

The Fall of Another Vendido

For most of my life as a Chicano advocate, I have heard the terms “Tío Taco” (literally, “Uncle Taco,” meant as the equivalent of “Uncle Tom”) or “vendido” (sell-out) applied to Mexican Americans in authority that willingly neglect or ignore the needs of Chicanos. Some feel that these terms are too harsh or disrespectful, even for “Hispanics” that utilize positions of power simply to enrich themselves. The argument against that perception is the great, irreparable damage done to the Chicano community by such neglect from one of our own. Thus, they should be called out in no uncertain terms.

Certainly, the Black community in the U.S. struggles with this as well. I actually have a book called “The American Directory of Certified Uncle Toms” (2002), a somewhat tongue-in-cheek but scathing treatment of Blacks considered by the authors to be guilty of working “against the freedom aims of the Black race.”

I’m thinking about all this after reading a headline in the local newspaper on February 18 entitled “Cal State Chancellor Castro Resigns.” The story describes how California State University Chancellor Joseph Castro was forced to resign his lofty position because of allegations that he essentially covered up the deeds of a serial sexual harasser when Castro was the president of Fresno State University. Castro admitted making some mistakes, even writing a glowing letter of recommendation for the predator while separating him with a proverbial “golden parachute,” a \$260,000 buyout to secure the guy’s resignation. Apparently, while Castro was under consideration for the job of CSU chancellor, he failed to disclose these important matters with the CSU Board of Trustees.

I met Joseph Castro many years ago when I was a mid-level manager in student affairs at UC San Diego. At the time, UCSD was going through its regularly scheduled accreditation review. According to Google, “Accreditation is a review process to determine if educational programs meet defined standards of quality. Once achieved, accreditation is not permanent—it is renewed periodically to ensure that the quality of the educational program is maintained.” The University of California, like most similar universities in Califas, is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Few people may realize it, but if a university loses its accreditation, the diplomas earned by its students will be relatively worthless.

Part of UCSD’s accreditation process was to hold open forums between members of the WASC accreditation review team and members of the UCSD community. There were forums for faculty, staff, and students, respectively. As I recall, Joseph Castro was the chair of UCSD’s accreditation review team. I attended their forum for UCSD staff, at which I testified to the racist, toxic conditions for Chicanos on campus. Among the dimensions of such institutional racism was UCSD’s complete refusal to appoint Chicanos to high administrative positions. As part of the UCSD Chicano/Latino Concilio, I had attended numerous meetings with the university’s vice chancellor of business affairs, who oversaw the UCSD Human Resources Department. This white administrator, with great influence over hiring practices, perpetuated Nazi-level policies of white supremacy in his division. I testified at the forum about this racism on campus, which also resulted in low numbers of Chicano students admitted to UCSD and low numbers of Chicano faculty. This testimony didn’t exactly make me popular among the UCSD administration but it had to be done.

As I testified, I noticed that Castro looked half asleep. It was if he was trying to show me that he didn't care at all about anti-Mexican racism at UCSD. After I testified, instead of asking me some probing questions that could have shed more light on institutional racism on the campus, Castro just nodded and moved along. When the accreditation review was completed and Castro's committee submitted a written report on their findings, there was no mention whatsoever about the abject lack of diversity and equity at UCSD. This guy was in position to create transformative change at UCSD that would have benefited Chicanos and other underrepresented communities. Instead, he left a racist status quo intact.

Years later, when I read that Castro was appointed chancellor of the prestigious, twenty-three-campus CSU system, I wasn't really surprised. For all my thirty-three years living in San Diego, I have seen incompetent Hispanics hired and/or promoted to positions of authority. What they have in common is a complete willingness to ignore the needs of Chicanos and to support the racist status quo of whatever organization or institution that employs them. Don't get me wrong: not every Chicano administrator in a leadership position sells out in such a manner. However, it's extremely hard to reach a position of high authority when powerful whites know that you are an outspoken advocate for Chicano equity. Usually, selling out is the price to pay for a significant promotion, at least within a racist organization.

The mentality I have often observed is Hispanics deluding themselves to believe that just by occupying a position of authority, they are benefiting the Chicano community. I disagree. They might also lie to themselves, saying that if they just stay quiet and ignore racism, they will keep advancing until they reach a position in which they can really create change. That might be possible, but it's highly unlikely.

So as socially conscious Chicanos, how do we react to Castro's forced, justified resignation? On one hand, his timidity meant that he would never take a professional risk to advocate strongly for Raza. So he won't really be missed. However, I can't help but think that Castro's demonstrated incompetence and dishonesty will make it even harder for Chicanos to advance through the incredibly racist structure of higher education in California. As of today, UC San Diego, established in 1960, has appointed one "Hispanic" to a vice chancellor position in its entire history, and unfortunately he was as much a Tío Taco or vendido as Castro. What's also horrible and shocking is that the interim CSU chancellor will be: guess who? None other than the same administrator that perpetuated racist structures, policies, and practices when he was the vice chancellor of business affairs at UCSD. He's now the chief financial officer at the CSU. I'm not making this up! You can't make up this shit.

It will be interesting to see who is appointed as the next CSU chancellor. Don't hold your breath waiting to see a righteous Chicano in the position.