Miguel Santana: Latino Majority Must Not Duplicate L.A.’s Racist Past

As calls for the resignation of three Los Angeles city councilmembers mount, Weingart Foundation CEO Miguel Santana said officials must show they represent everyone.

The leaked recording of three Los Angeles city councilmembers and the head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor engaged in a conversation peppered with racist and disparaging remarks shook L.A. and the nation this week, with President Biden calling on Nury Martinez, Gil Cedillo and Kevin de León to resign.

Earlier Tuesday, nine prominent Latino leaders released a joint letter calling for the resignation of the councilmembers. Among them was Miguel Santana, who served as the City of Los Angeles’ top administrator for more than seven years and is now president and CEO of...
Miguel Santana, who is the CEO of the Weingart Foundation, which supports efforts for racial, social and economic justice in Southern California. (Santana said he signed the letter as an individual, independent of his role at the foundation).

Santana spoke with Capital & Main about why he believes the councilmembers should step down as well as the policy reform and community actions that are vital to governing a multicultural Los Angeles with a Latino majority.

The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

**Capital & Main:** Why did you and other Latino leaders call on the councilmembers to resign?

**Miguel Santana:** As difficult as it is for these councilmembers to step away, it is now necessary for them to do so. As a member of the Latino community, as a civic leader, as someone who loves this city and who’s been here my whole life, I feel it’s especially important that the Latino community be the first to say, “It’s time for you to resign.”

We need to demonstrate that as we become the majority population we can govern, and that we’re not going to simply mirror and duplicate the racist systems which the city was founded on. A hundred years ago, redlining was understood as being the law of the land, and people in City Hall drew lines to ensure that Latinos and other people of color didn’t have representation, to ensure that we had a segregated community, didn’t have access to quality education or jobs or even the ability to purchase a home.

Now, we’re in those seats as Latinos and we have to be clear that we’re not going to simply follow that pattern. And so it is this moment that we separate ourselves from the legacy racist policies and demonstrate that we can govern in a different way that’s much more inclusive of all Angelenos.

**Other than not saying racist things that get recorded, what are some things that you think should be done by Latino leadership or any city leader now?**

It really starts by putting at the forefront of our policies the experience of those who have been historically marginalized and who are at the worst end of all the different indicators in our community. From homelessness to education to unemployment, poverty, healthcare outcomes, if we really start with those who have the least amount of access, who have struggled to survive, then I think we build a community that ensures that everyone has an opportunity to thrive, and that informs how districts are drawn, how policies are implemented and the distribution of resources.
When you place those who are the most disadvantaged at the center of this work, then it lifts up everybody. And I think that really is an important frame of how we think about the way government, philanthropy, the private sector engages with our community.

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In the minds of the councilmembers, and among some of their supporters, there might be a sentiment that these are people who are valuable because they’ve built up clout over time and that losing them would be too much of a cost. What would you say to that?

That’s what makes it so hard. Gil Cedillo was the only person who was fighting to give driver’s licenses to the undocumented. We wouldn’t have that today if it wasn’t for Gil. Nury Martinez has been one of the loudest champions for children in poverty. Kevin has made groundbreaking work around climate change in his career. They’ve been advocates on issues advancing social and racial justice.

But what matters the most in this case is what happens when no one’s watching and what ultimately informs your governance and your decision making. When you are limited to a zero-sum game framework where it is thought that if we give something to a different community, it’s a loss for our community, then all of that work reaches a ceiling.

The truth is that Latinos can’t advance the issues that are most important to the Latino community by ourselves in a multiracial community like Los Angeles. Whether it comes to policing, ensuring access to services, ensuring quality education for our children, access to healthcare, if we just rely on the Latino community to advance those issues then our ability to make real progress is really challenged.

It’s the same way for the African American community or the Asian American community — all of these issues impact every community. So it’s painful that what has been exposed is a framework, really a relic of the past, a sense that I can only support one community. It’s shortsighted, outside of being racist and bigoted, because it ends up hurting everybody, including the Latino community. Latinos won’t have representation in those districts for a period of time, should they do the right thing and resign. There are no winners here. We’ve all lost as a result of this moment. But one thing is certain — we can’t move forward until they step down and allow that work to be done.

Is the notion of people being irreplaceable also misguided?

Our democracy is founded on this idea that everyone can be replaced, and in fact should be. There are no dictatorships here, at least hopefully not yet. Representation is constantly evolving. We’re seeing that in the outcome of the recent election in Council District 1, where a longtime serving councilmember, Gil Cedillo, has been unseated by a young, up-and-coming Latina, Councilwoman-elect Hernandez. So I think it is at the essence of our governance that every four years the community gets to decide whether you’re the best person for that role.
That’s what makes our democracy what it is.

