

MAYOR RICHARD RIORDAN AND ANTONIO VILLARAIGOSA IN FRONT OF LOS ANGELES CITY HALL.

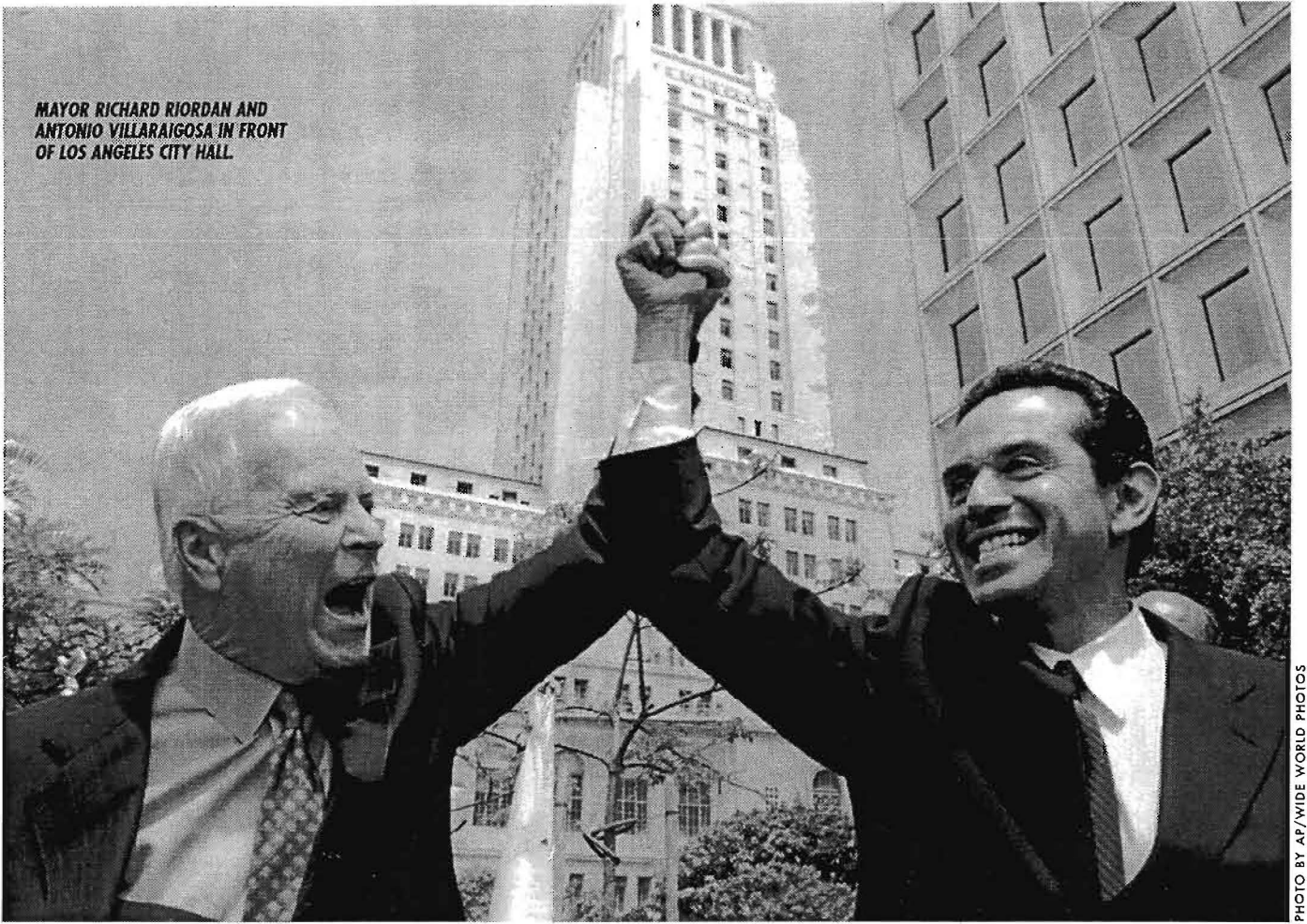


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Power of Personality

Will Antonio Villaraigosa become L.A.'s next mayor?

BY KEVIN O'LEARY

All over Southern California you see Latinos at work. They are the gardeners, the busboys, the truck drivers, the fast-food cooks and the janitors. These are the recent immigrants.

But many Latinos have lived in California for generations and have joined the middle class and professions. These are the Latinos who vote and now one of them is on the brink of becoming the mayor of Los Angeles – the nation's second-largest city with 3.7 million residents.

