There are many ways to serve the people of your country. Henry B. Gonzalez devoted his life to serving through elected office. He was born on May 3, 1916 in San Antonio, Texas and graduated from Jefferson High School, studied civil engineering for three years at the University of Texas at Austin, and graduated from St. Mary’s University School of Law. In 1940, he married Bertha Cuellar and together they raised eight children.

“Henry B.” as his friends, colleagues, and constituents affectionately knew him began his service in elective public office in 1953 when he was elected to the San Antonio City Council. He believed that all the citizens of San Antonio had the right to earn a decent living, receive a good education, and live in safe and healthy neighborhoods. While on the City Council he helped repeal city ordinances that segregated public facilities such as the swimming pools and the golf course. He worked to bring water lines into the slum areas of the city that had no running water.
In 1956, Mr. Gonzalez was elected to the Texas Senate. He was the first Mexican American senator in 115 years. In 1957, legislators from East Texas tried to pass a group of bills that would severely limit the civil and social rights of non-white citizens. Henry B. led a 36-hour filibuster against the bills. Because of the attention he brought to this situation only three of the bills were passed. The Texas Supreme Court later declared all three unconstitutional. When asked about his role as an advocate for the poor, Senator Gonzalez said, “I don’t think of myself as a do-gooder or a big crusader. I think I have always tried to keep my feet on the ground and do the practical thing.”

In 1961, Henry B. Gonzalez became the first Mexican American from Texas to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. When he moved into his office in Washington, D.C., he hung a sign on the door that said, “This Office Belongs to the People of Bexar County.” During an interview in October 1963, a reporter for Catholic Digest asked Congressman Gonzalez what advice he had for his fellow politicians. Gonzalez answered, “Get out of Washington. Find out what the people are doing, how they are living. Go visit the lines in employment offices; visit the places where surplus food is distributed; sit for a day in juvenile court; visit prisons. Go to a national park and see how foresight and planning have conserved our natural resources. It could do the same for human resources. Walk around the slums and talk with the people who live in them. Even the kings of old visited their kingdoms.” Henry B. practiced what he preached for the next 37 years.

Henry B. was an ardent supporter of the Civil Rights Movement. He used his influence in Congress to bring attention to Texas and several other states that continued to charge a poll tax. The very first piece of legislation he introduced in congress called for outlawing the poll tax in any state. In Texas you had to pay $1.75 by January 31 of each year at a time when most
working people made as little as 40 and 50 cents per hour. This fee often made it too expensive for poor people, especially African Americans and Mexicans to cast their votes on Election Day.

From his first days in office, Congressman Gonzalez demonstrated his commitment to providing equal opportunities to people of different genders, races, and religions. He hired a woman, Gail Beagle to serve as his Chief of Staff, when there were very few women in such positions in Congressional offices. He was also the first Congressmen, south of the Mason-Dixon line, to hire African Americans for his staff. One of his caseworkers was a woman of Mexican and Chinese descent named Ella Wong. She spoke and wrote fluent Spanish and English.

As President Lyndon Johnson worked to pass the Civil rights Act of 1964, Congressman Gonzalez made speeches supporting the legislation and voting to pass the bill. President Johnson later thanked Rep. Gonzalez for his help in providing greater civil and social rights to more Americans.

Shortly after retiring from public office, Henry B. Gonzalez died on November 28, 2000. At his memorial service, which was televised live on San Antonio television stations, U.S. Representative Kika de la Garza said, “He was a man of the people. There was no high, no low, no rich, no poor, no black, no white. They were all children of God.”