“As Latino leaders, we need to be clear that we do have a responsibility to govern representing everyone.”

You talked about the zero-sum framework. Do you think there are things in the design of our government or the way we create district boundaries that heighten these kinds of conflicts? This, after all, is what they were talking about when these comments were made.

We’re all human beings and we’re designed to protect ourselves and our self-interest, and politicians are no different. This has been the history of this country as well, that those in power work very hard and often do whatever it takes to stay in power. And the city and the county have been subject to litigation when it’s been white leaders who have demonstrated that pattern.

Cases have gone all the way up to the Supreme Court, as it did in the county of Los Angeles. And so ultimately, to create as much of a neutral process as possible, the only answer is to create a truly independent redistricting body whose role is to consider all the factors — representation of all communities being one — and set district lines accordingly and to require that those in power simply accept them without making any real substantive changes to them.

That pattern is taking place at the state level. We recently saw it at the county level. It must happen at the city level.

**What else needs to be done to address the current crisis in L.A.?**

I think what we need to do now is really have this very difficult conversation, not only between communities but amongst communities. As Latino leaders, we need to be clear that we do have a responsibility to govern representing everyone.

And then in the African American community, for those who are in elected office, how do you ensure that you’re representing the district that is the heart of the Black community and at the same time maybe a majority Latino community? And instead of just saying, “Well everybody has to take care of their own,” and creating a framework of, “If you leave me alone, I’ll leave you alone,” thinking about it more holistically.

What gives me hope is that at the Weingart Foundation, we see that every day in the work that’s being done by our partners in the immigrant rights space where Latinos, Asian Americans, African immigrants, Haitian immigrants come together around shared values, shared issues, shared challenges. They sit at the same table, they organize together, there is no division among who's more important. You see that in coalitions that are being formed in the Inland Empire that are bringing marginalized communities together around job creation, or access to education here in Los Angeles. So what’s different this time, as someone who was here during the civil unrest of the ‘90s, is that there is an authentic, genuine relationship among grassroots organizations and community leaders who come together to fight for greater
Is there a way, other than people changing their mindset, to get government or big institutions to develop this different kind of consciousness we see in community organizations?

Well, having independent district lines created is a way of removing individual interests from a very politicized process to maximize representation. Electing people who represent the entire community in their districts, not just the English-speaking community, is another way. But those things don't just happen. It requires conflict. Conflict is part of what exposes racism and discrimination and inequity, as we're seeing today. And it's not just about resolving that conflict, but acknowledging the underpinnings of it, leaning into that, and knowing that it's there. It's having an honest conversation about a path forward.

Government rarely reforms itself. And in this moment of crisis in governance, it's going to require the community to establish a path forward. It's not going to come from City Hall. And we have to be vocal, we have to be insistent, we have to vote, and we have to put systems in place, assuming the worst, but also ensuring that we don't just leave it to creating an independent commission and now everything's okay. Because that's not the only way in which this kind of zero sum game framework plays itself out. [Change] requires real work, and it's why we need a vibrant, thriving, strong civic leadership that's multicultural, that is grounded in community, and that is willing to raise the tough issues when it most matters.

When you held the highest administrative post in the city, you had your own setback. As these councilmembers face the prospect of resigning, they're probably in a position where they feel they're giving up their reason for being. What would you say to them?

Twelve years ago, I was arrested for drunk driving. It was a wake-up call for me. The only thing I had to change was everything. I had to assess my lifestyle, my priorities, my relationships, my friends, how I spend my time, my work. It was a moment of truth for me. I made the choice to accept the lesson that I was being taught through that experience and have been sober now for 12 years. That moment saved my life. And I’m very fortunate that at the end of the day, that happened to me.

When we all face setbacks, we all have moments of truth, moments that we’re not proud of. They’re not always as public. So my advice to three people who I know well, who I’ve stood by and who stood by me, is to take this moment to really reflect on what most matters — your family, your community, your values, your legacy — and to take the next steps that allow you your own healing process. I have no doubt that each one of them is undergoing a tremendous amount of pain to have their deepest, darkest thoughts exposed to the public.

Not only is the need for them to remove themselves from that conflict important for the community so that the community can heal; it’s important for them personally so that they...

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can heal, so that they can move on with their lives.

I don't wish anything bad to any one of them. I hope that they grow from this experience and are able to talk about this moment 12 years later, the way I could talk about my moment. But in addition to it being a personal failing, the implications are much broader. This is bigger than them now. This is about how, as a Latino community, we can demonstrate that we can govern and represent everybody. It’s about our relationship to other communities who have stood by us, and who we’ve stood by on many issues, and it’s about the future of the city. And so it’s important that they do the right thing, the honorable thing, and allow that process to begin.

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