

Remembering Richard Estrada

A champion of those hurt by mass immigration

by Gerda Bikales

Too soon, all too soon, America lost one of its wise and courageous men. Richard Estrada was felled unexpectedly by a liver ailment, last October 29. He was 49.

Most people knew Richard Estrada as a gifted journalist, whose tightly written columns appeared in newspapers across the country. From his perch as associate editor of the *Dallas Morning News*' editorial page, he sometimes wrote lighthearted and playful pieces, turning to the world of entertainment and sports to make a point. But he was by inclination a serious man, who often wrote about the plight of the mentally ill, the degradation of the environment, the plague of drug and alcohol abuse. He devoted many columns to those topics, and won an award in 1998 for his writings on mental health from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill.

But a workable immigration policy, one in the service of the American nation, was his most enduring interest. He was himself the grandson of Mexican immigrants, and he remained emotionally close to his Mexican roots even as he acquired a strong, unshakable American identity. The Spanish he picked up as a child in his home he perfected through formal study of the language, and he became a lifelong student of Latin

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American culture and history. Born in New Mexico, educated in Texas, he saw himself as "a child of the border." He understood the special problems and responded to the unique charms of that region, where Mexico is a palpable presence. In the early eighties he had accepted an opportunity to live and work in the nation's capital, but he eventually chose to return to the Southwest, to be near his ailing parents and to stay immersed in the border experience.

Richard Estrada was a staunch restrictionist on immigration. Politically, he was a man of the left whose instinctive sympathies were for the poor and exploited. He frankly admired the ideals of the revolutionaries in Nicaragua and in El Salvador (though perhaps not their governance) and disagreed with America's foreign policy in Central America in the eighties. He understood the conditions that drove illegal entrants by the tens of thousands to cross the border into the United States in search of a better life, and he did not fault them. But he was highly critical of American immigration policy-makers who turned a blind eye to this worsening problem, refusing to enforce our laws and deliberately ignoring the evidence that such massive numbers of immigrants were holding back the economic advancement of America's minorities, including Hispanics already here. He was equally concerned about the cultural consequences of this explosive immigration. He viewed the growth of the bilingual education industry as disastrous for the future of the newcomers' children, a disincentive to their mastery of the English language and an obstacle in the development of their American identity.

In his skillful prose, Estrada argued for immigration

reforms suited to the changed realities of our time. He never hesitated to publicly express his views, at every opportunity, in person and in writing.

To do so was not without personal risk for a man with a Spanish surname and the classic appearance of a *camposino*. His forthright arguments for controlled immigration earned him the enmity of the Latino spokesmen whose unlimited-immigration advocacy he challenged and whose self-appointed leadership claims he

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exposed. These individuals felt threatened by Estrada’s authenticity and his passion for truth-telling. Not long after assuming his position at the *Dallas Morning News*, his dismayed opponents made a concerted effort to get the newspaper to dismiss or quiet the columnist, threatening a boycott of the paper and its advertisers. Estrada firmly stood by his convictions, no matter what the consequences. It is a tribute to his employers that they too failed to be intimidated by such threats.

His profound knowledge of the immigration issue in all its complexity earned him a Congressional appointment to the bipartisan U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, headed by the late Barbara Jordan, a former Congresswoman from Texas. Estrada did not take his service on the Commission casually — he was not one to skip contentious meetings or to let voluminous paperwork go unread. Possibly the best writer on the Commission, he had much to contribute to its search for consensus language and verbal precision.

At a memorial service held in Washington three weeks after his death, Richard Estrada was fondly remembered by friends, family and colleagues in the capital city. Frequent mention was made of his towering intellect, prodigious knowledge of matters practical and abstruse, and of his insightful writing. But he was also remembered as a kind and witty person, a devoted friend,

a loving son and brother. Congressman Lamar S. Smith(R-TX) praised the credibility Estrada brought to this issue, making it easier for others to speak out. He warmly spoke of the man he knew as both humble and strong. Congressman Sylvester Reyes(D-TX) recalled the writer’s exceptional care in getting the facts straight, checking and double-checking his sources. Though he often disagreed with Estrada, Mr. Reyes feels that the journalist was truly a “*hermano*” — a brother within America’s Hispanic community. Fellow Commission member Michael Teitelbaum called Estrada a very constructive participant in the panel’s work, whose elegant and clear rewriting of the archaic unintelligible “Oath of Allegiance” to the United States — the recitation of which is the high point of the naturalization process — should be adopted as a tribute to Richard Estrada.. To Patrick Burns, his close friend, Richard was, above all, a man of fierce morality. Burns commented on Richard’s usual calm temperament, which he saw change to anger only once. He described the memorable moment: a fellow journalist of considerable Beltway renown once approached Richard to ask him what a Mexican like himself thought about an issue under discussion. Richard angrily pounced on his interlocutor, poked him with his finger in the chest and reminded him “I’m an American, and don’t you forget it!”

By way of comforting the audience at the memorial, one speaker suggested that Richard Estrada, freed from the cares of the working journalist and the burdens of living, is probably happily engaged in animated debate with the great thinkers he had studied and admired, the likes of St. Augustine, Kant and Jefferson. Maybe.

But we who must carry on the immigration debate here on earth will find the task harder without him.

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