

The Chairman's Turf

It's a Long Way From Border Country to the Shadow World of Spies

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EL PASO [Silvestre Reyes](#) is straight out of Border Country, that place of lawmen and bandits, pluck and luck.

Grows up on a cotton farm along the Rio Grande, oldest of 10, struggling with English as a kid. Helicopter gunner in Vietnam, some college, marries his high school sweetheart (honeymoon at the Mesa Motel), lands a solid government job -- Border Patrol. He works like hell for 26 years, gets shot at by Mexican train robbers, rises from agent to bridge inspector to chief for West Texas and Arizona.

"Outdoor work," he calls it, for someone with "a flair for a little danger" -- but unexpected work for the boy who used to warn undocumented farm workers when la migra came around.

Next, a grateful citizenry sends its tough but soft-spoken lawman to Congress, reelects him five times, the first Latino to represent his 80 percent Hispanic district.

Reyes is, in short, that most cherished of political properties, the real guy, a man of the people, not just someone who pretends to be.

"He is a Real Life 101 politician. He's been there," says Cindy Ramos-Davidson, chief executive of the El Paso Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "He can talk with the best of the best and the lowest of the lowest. There are a lot of people in elected office who have never had Real Life 101. It's wondering where the next paycheck is coming from, it's balancing family life and work life. It's helped him stay human, for lack of a better word. "

Now, though, he stands at a perilous political intersection. Today he becomes the new chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, assigned to ride herd on 16 spy agencies with an estimated collective budget of \$42 billion.

In Washington's power corridors you can hear the whispers. Isn't this one of those jobs that demand intellectual firepower? (Never mind those other whispers, as old as the republic, that not a few in Congress, even some of the stars, are, actually, well, dopes.)

All that Real Life stuff is swell. But the new outlaws are more lethal and formidable than ever. Is an instinct for the Common Man what the nation requires to ensure the global war on terror is successful -- and constitutional?

Can credential-crazy Washington countenance an intelligence chief with a two-year community college degree? Not to mention that ambush from Congressional Quarterly, where Reyes blew the question of whether al-Qaeda is Sunni or Shiite.

It's a big challenge for a lawman from a dusty border town.

"The border is a tough area to work," Reyes says one morning, standing down here in that dust at the edge of two countries. "Sometimes there are no rules. The big rule is 'Survive.' "

A Sound of a Horn

His grandfather once rode with Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa -- carried a rifle, wore bandoleers and a big sombrero, the full rebel regalia -- then fled to this valley to farm. His father dropped out of the sixth grade to work these fields. Up into this life came young Silvestre, named after his grandfather.

He didn't need much English to be the lookout.

"There was a kind of early-warning system whenever the Border Patrol was working the valley," Reyes recalls, gazing across the land at Mexico. "My job was to be at the entrance to our farm. We had a truck that had this big air horn. Whenever I saw the migra coming, I would blow three blasts on the horn. All the workers would scatter and hide.

"Of course the Border Patrol knew what was going on. They'd come up and ask me what I was doing.

"Just playing on the horn. "

A deadpan twinkle gleams out of Reyes's round face.

So his first job was in intelligence. Eight years old and already he was a little bit cagey and shrewd, this boy in Border Country.

Later, he tamed the wild El Paso-Juarez line, revolutionized border security for all of America, climbed from the edge of this desert to become the first Latino to chair such a key congressional committee. He'll soon find out if frontier wiles can tame the bureaucratic badlands of "black" budgets and shadow kingdoms. Already he's been outsmarted once.

The gotcha pop quiz, the ritual Washington hazing once you've achieved real power and better guard it in hostile territory: Reyes was doing all right until the al-Qaeda question.

"Predominantly -- probably Shiite," he said to Congressional Quarterly.

Guess again, congressman! Ah, yes, that ineluctable rite of passage, a rookie pooh-bah's baptismal gaffe. Over to you, Jay Leno: "Apparently the term 'intelligence committee' is just a suggestion."

Reyes tried to brush it off, tried to explain -- it was late in the day; he knew the answer but misspoke; and heck: "I got through all the hard ones, I talked about the 12th Imam!"

Finally he stopped spinning and did something much more typical for someone who never intended to be a politician. He conceded his blunder.

"When you screw up," he says, "you admit it, then you move on."

Accidental Career

Ask about Reyes, 62, around El Paso and Capitol Hill, and you keep hearing those cliched themes: He's a nice guy, he's "human," and "what you see is what you get."

You hear it enough about Reyes -- universally known as "Silver" since his school days, even by his wife of 38 years, Carolina -- that you wonder if he might be too nice to be intelligence chairman, not Machiavellian enough. To do a good job in Washington, backs must be stabbed.