In Orange County, Miguel Pulido is mayor of Santa Ana and has built a considerable reputation as a civic leader in his city and in California as a whole. But because Santa Ana is three-quarters Latino, it is not news that a Mexican-American is mayor. By contrast, it will be big, national news if Antonio Villaraigosa outpolls James Hahn in the June 5 runoff

election and becomes the next mayor of Los Angeles. Latinos make up 41 percent of the L.A. electorate but supply only 20 percent of the vote. So a Latino candidate must build a broad, multiethnic coalition to win.

Considered a longshot at the beginning of his candidacy, the former Speaker of the California Assembly is locked in a close race with Hahn, the veteran city attorney. If Villaraigosa wins – many observers think he will – and becomes the first Latino mayor of Los Angeles in 130 years, it will be because of his magnetic personality and a message of bridging racial and ethnic differences that found receptive ears in a city where nearly 150 languages are spoken.

A national magazine story before the Los Angeles Riots in 1992 spoke of the young generation of Angelenos getting beyond race. This is true, but not totally. Of course, Los Angeles is not a black vs. white

city as are many of the big cities on the East Coast. It is more along the lines of "What's Cooking?" a delightful 2000 film about four Los Angeles families – the Avilas, the Nguyens, the Seeligs and the Willamses – as they prepare for Thanksgiving. Latino, Asian, Anglo and African-American – that is Los Angeles – plus a potpourri from the rest of the world.

In the mayoral debates across a city that ranges 46 miles from San Pedro in the south to Sylmar in the north San Fernando Valley and 20 miles from Venice on the Pacific to Boyle Heights on the Eastside, Villaraigosa, 48, becomes his most passionate when talking about the importance of bridging differences. Addressing an energized crowd at Cal State Northridge, Villaraigosa says in a hoarse voice, "Look, we're the most diverse city in the nation – probably the world.

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"We have to make it work."

Like the Energizer bunny, the ebullient, driven Villaraigosa has support that spans the city. Beginning with his roots in the Latino community and labor movement, Villaraigosa used his reputation for legislative achievement and bipartisanship to reel in endorsements from the Sierra Club, National Organization for Women and Gov. Gray Davis as well as Republican legislators and moderate Republican Richard Riordan, the current mayor. A man of intensity and charm, Villaraigosa outtalks and outworks his rivals. The smooth-talking Xavier Becerra, a Harvard-

educated Eastside congressman, was a rival for the Latino vote in the primary. Bracca was overmatched.

Villaraigosa stands a better than even chance at winning on June 5 for two reasons: troops and money. Outhustling Hahn in February to secure the local AFL-CIO endorsement when the city attorney wanted them to stay neutral, Villaraigosa gained the firepower to win on the ground. In low turnout municipal elections, the money and volunteers that labor supplies is crucial to victory in many local Los Angeles races. And using his statewide contacts and skills at fund-raising honed as Assembly leader, Villaraigosa has a war chest double the size of Hahn as they both throw money into television advertising.

If Villaraigosa's upbeat personality is the key to his appeal, two background factors powered his quick rise to prominence: term limits and Proposition 187. Legislative term limits ended the 14-year speakership of the legendary Willie Brown, now mayor of San Francisco. Quick studies such as Villaraigosa and his successor Robert Hertzberg worked at being dynamos in their freshman term and then quickly moved to leadership positions. But because California Assembly careers are currently limited to six years, Villaraigosa set his sights on L.A. politics as his next posting. Term limits allowed him to exit the state Legislature before the energy crisis descended. (Hahn wants voters to recall that Villaraigosa voted for electricity deregulation. But because support for deregulation was unanimous in the Legislature and because the City of Los Angeles was exempted from the plan and has plenty of power, the energy charge is not as damaging as it might be.)

As term limits helped make Villaraigosa a shooting star, so Proposition 187 to limit

illegal immigration awakened the sleeping Latino giant of California politics. Angry Anglos, mostly older voters, passed the measure by a landslide in 1994 but Latinos were outraged at then Gov. Pete Wilson and the Prop. 187 proponents. In elections since, Latinos have increasingly become more organized and active.

There is an inherent excitement about the Villaraigosa candidacy because of its historic importance. The Hahn campaign seems bland by comparison. Part of the reason is that the tall, monotone Hahn is a more low-key personality. But just as important, Hahn appears to be a victim of his background. A prosecutor and city bureaucrat, Hahn touts the small successes of city government. He lacks big picture vision and has trouble exciting people with his ideas. One Los Angeles Times columnist wrote: "A city manager type. A details guy."

