban renewal, and housing and consumer affairs. In a 1964 interview with Rodriguez, Gonzalez declared that one of his primary objectives as an officeholder was to vote on every issue so that the public would always know his position.

In his emphasis on information and knowledge, Gonzalez has disseminated newsletters and written articles for various periodicals. In *Harper's Magazine*, Christopher Hitchens described observing a House "session" only to discover Gonzalez speaking to an empty room. Known for his after-hours speeches, Gonzalez has used the tactic for years to speak directly to U.S. citizens watching the C-SPAN cable network; it also has allowed his speeches to be recorded in the Congressional Record. Hitchens wrote that on that particular day he visited--during President Ronald Reagan's term--Gonzalez "was warning his country, if none of his peers, of the impending calamity of the savings and loan business."

In 1989, Gonzalez became chairman of the U.S. House Banking, Finance, and Urban Affairs Committee, where he conducted hearings on the savings and loan fiasco and was instrumental in developing the subsequent bailout bill with its lending and accounting regulations. He also focused on the commercial banking industry, warning of the need for better regulation. The outspoken Congressman has not always found support among his peers. "Loose cannon," "crackpot," and "eccentric" are terms Hitchens used to describe some peer appraisals. Gonzalez's call for the impeachment of President George Bush in 1991 for the U.S.'s role in the Persian Gulf War with Iraq drew little support. Similarly, Gonzalez had called for the impeachment of Ronald Reagan on two separate occasions: in 1983 for the invasion of Grenada, and in 1987 for the Iran/Contra affair. Although he was not supported in his impeachment efforts, he was praised for his honest investigation of the savings and loan problems and the Keating Five. Hitchens quoted Wisconsin Republican Toby Roth in *Harper's Magazine* as saying that Gonzalez "has the stick-to-it-iveness of an English bulldog. He's a genuine old-fashioned public servant."