He doesn't have the plotting ambition of the career pol. He wound up as intelligence chairman almost by accident, when Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) passed over two candidates ahead of him -- she didn't get along with one, didn't like the ethics cloud over the other. Reyes was in his garage building shelves to store Christmas decorations when she called to anoint him.

He landed in Congress in the first place only when, as the popular local Border Patrol chief, he reluctantly yielded to entreaties from El Paso business types to run.

"He has always started at the bottom," Carolina Reyes says. "He never said, 'I'm going to become chief.' He never said, 'I'm going to be a politician.' . . . He does his job, and comes up with good ideas, and gets promoted."

Yet here he is, astride the juncture of several key fault lines in American culture: a Latino Democrat, when his party is trying to solidify itself as the party for minorities; a veteran with a law enforcement background, when his party is trying to bolster its bona fides on national security; a congressional player on national security policy at a time of war; a former border guard who can shore up the Democrats' enforcement flank in the immigration debate.

That career with the Border Patrol was born only after he had taken every federal agency entrance exam he could think of, and the Border Patrol was the first to call.

He went from having been a lookout to being one of the lookers. For a few years, he worked one of the bridges between El Paso and Juarez.

Lean out the booth window, peer into the car: "Citizenship? What are you bringing from Mexico?" He learned how to read people fast. What were they leaving? What did they want? This is how intelligence works in the field.

Sometimes he practices a little craft on his colleagues. Behind the almost always deadpan face -- it is the jowly, deceptive deadpan of comedian Jonathan Winters, just before a deadly punch line -- is the winking soul of a connoisseur of pranks. Many have

failed to recognize the twinkle until it's too late. They tell Silver Reyes stories, fondly, even as they plot paybacks.

I get accused of all these weird things," Reyes protests.

Once, someone passed on to an aide of Vice President Gore the happy news that [Rep. Solomon Ortiz](#) (D-Tex.), a bachelor for decades, had just married someone with a made-up-sounding name like Ramona Corona. This happened at the vice president's residence, during a reception for the Hispanic Caucus. So Gore publicly congratulated Ortiz on his nuptials to Ramona Corona. Suddenly the dean of the caucus, who had been enjoying the company of two pretty young things seated on either side of him, had a lot of explaining to do.

"I knew real quick it came from Silver," says Ortiz, still single.

There was the time in 2003 when Reyes and [Rep. Eliot Engel](#) (D-N.Y.) were part of a delegation to North Korea whose representatives insisted on beginning each session with rote denunciations of the United States. Bored, Engel was slipping his shoes on and off beneath the table. Finally he tried to put them on, and they weren't there! He blindly probed the floor in all directions with his stocking feet while the North Koreans droned on.

"When the tirade ended, and the meeting ended, I got up, and I saw my shoes all the way on the other side of Silver," Engel says.

Just playing on the horn.

A prankster is a student of human nature. A little part of him remains detached, on the lookout for weakness, absurdity, vanity. Good qualities, perhaps, for questioning spy chiefs. And an even more startling one:

"He doesn't think he knows everything," says Engel. "He's willing to listen and willing to learn."

"He asks tough questions," says [Rep. Curt Weldon](#) (R-Pa.), who just lost his reelection bid. "He won't be pushed around."

A final lesson from Real Life 101: He quit college to go to work, not realizing it would expose him to the draft. He went almost directly to boot camp, then to war. During an enemy rocket attack, he lost the hearing in his right ear.

Years later, in Congress, confronted with President Bush's eagerness to take on Iraq, Reyes recalled his direct experience with the unpredictable hell of war. He considered the intelligence he was privy to as a committee member. And on the Iraq war resolution, he voted no.

A lot of folks now say he passed that yes-or-no quiz with flying colors.

Law of Absolutes

A border implies a binary logic of either or, one or the other, but Border Country teaches that nothing is that simple. No matter how far away he goes, Reyes carries within him this rich interior and exterior landscape -- paradoxical, organic, alive -- that shaped him.

From an overlook where the purple mountains cut triangles against the blue sky, El Paso and Ciudad Juarez look like a single city, with a combined population of 2.1 million, sprawling across the valley. But down on the ground, the picture sharpens, the border draws its distinctions -- riverbed, chain-link fence, markers in the lonely scrubland insisting vainly on who is who and where is where.

The billboards on both sides are in Spanish, but Juarez feels different. The streets meander, filled to bursting, traffic surging to el Norte. El Paso is a community with a bit of a chip on its shoulder. Eighty percent Hispanic, it feels isolated from the rest of Texas in a different time zone, disparaged by Anglo America, misunderstood by Washington, burdened yet bonded with Mexico.

