



Janet Murguía, President

National Office
Raul Yzaguirre Building
1126 16th Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202.785.1670
Fax: 202.776.1792
www.nclr.org

March 20, 2007

Ms. Paula Kerger, President
Public Broadcasting Service
2100 Crystal Drive
Arlington, VA 22202

Dear Ms. Kerger:

On behalf of the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the U.S., I write to express my extreme disappointment with the exclusion of Latinos from the upcoming World War II documentary by Ken Burns. I do so with mixed feelings, because I am a fan of both the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and much of Ken Burns' work. However, the exclusion of the Hispanic community from this critical documentary series is not acceptable, for three reasons.

First, it is simply unjustified on the merits. World War II not only was an epochal event for our country, but also – as we understand the series will demonstrate – had an important, disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic relations in the U.S. What the series apparently will ignore are two essential parts of the story: (1) the contributions that Latinos made to our successful war effort, and (2) the transformative effect that the immediate post-war period had in shaping the destiny of what is now the nation's largest ethnic minority.

With respect to the first point, I would note simply that experts believe that Hispanics were disproportionately represented among frontline casualties in the war and received proportionately the highest number of Medals of Honor of any major ethnic group. While firm data on Latino representation are unavailable because separate statistics were not kept (except on Puerto Ricans, at least 50,000 of whom served in WWII), all of the informed estimates we are aware of suggest that perhaps 500,000 Hispanics fought for our country in the war, far exceeding this community's share of the total population in that period. At a time when some in this country question the loyalty and patriotism of the nation's growing Latino community, this is a story that needs to be told.

But in many ways the immediate post-war Hispanic experience is equally compelling. The refusal of officials in Three Rivers, Texas, to permit deceased Latino veterans' families to use the town funeral home, and similar discriminatory experiences elsewhere in the country, directly led to the creation of one major Latino civil rights organization: the American GI Forum.

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LA RAZA: The Hispanic People of the New World

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Furthermore, it activated a long-dormant community, resulting in a decidedly more activist posture by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the country's oldest Hispanic organization, and the creation of many related efforts. Moreover, many of the most important civil rights leaders of our time, including former NCLR President Raul Yzaguirre, cut their eye teeth in this period and/or through these organizations. Dr. Hector P. Garcia, a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, was the founder of the American GI Forum. Yzaguirre counted Garcia as his principal mentor and once headed an auxiliary organization, the American GI Forum Juniors, during his formative years. LULAC and NCLR continue to be among the nation's most important civil rights organizations, and the story of WWII, and its far-reaching effects on our society which are still visible today, is simply incomplete without substantial attention to the roles that Hispanics played.

Second, although like many Americans I have admired much of Ken Burns' work, I must say that the exclusion of Latinos from the WWII series appears to be part of a pattern. That his series on jazz failed to include even a passing reference to such notables as Celia Cruz, Tito Puente, Willie Colón, or many others seemed questionable at best. But his virtual exclusion of Latinos – with the exception of six minutes on Roberto Clemente – from his series on baseball, a game where Hispanics historically have made enormous contributions and dominate today, was completely inexplicable. It seems obvious in retrospect that, notwithstanding his creative genius, Mr. Burns has a serious blind spot when it comes to our community.

I understand that all of us have faults. However, PBS is not just another network, and Ken Burns is not just another filmmaker. PBS is funded in part with public dollars and, more importantly, holds a public trust. The extraordinary synergy between Mr. Burns and PBS over the years, and the significant investment of public funds in his documentaries on the Civil War, jazz, and baseball, have made him the chief television chronicler of our nation's history. For these reasons, someone at PBS should have identified these omissions and brought them to Mr. Burns' attention or, failing that, to have taken other proactive steps to ensure that PBS programming on WWII accurately reflects the country's full diversity and historic experience.

Which brings me to my third point: PBS's behavior in this matter follows an unfortunate, long-standing pattern of virtually ignoring the nation's 44 million Latinos, the largest minority group in the U.S. Any objective review of PBS's recent or current programming would, I believe, demonstrate that the number and accuracy of Latino portrayals or Hispanic-focused stories is, by any reasonable standard, inadequate. For nearly three decades, NCLR and other Hispanic advocates have made repeated efforts to encourage increased attention to the Latino community, and many of us are bitterly disappointed that we have so little to show for this constructive engagement over such a long period of time. At a time when the PBS budget is under close scrutiny and with four members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on the Appropriations Committee, your decision to exclude Latinos from one of your most anticipated and touted series appears both untimely and unwise.

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For these reasons I urge, in the strongest possible terms, that you take immediate, firm intervention to ensure that the upcoming series fully reflects the Hispanic experience during, and in the immediate aftermath of, the second World War. I note in this respect that we fully agree with the views expressed to you by University of Texas Professor Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, the American GI Forum, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and others that the notion of support for ancillary local programming that includes Latinos is not an acceptable substitute.

I further respectfully suggest that you institute an immediate, comprehensive review of your current and planned future programming and call on the numerous Latino experts in academia, journalism, the arts, and the civil rights community to ensure that this kind of incident is not repeated in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet Murguía". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

Janet Murguía
President and CEO

cc: Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez
American GI Forum
Lionel Sosa
Congressional Hispanic Caucus
Congressional Hispanic Conference