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La Raza in Vietnam: The Experience of Chicano Veterans

**Introduction**

The American War in Vietnam[[1]](#footnote-1) steadily lost support at home as revelations of atrocities as well as dishonesty from government officials emerged, prompting varying responses from different groups within the United States. The conflict in Vietnam coincided with the Civil Rights Movement, which led many Black GIs to question their obligation to fight in the name of the government that oppressed them. The American war in Vietnam is also recognized as a conflict that disproportionately affected lower-income Americans, regardless of ethnicity. Less educated, working-class young men were unable to secure the deferments that spared middle- and upper-class whites from conscription. Yet, in the era of the conflict in Vietnam, one group that is often overlooked are Chicano and other Latino veterans. Due to the interaction of ethnicity and socioeconomic status, Chicano veterans and the Chicano Movement are essential subjects of study if we are to gain a fuller understanding of the Vietnam War and the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. Primary source accounts from Chicano veterans and activists form the basis for this essay. Original interpretations of published interviews accessed via *PBS* and the University of Texas will examine the experience of Chicanos in the military, the devastating effects on their communities, and their perspectives on the United States and their place in it. Due to their economic vulnerability and questioned loyalty, the American War in Vietnam led to higher rates of conscription and deaths among Latinos. While it caused varying responses among Latino veterans, the Chicano youth were emboldened to advocate for their communities and demand equal rights.

**Mexican Americans before the Chicano Movement**

Although the terms “civil rights” or “desegregation” in the United States evoke the struggles of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, Latinos in the United States had launched a fight for equality decades before. Based on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, through which the United States acquired the southwestern territories of California, New Mexico, Texas and others, ethnic Mexicans residing on the newly American land should have received equal rights and privileges as other Americans. Much like the treaties and agreements made with other minority groups, these guarantees were not carried out in practice. In an attempt to protect their rights as workers, strikes and revolts were common in the southwestern United States; tragically, they often ended violently. These revolts began as early as 1913 but were widespread between the 1930s and the 1950s from California to Denver and New Mexico and up to Chicago, to name a few examples.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Accord to Dr. Carlos Muñoz, Jr., emeritus professor of Chicano/Latino Studies at the University of California-Berkeley, Mexican American children were educated at segregated schools that taught that their culture was inferior; these children were also disproportionately identified as students with disabilities and were often encouraged to drop out of school to join the labor force.[[3]](#footnote-3) Although Mexican American groups began to challenge these injustices as early as 1930, the first case to bring about widespread change was *Mendez v. Westminster* in 1946. This case led not only to the desegregation of public schools in the state of California, but to the end of a system akin to the Jim Crow south, where Mexican Americans were forced to exist in a separate sphere of public space. The *Mendez v. Westminster* federal case would lay the groundwork for thelandmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case eight years later.

Since their incorporation into the United States with the landgrabs of the mid-1800s, Mexican Americans have often felt pressured to prove themselves as loyal American citizens. World War II provided an opportunity for Chicanos to demonstrate their dedication to their country by serving in the military. In her book *Raza Sí, Guerra No: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era,* Dr. Lorena Oropeza of the University of California-Davis wrote that between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexican Americans fought in World War II while countless others supported defense industries.[[4]](#footnote-4) Chicano contributions to World War II rightfully cemented their efforts for equal rights, but the activism “...confirmed traditional patterns of supplication, embraced a narrow conception of citizenship, and mitigated criticism of U.S. institutions.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Mexican Americans often pointed to military service as proof of their “whiteness” and right to citizenship, rather than being able to demand equal rights as Chicanos.

Although the 1950s was certainly not a period known for radical activism, many crucial Mexican American organizations were formed during this time. As a result of the GI Bill, many Latino veterans of World War II were able to access a higher education, enhancing their existing community leadership.[[6]](#footnote-6) Members of groups such as the Association of Mexican American Educators (AMAE) and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) began to form a new Latino middle class, which generally supported the moderate policies of the democratic party.

