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Review of *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* by Brian D. Behnken

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Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas. By Brian D. Behnken. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. xix + 347 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00.

If you are an African American, a Mexican American, or a progressive Anglo who grew up in Texas in the past century, reading Brian Behnken's book, filled as it is with examples of the state's racism, is sure to tear off a few old scabs. Behnken's main objective, however, is to explain the factors that kept black civil rights activists from working with their Hispanic counterparts to reduce racial segregation and discrimination.

One factor, Behnken argues convincingly, was geography: the battleground for the black struggle was in the eastern part of the state, the Mexican-American battleground hundreds of miles away, in the Rio Grande Valley. A more insidious factor was binary racialism. In Texas, a person was either black or white. For much of the twentieth century—until the 1960s—Mexican American leaders chose to pursue a “whiteness strategy.” Making common cause with blacks would have compromised Mexican Americans' preferred identity. “Let the Negro fight his own battles,” said League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) president Felix Tijerina, whose politics reflected his segregationist attitudes. Blacks responded in kind, buying into the negative stereotypes that white racists had devised to justify their oppression of Mexican Americans.

There were a few racially enlightened heroes in this political drama, among them University of Texas professor George Sanchez and U.S. representative Henry Gonzales. But the villains greatly outnumbered the heroes, and in Behnken's view, some of the state's governors were among the most vile.

Behnken's political history brings us up to 2008, when African Americans generally supported Barack Obama during the Texas primary while Mexican Americans offered Hillary Clinton broad support. Mexican Americans wound up supporting Obama in the 2008 general election (supporting him even more strongly in 2012).

What of the future? What is missing from the book is prognosis. Are these two groups doomed to keep repeating the past? Could the Texas experience offer lessons for other regions of the country, particularly for Great Plains cities such as Topeka and Kansas City, Kansas, where demographic changes are likely to heighten black-brown conflict? Behnken's story about Texas is carefully researched and well written, but it provides little guidance for addressing the tensions that are likely to arise in these venues.

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