



## Héctor P. García

### Physician and Political Activist

 Pupil's Edition,  
p. 512



*Héctor P. García (1914–1996) was a Mexican American doctor who became a strong and effective advocate for the civil rights of Mexican Americans.*

**H**éctor García was born in 1914 in Llera, a city in Tamaulipas, Mexico. When he was a small boy, his family fled to Texas to avoid the confusion of the Mexican Revolution.

García's father encouraged all of his children to do well in school, and they did. Six of the García children, including Héctor, became medical doctors.

**Higher Education and Beyond** García received his bachelor's degree in 1936 and his M.D. in 1940, both from the University of Texas. After two years of general and surgical internship, he joined the military, serving in Europe during World War II. He reached the rank of major and was awarded the Bronze Star and six Battle Stars. He met Wanda Fusillo in Italy, and a month after she completed her doctorate, they married.

**The American G.I. Forum** Dr. García was infuriated by the unfair treatment of Mexican Americans that he saw in Texas when he returned, so he organized the American G.I. Forum in 1948. The group's original purpose was to improve veterans' benefits and their medical care. Before long, the organization was also dealing with such issues as housing, education and vocational training, the poll tax, voter registration, hospitalization, and employment.

**The Longoria Incident** In 1949, the body of Hispanic World War II hero Felix Longoria was to be shipped home to Three Rivers, Texas, for burial. The director of the local funeral home refused to handle the service because "the whites wouldn't like it." Dr. García was angry, and he wrote to Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. Their combined efforts resulted in Longoria's burial in Arlington National Cemetery. This incident led to a long relationship between Johnson and García.

**Continuing Efforts** Dr. García and the American G.I. Forum continued to fight the unfair treatment of

Mexican Americans. They worked for improved health conditions for children in Texas's segregated schools, raised funds to argue legal cases, campaigned against the poll tax, and lobbied for fair labor practices.

Over time, these efforts succeeded. Movie theaters, restaurants, and hotels were open to Mexican Americans by the end of the 1950s, with beauty salons and barbershops following in the 1960s. Desegregation did not reach Texas cemeteries and swimming pools until the 1970s.

**National Honors** Because of his political activities, Dr. García, still practicing medicine, came to national attention and received honors from a number of presidents. President Kennedy asked him to arrange terms for a treaty with the Federations of the West Indies. President Johnson appointed him to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. In 1967, Johnson appointed García to be the alternate ambassador to the United Nations. President Carter named García to the U.S. Circuit Judge Nominating Committee, and President Reagan presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award available to a civilian.

Dr. Héctor P. García died in Corpus Christi in July 1996. He was survived by his wife and three daughters.

### Review Questions

1. What organization did García help found?
2. What was the Longoria incident?

### Critical Thinking

3. **Drawing Conclusions** What skills did García demonstrate that made him a successful civil rights activist?