**Chicano Activism during the Vietnam War**

By the 1960s, however, this culture of modest reform was no longer sufficient for many Chicanos, especially the youth. Their parents and grandparents had sought acceptance in American society by proving their loyalty in the armed forces and enduring assimilation for the sake for self-preservation. Diverging from the previous generation, Chicano youth embraced their ethnicity and began to explore their identities at a level their ancestors had not enjoyed. Oropeza explained that the youth “...forcefully rejected the traditional standards of belonging that Anglo-American society had set...in favor of a recognition of and even celebration of their indigenous inheritance.[[7]](#footnote-7) Embracing their ethnic identity, the Chicano Movement mirrored the Black American activists by launching their own “brown power” initiatives. Oropeza recounted that Chicano youth began reexamining their history and positioning themselves as belonging, not only to the United States, but to the Americas as a whole. The concept of Aztlán, which was the homeland of the Aztecs and the present-day American Southwest, was adopted as the origin of Chicano identity and legitimacy.[[8]](#footnote-8) During the 1960s, the cultural realignment of young Mexican Americans cannot be overstated.

Led mainly by young Chicanos, educational reform became a focal point of the Chicano Movement. In 1969, the students of Crystal City High School in Texas organized a walkout to protest the inequalities of education and recruitment among Chicano students. According to the *PBS* documentary *On Two Fronts*, the student population, which was eighty-five percent Latino, demanded to be instructed by more Latino teachers and counselors, wanted courses taught on Chicano studies, and sought to ban all military recruitment in the high school.[[9]](#footnote-9) Student organizers were keenly aware that high schools with predominantly white student populations enjoyed the presence of college recruiters, while Latino high schoolers were only viewed as future soldiers.

The American War in Vietnam was closely connected to the Chicano Movement. Many Chicano leaders took clear stances against the war based on their identity as well as the perceived injustice of the war itself. David Sanchez was the founder of the Brown Berets, a Chicano group dedicated to fighting for workers’ rights, equal educational opportunities, and speaking against police violence. Regarding the conflict in Vietnam, Sanchez asserted that Mexican Americans had closer historical and genetic ties to Black Americans as well as the Vietnamese people; therefore, Chicanos should not fight in Vietnam but focus on the “European foreigners” in the United States.[[10]](#footnote-10) Manuel Gómez, the leader of the Chicano Movement in San Francisco, similarly viewed Chicanos and the Vietnamese as brothers united by “...a bigger, systematic oppression of a brutal empire” and refused his induction into the military on the grounds that, as a child of “la raza,” he would not kill his brothers.[[11]](#footnote-11) Despite the global perspective of many college activists, other Chicanos focused on issues at home. Lea Ybarra and Nina Genera were two Chicanas who participated in the anti-war aspect of the Chicano Movement by going to induction centers in an attempt to inform Latinos of their possibilities for deferments. The young women also co-authored the anti-draft booklet *La Batalla Está Aquí* (the battle is here) to convince young men to use “...their potential here at home.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Regardless of their motivations, many young Chicanos involved in the movement did not support military action and prioritized civil rights at home.

**Oral History Accounts: *On Two Fronts***

A main source of oral history used in this essay was the *PBS* documentary *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*. The documentary followed multiple stories from Latino and Chicano veterans who fought in the American War in Vietnam war, others who demonstrated against the war, and the impact of the war on Latino communities in the United States. One individual closely followed by this documentary was Everett Alvarez, Jr., a Navy pilot who was shot down and captured by North Vietnamese forces as a result of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. *On Two Fronts* detailed the reactions of his family, including his sister, Delia Alvarez, who became a staunch opponent of the American War in Vietnam. Dr. Lorena Oropeza, a historian at the University of California-Davis, explained that Alvarez was in a unique position as a minority soldier in the elite role of a pilot. This unique position was also reflected on his family, who were often interviewed regarding their stances on the war and their feelings on having a family member as a prisoner of war.

Another main focus of the documentary *On Two Fronts* was the experience of the people of Greenlee County, Arizona, specifically in the town of Morenci. Morenci represented the tragic experience of many small, working class towns. At the time of the American War in Vietnam, it was home to around six thousand residents who were mainly supported economically by the nearby copper mine. Residents interviewed in *On Two Fronts*, described Morenci as a town that segregated white Anglos from Latinos and Black Americans. Vietnam veteran Art Montez recalled that the career choices for Morenci youth were limited to working for the mine, working in the fields, or joining the service; higher education was not a viable option.[[13]](#footnote-13) Many graduating high school students viewed service in the military as their chance to escape from Morenci and see the world. In 1966, nine young men from the graduating class of that year joined the Army together and were sent to Vietnam, becoming known as the ‘Morenci Nine.’ Five of the boys were Anglo, three identified as Mexican American, and one was a member of the Navajo Nation. Six of the young men were ultimately killed, greatly exceeding the expected death rate of ten percent cited in the documentary by Dr. Kyle Longley of Arizona State University.