One recent morning, Reyes stood in the dust of the frontier at the end of the infamous "black bridge," the old rail trestle where a friend and fellow agent was hit over the head and killed, where hundreds of would-be immigrants would mass on the Mexican side and sprint across in "banzai runs," overwhelming the Border Patrol.

"To appreciate the peace and tranquility that is here now, you've got to imagine what it was like," he says.

It was chaos.

When the river was dry, the Mexicans walked over. When the river flowed, entrepreneurs set up ferry services; peddlers sold Cokes and snacks. There were crazy hot-pursuit chases on downtown streets, through back yards, even across the campus of a high school on the border.

Enough! decided the first Latino sector chief in Border Patrol history. One Sunday morning in 1993, El Paso and Juarez awoke to find the border sealed by 400 agents spread along 20 miles.

At first there was an uproar. Protesters threw rocks, closed bridges, burned effigies. Merchants fretted about lost sales. The Catholic Church pleaded for mercy. The Mexican government complained to the State Department. Even Border Patrol brass in Washington gave Reyes a hard time.

On just whose side was this grandson of one of Pancho Villa's riders?

"This is the ex-Border Patrol agent who made a career of deporting his people," says El Paso immigration lawyer Carlos Spector.

Reyes made one concession: He changed the name of his crackdown from Operation Blockade to the more politically correct Operation Hold the Line. He was ready to

outlast a political siege of weeks. "I knew the system pretty well, I could identify overtime money that I needed to get through the first four to six weeks," he recalls with relish, and he had squirreled it away in anticipation. Daily illegal crossings plummeted from up to 10,000 to a few hundred. Reyes was summoned to the Oval Office, where, standing humbly in his pressed green uniform like a Boy Scout with an easel and a wooden pointer, he briefed President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno.

"He literally changed the culture of the Border Patrol through his own initiative," says David Aguilar, the current national chief of the Border Patrol. "He is very innovative, very aggressive, very focused."

The Border Patrol adopted the maverick chief's innovation nationwide -- and Reyes became a hero to the tough-on-illegal-immigrants crowd, the Minuteman types.

His own view is not so simple. He felt -- feels -- compassion for border crossers, understands their yearning and risk-taking. He was once their lookout.

"You see the misery coming across the border," he says. "You recognize that they're not criminals, that these are people that are down and out because of economic circumstances. . . . The only difference between you and them is fate."

Haunted by the misery, he used to startle his wife, coming in unexpectedly from his midnight shift. He would start pulling clothes out of his closet to give to border crossers he had detained. "He would also come home for lunch during the day," Carolina Reyes says, "and I would say, 'But you took your lunch,' and he would say, 'We gave our lunches to the people that we found. They were starving.' "

Then he would deport them. Dash those dreams, not unlike the dreams of his grandfather. "You took an oath to enforce the law, you're carrying a badge and a gun," Reyes says. "The way you honor that commitment is by treating them with dignity and respect."

His perspective on the immigration debate is formed by the messy reality on the ground in Border Country. He calls the 700-mile border fence law signed by President Bush "ridiculous, ludicrous and stupid." He supports a path to citizenship for undocumented workers.

"People talk about illegal immigration and they cite statistics," he says. "You're handling not statistics, but people, family units."

Still: The 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States are "a shadow world where people who want to hurt us can operate," he says. "The only way we are going to reduce that shadow world is to have a legalization program. I think it's a part of the national security strategy."

A quarter-century in the field of Border Country yields Reyes this intelligence: Misery can lead to desperation, and desperation sometimes turns peace into chaos.

Invisible Borders

On a recent night in December, all of El Paso society has converged at the downtown art museum to salute Reyes -- 1,000 people from politics, business, the military, education, charity, bursting with local pride. They blame the "sharks" in Washington for the public shaming of the pop quiz.

Reyes gets up to speak, and the microphone begins to squeal. "It's already the CIA doing this," he cracks. Then he chokes up. The audience is equally emotional. He is the local boy, he has made good. "Que viva Silvestre!" they shout, and they send him off to cross one more frontier, migrating from a mid-bench seat in the political minority into the leadership.

The borders in Washington are no less dicey for being invisible. They define fiefdoms -- Congress, the White House, the media, the intelligence agencies -- and are subject to rogue incursions and political banditry.

"One of the first things we're going to have to do is reclaim our turf," reflects the chairman. "We have ceded and abdicated our role as a co-equal branch of government."

Today, he goes on the lookout again. On border patrol.