

José Tomás Canales: An Early Voice for Reform

By Theodora McGee
Moorestown High School
Moorestown, New Jersey

While the 2020 death of George Floyd focused the nation's attention on the inequalities in law enforcement, this is not the first time police brutality and racism have been put on trial. Over 100 years ago, José Tomás Canales, a representative in the Texas State House, took a stand against violent acts by law enforcement. In 1919, Canales accused the Texas Rangers of killing innocent Mexican-Americans in South Texas. In the early 1900s, Texan law enforcement officers and the Texas Rangers responded to Mexican raids into Texas with extreme violence, killing not only raiders, but also Tejanos, landowners who had become American citizens when the Texas-Mexico border shifted south (Lira Ramirez). It is estimated that the Rangers killed up to 5,000 Hispanics between 1914 and 1919 (Rangers and Outlaws). On January 15, 1919, Canales introduced a bill in the state legislature to address the violence by reforming the Rangers (Victoria Smith). The bill failed, but an investigation of abuses by the Texas Rangers was launched. Through his bill and the role he played in the subsequent investigation, Canales exhibited remarkable personal and political courage.

Canales' main obstacle in his pursuit of reform was lack of support for his people. Despite delivering impassioned speeches to gather support from his colleagues, he encountered almost unanimous resistance in the legislature (Lira Ramirez). As the only Latino in the legislature, Canales' ethnicity contributed to his isolation. During his years in the House, Canales found himself distanced from "leading Caucasian men who called him a 'greaser from Brownsville.'" "His ethnicity generated an incredible hostility" (Lira Ramirez).

The lack of legislative support for Canales' bill reflected lack of public interest in the issue. The press was apathetic towards violence against Tejanos; "the discovery of Mexicans' dead bodies had reached the point where it created little or no

interest to media outlets” (Victoria Smith). The public, which tolerated violence by law enforcement, felt that Canales was blowing the issue out of proportion. Both politicians and the public perceived Canales’ reform proposals as extreme (Lira Ramirez).

Canales also faced an uphill battle because he was criticizing a well-liked organization. Canales was strongly criticized for attacking “an idealized force” that protected the public (Lira Ramirez). The judicial system had a history of turning a blind eye to the Rangers’ violence (Monica Martinez). The Rangers also enjoyed the support of prominent politicians, some of whom served on their defense team for the investigation.

Faced with opposition from fellow legislators and an unsupportive public, it became clear that pursuing reforms would jeopardize Canales' political future. Commitment to reform threatened his relationship with Canales' most influential political ally, Texas Governor William Hobby. Canales was personally loyal to Hobby and actively supported his election. When the Hobby administration fought against the reform bill, however, Canales did not back down (Sonia Hernandez and John Moran Gonzalez).

By refusing to abandon his reform efforts, Canales also put his life on the line. Advocates of previous efforts to reform the Rangers had been assaulted, including one attorney who had been pistol-whipped by a Ranger (Rebecca Onion). Canales himself was accosted on the street and threatened with violence by a prominent Texas Ranger who warned, “You are hot-footing it here, between here and Austin and complaining to the Governor and the Adjutant General about the Rangers, and I am here to tell you that if you don’t stop that you are going to get hurt” (Proceedings). At one point, Canales expressed his belief that if his efforts were not successful, “he would not live another six months” (Sonia Hernandez and John Moran Gonzalez).

Canales' reform bill failed when the legislature concluded there was a lack of evidence of the Rangers’ misdeeds. During the investigation that followed, the Rangers’ defense team twisted the review of the Rangers’ abuses into a debate over whether the Rangers should be disbanded. The other primary defense strategy was attacking Canales' credibility and integrity. He was painted “as a delusional,

hypocritical shill for 'larger interests' and as an unpatriotic Mexican, with all the negative connotations the term held at the time." (Richard Ribb). After twelve days of testimony, the investigation concluded that the Rangers should not be disbanded, though they acknowledged a "gross violation of both civil and criminal laws" (Victoria Smith). The legislature then passed a watered-down reform bill that placed fewer restrictions on the Rangers.

Canales' efforts to reform the Texas Rangers had repercussions for Texas history, for the Rangers, and for Canales himself. The "Proceedings," the official transcript of the investigation, provided an official documentation of racial violence perpetrated against Mexicans and Tejanos, thus memorializing the voices of the witnesses.

Although the bill that ultimately passed did not contain a number of the reforms Canales had fought for, the resulting reforms and attention drawn to the issue resulted in a decrease in Ranger violence against Mexicans and Tejanos. There were even instances when the Rangers stopped racially fueled violence by private citizens (Victoria Smith). The investigation also increased public awareness and outrage by the press. After the investigation ended, the prominent *Dallas Morning News* concluded that "only Canales' courage and sense of responsibility prevented the continuation of 'shocking and intolerable conditions'" (Sonia Hernandez and John Moran Gonzalez).

While Canales' fight to reform the Texas Rangers helped reduce violence against Mexicans and Tejanos, it spelled the end to his political career. Due to his diminished status in the legislature and the threats against him, Canales decided not to seek re-election to the Texas House (Lira Ramirez). This was not the end for Canales' public contributions, however, as he continued to fight for equal rights in education, politics, and society (Sonia Hernandez and John Moran Gonzalez).

José Tomás Canales was "willing to meet crushing defeat rather than compromise his principles" (John F. Kennedy). By initiating and then persevering in his efforts to prevent violence against Mexicans and Tejanos, Canales exhibited extraordinary personal and political courage. Despite threats of physical violence and the near certain end of his political career, José Tomás Canales took a stand against

the misuse of official power, thus serving as an inspiration to current and future politicians.

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