The veterans interviewed from Morenci described an intensely patriotic culture in which the Mexican American community felt the need to defend and prove their loyalty to the United States. Morenci veterans recounted that Chicanos felt an obligation to serve the United States and prove that they were even more patriotic than Anglo Americans. This intensity of this duty often prompted young men to choose to serve in the Marine Corps, proving that they were the “toughest of tough.” In Greenlee County, residents recalled that the anti-war movement was not tolerated in their community, since questioning the government could cast doubt upon the image of loyalty that generations of Mexican American soldiers had worked to preserve. It was virtually impossible to find a family in Morenci that was not affected by the war. Throughout the course of the war, thirteen servicemembers from Morenci were killed in Vietnam.

**Overarching Themes and Supporting Accounts**

Chicano communities in the United States faced disproportionately high casualties during the Vietnam War. This discrimination arose from the convergence of ethnicity and socio-economic status and had a profound impact on Mexican American communities across the United States. Along with the documentary *On Two Fronts*, the University of Texas Voces Oral History Project provided an insightful look into the social history of Chicanos. The university accumulated numerous accounts on the topics of Mexican American activism and military service, including seventy-one experiences related to the Vietnam War. These accounts reinforced the themes from the documentary discussed above and further personalize demographic trends.

*Ethnicity and identity.* An element that clearly influenced the Chicano experience in Vietnam was ethnicity. Antonio Santiago, a Marine of Puerto Rican descent, recalled that, as a child growing up in a mixed minority neighborhood in New York City, he had no negative experiences related to his ethnicity. However, when he joined the military, discrimination against Black or Latino soldiers was evident in that they were overwhelmingly assigned to most dangerous positions.[[14]](#footnote-14) Through this adversity, Santiago came to identify more strongly with his Puerto Rican heritage and even visited Puerto Rico after his service. Another Puerto Rican, Germán Abadía-Olmena experienced an intense feeling of disconnect from the Army due to his ethnicity. Abadía remembered that many of his fellow soldiers questioned where Puerto Rico was located and that he was taunted for his difficulties with English.[[15]](#footnote-15) On the other hand, John Aleman, a college-educated officer, never recalled receiving unjust treatment in the military.[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Socio-economic status.* Overwhelming, the American War in Vietnam required sacrifices from the poorest American families. Young men who belonged to white, middle-class families were generally able to secure deferments because they were able to enroll in college directly after high school. Even if a young man was enrolled in college, any financial hardship resulting in a break in higher education would subject that person to the draft. In small, mostly Latino communities, college was simply not an option for many young men, leaving them vulnerable to the draft at higher rates than their white counterparts. From the oral history accounts collected by the University of Texas, it was clear that the socio-economic status of many Chicano families made their sons victims of the draft. Veteran Dan Arellano recalled that, as migrant workers, he and siblings would miss large chunks of the school, often beginning the academic year a month late.[[17]](#footnote-17) Boot camp was the first time Arellano had received three meals a day. Veteran Felipe Ramirez III shared that his family traveled from Texas to California every summer to work seasonal agricultural jobs.[[18]](#footnote-18) The necessity of working to support their families left many young men at an educational disadvantage.

*Benefits of military service.* Although veterans willing to share their experiences often recounted the many negative aspects of military service, many also recognized the benefits they enjoyed from joining the military. John Aleman, a college graduate who enlisted and became an officer, felt that serving in the military brought him respect and the opportunity to travel with his wife.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, the limitations of this respect were seen when Aleman returned to the United States and had difficulty renting a house. Nonetheless, Aleman maintained that his experience in the military gave him the confidence to fill the role as a community leader at home.[[20]](#footnote-20) The same was true of Dan Arellano, who returned home motivated to document his community’s local history and be an active in local government.[[21]](#footnote-21)

