

In Memoriam: Mario Obledo, Godfather of the Latino Movement, 1932–2010

by *Kenneth C. Burt*



Mario G. Obledo Papers, Special Collections,
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Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. He is currently researching the role of Hispanics in national politics during the 1930s and 1940s. He has chapters in five anthologies, and he served as the on-air academic for a PBS documentary on Latino veterans, “Realidades: Los Soldados Americanos,” in 2002. He writes periodically for Hispanic Link News Service. Burt worked for the United Farm Workers prior to attending the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

Mario Guerra Obledo, one of thirteen children born to immigrant parents escaping the violence of the Mexican Revolution, graduated from law school on the cusp of the John F. Kennedy presidency that inspired a generation. He was a giant in the Mexican American civil rights movement. He died in August 2010 at the age of seventy-eight.

“I was a real idealist,” recalled Obledo, then a twenty-seven-year-old veteran of the Korean War. “I was going to try to defend the rights of the people.”

Obledo kept his promise. He cofounded, led, or nurtured a host of organizations that sought to improve the lives of Hispanics in the United States, such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Hispanic National Bar Association, Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, and National Coalition of Hispanic Organizations. He was also a teaching fellow at Harvard Law School and chaired the National Rainbow Coalition.

When former President Bill Clinton awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998, the citation said Obledo had “created a powerful chorus for justice and equality.”

Obledo's activism started in the mid-1950s. While an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, he formed a campus LULAC chapter. "I went to the state convention in 1955 in Lubbock, Texas, and I recall at the general session I raised my hand and pledged that I would devote part of my life for the rest of my life to help in my community," he told an oral historian at the University of California at Davis. He never forgot that pledge.

He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in pharmacy and later from St. Mary's University School of Law in San Antonio. In 1965, after working in the private sector, Obledo went to work for the attorney general of Texas in Austin. While there he discussed the idea of creating a Mexican American legal group along the lines of the well-established NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

In 1968, MALDEF became a reality, and Obledo became its first general counsel. The trailblazing litigator overturned ingrained discrimination that for too long had been accepted in the United States. Cases ranged from companies that refused to hire Hispanics to cities that refused to allow Mexican Americans to use swimming pools.

Then California Governor Jerry Brown hired Obledo in 1975, taking him away from his teaching post at Harvard, to serve as his secretary of health and welfare. There Obledo oversaw a budget that was larger than that of forty-six states. Obledo's proudest achievement was the diversification of many state departments. He also encouraged Brown to make a record number of Hispanic appointments.

Obledo resigned as secretary to make a run for California's Democratic nomination for governor in the early 1980s.

It was yet another first in the modern era—a time when Hispanics accounted for nearly a quarter of the state population but had limited sway politically. At the bilingual press conference announcing the Obledo candidacy, then United Farm Workers Vice President Dolores Huerta stated, "Obledo is doing us a favor because he is demonstrating that the Hispanic community has the qualified people for this kind of job."

Even though Obledo did not win the race, he was still a trailblazer. Following the gubernatorial run, Obledo returned to his organizational roots: he assumed the national LULAC presidency. From the vantage point of this enduring organization, he was able to assess the tremendous strides made by Hispanics even as he sought to ensure greater opportunity for all.