Thus the subtext to the June 5 election is new vs. old; change vs. status quo; energy vs. steady experience – and hope vs. resentment. The Villaraigosa candidacy is the All-American story of overcoming adversity and upward striving – a kid from a broken home on the Eastside who was a high school dropout but then graduated from UCLA and rose to Assembly speaker.

A cross-racial coalition between blacks and whites is the key to Hahn's chances. Yet this coalition will not be the progressive black-Jewish coalition that elected Tom Bradley to five terms. No, today affluent Westside Anglos are already flocking to – and writing checks for – Villaraigosa. Instead, the Hahn coalition are blacks and whites living in separate universes on either side of Mulholland Drive. Some will cast a positive vote for Hahn; others will cast their ballot as a backlash against Latinos – a group now on the verge of majority status with nearly 50 percent of the city's population. Of course, the city's population and the voting universe are two distinct entities: The number of white voters has dropped to 52 percent from 72 percent in 1993, the last open mayoral race, while the number of Latino votes has increased from 8 to 20 percent. The number of African-American and Asian voters has remained stable at 14 and 4 percent, respectively.

Representing south Los Angeles County, Hahn's father, the late Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, was a white politician beloved by his African-American constituency. This is the base of Hahn's support. And conservative and moderate whites in the San Fernando Valley – especially those who voted for businessman Steve Soboroff in the primary – are seen as the key to victory by both campaigns.

The question facing L.A. in the last week of the campaign: Is the city ready to look boldly ahead to the new century of ethnic diversity and politics that go beyond race or will conservative whites and resentful blacks unite to keep a liberal Latino from gaining the top job? Hahn anticipated running against Soboroff and being the liberal candidate. Now Hahn cites his push for gang injunctions and his campaign manager Kam Kuwata drops code words, such as

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“he comes from a different background,” meant to cause unease about a Latino who grew up in the barrio. In television

spots and on the stump, Hahn selectively uses Villaraigosa's voting record to paint him as pro-criminal. Attack ads show a grainy black-and-white photo of Villaraigosa with the message, “You can't trust Antonio Villaraigosa.” Hard-edge campaigning. Par for the course in American politics, except it's not quite the campaign people expected from the son of the only elected official to greet Martin Luther King Jr. when the civil rights leader arrived in Los Angeles in 1961.

Los Angeles has a weak mayor compared to Chicago or New York. Even with the new city charter that Riordan helped push through, the L.A. mayor does not lord over city hall, much less the police department or the schools. Indeed, the L.A. mayor is more like the presidency than being king. Persuasion, not orders. Dale Carnegie, not Rudolph Giuliani. This is the difference between New York City and L.A. and Villaraigosa knows it. He views himself as a mediator and cheerleader. If elected he will use the bully pulpit much more than the late Tom Bradley, who was famous for being understated to the point of being a Sphinx. Los Angeles is only one city of 88 in Los Angeles County and one of several hundred in greater Los Angeles (Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties) – but the mayor of Los Angeles is easily the most visible and important civic leader in Southern California.

Villaraigosa and Hahn have similar agendas – give neighborhoods more power while calming secession movements in the Valley and the port, unsnarling traffic, reforming the scandal-ridden LAPD while improving officer morale (Villaraigosa says he will emphasize community-based policing and prevention programs for teens) and improving the struggling Los Angeles schools. The question facing voters: Is it better to choose Mr. Inside with intimate knowledge of the bureaucracy or Mr. Outside with state-level experience and more openness to bold approaches?

Both have the capacity to be good mayors. But Villaraigosa would be more interesting and more fun to watch. He would bring energy to the city, a rags-to-riches story to which inner city kids can aspire and a reputation as a skilled consensus builder with a knack for bringing diverse people together. Is Villaraigosa experienced enough to lead the nation's second biggest city? Is he tough enough to deal with the LAPD and Chief Bernard Parks? Is he a good enough manager (Riordan voiced doubts about both Villaraigosa and Hahn as CEOs during the primary)? No one knows, but many Angelenos believe Villaraigosa has the “right stuff” to do the job.

Which Way L.A.? We will know soon. When Mayor Riordan announced he was throwing his support behind Villaraigosa, one couldn't help noticing their physical similarities. Yes, Riordan has white hair and light skin and Villaraigosa has black hair and brown skin. But their medium height, roman noses and wrinkles by their eyes when they smiled broadly were so similar they could have passed for father and son. From one generation to another. The moderate Republican shouted to the crowd at City Hall as his potential successor stood next to him: “Futuro alcalde (mayor) de Ciudad de Los Angeles!” OCM