It is also important to mention that Latino veterans also suffered the same difficulties as other American soldiers, including negative impacts on their health and moral dilemmas regarding the war itself. Felipe Ramirez III was discharged due to the severity of the wounds he sustained in Vietnam and diagnosed with PTSD; he was still receiving medical treatment at the time of his interview in 2011.[[22]](#footnote-22) Germán Abadía also suffered from PTSD and Agent Orange exposure after returning to Vietnam and shared that he wished he had not fought in such a “political war.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Despite the benefits of being an officer, John Aleman also stated that he wished the war had not happened. After almost being attacked by a group of men desperate for food, he realized the U.S. was fighting people who “simply wanted to make it through the day” and blamed policymakers in Washington for the difficult position of families across the world.[[24]](#footnote-24)

**The Perspective of Chicano Veterans**

Although Chicano youth activists and Chicano veterans hailed from the same communities, it is important to recognize their experiences and ideals in the 1960s and 1970s could diverge significantly. In her book *Vietnam Veteranos: Chicanos Recall the War*, Ybarra and Olmos synthesize the experiences of Chicano veterans in the context of their political awareness. Based on her interviews with numerous veterans, Ybarra and Olmos conclude that most Chicanos in the military felt a sense of duty to serve and that the vast majority (90 percent) had little knowledge of the political issues surrounding the conflict in Vietnam.[[25]](#footnote-25) This ignorance, however, was less common as the war progressed, because veterans who served in the later years of the American War in Vietnam were aware of anti-war protests and general unpopularity of the conflict. In this manner, Chicano soldiers developed doubts about the American presence in the same way as other American GIs. Many Chicano veterans also felt that they became more politically aware during or after their service in Vietnam. Ybarra and Olmos noted that the topic of anti-war demonstrations evoked strong reactions from the veterans.[[26]](#footnote-26) These perspectives were also similar to the reactions of the typical American soldiers in that some individuals felt disrespected while others felt indifferent. Ybarra also touched on the veterans’ perspectives on foreign policy and concluded that almost all of the veterans were against military involvement in other countries and many felt that the U.S. government often supported dictatorships or corporations.[[27]](#footnote-27) Based on her interviews, Ybarra concluded that many Chicano veterans felt politically awakened by their service in Vietnam.

Unlike college activists, Ybarra found that most Chicano servicemembers did not make general connections between their ethnicity and the conflict in Vietnam. Of course, these veterans experienced racism and discrimination at home; it simply did not have a strong impact on the servicemembers’ outlooks on the war. Chicano soldiers “...did not identify with the Vietnamese as being people of color like themselves. They saw them only as the enemy….”[[28]](#footnote-28) However, most of the interviewed veterans asserted that racial tensions within the military itself were high, especially in the later years of the war. Some also expressed frustration that their service to the United States did not positively affect their job outlook or position as an American citizen. It is worth noting that some Mexican American veterans did explore this connection when they returned to the relative safety of home.

**Conclusion**

Although the Chicano Movement completely challenged the traditional ideas of Mexican American identity, many Chicano veterans did not share in the revolutionary values of the youth. It is important to realize that every Chicano veteran experienced the American War in Vietnam in an individual manner and formed their own perspective. Similar to the experiences of Anglo-American GIs, many Chicano veterans suffered from health problems and doubted both their purpose in Vietnam as well as intensions and policies of the U.S. government. What set Chicanos apart in the Vietnam era, however, was the devastating impact that service in the military had on their communities. The town of Morenci was just one example of small towns in the Southwest who lost several young men during the course of the war. Young Latino men often had no path to college and little employment options, leaving military service as a sole option. Although the United States has not employed conscription since the conflict in Vietnam, it is still vital to consider the role that ethnicity, education, and socioeconomic status have on the opportunities of young people in the present day.

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5. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Muñoz, “The Chicano Movement,” 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*, directed by Mylène Moreno (2015; Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Service), https://www.pbs.org/video/stories-service-two-fronts-latinos-vietnam-full-episode/. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 90, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Oropeza, *Raza Sí, Guerra No*, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mylène, *On Two Fronts*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mylène, *On Two Fronts*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ximena Mejorado, “Germán Abadía-Olmeda,” interview by Manuel Avilés-Santiago, *Voces Oral History Collection*, University of Texas, June 17, 2010, webpage, https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/german-abadia-olmeda. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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19. Dawson, interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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26. Ybarra and Olmos, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 213.  [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ybarra and Olmos, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ybarra and Olmos, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)