

¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!

The Chicano Movement from South Vietnam to the American Southwest

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The overlap between the civil rights and anti-war movements within the Chicano Movement came to a head on August 29, 1970, when protesters in Los Angeles took to the streets as part of the National Chicano Moratorium to protest the war in Vietnam. Between twenty and thirty thousand demonstrators took to the streets of East Los Angeles in the battle for social justice and equality. Marching to chants of “CHICANO POWER” and gathering in Laguna Park, since renamed Ruben Salazar Park, while listening to Mexican folk music and speeches from civil rights leaders and anti-war advocates, the people gathered that day to spread a message of peace, unity, and equality. The origins of the Chicano Movement in the Vietnam era can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century when the Chicano identity itself emerged from a search for belonging amidst intense segregation and cultural disenfranchisement. The Chicano identity became simultaneously interwoven with both the larger civil rights movement as well as the new American culture that developed after the Second World War. The Chicano Movement’s early alignment with African American civil rights leaders and organizations placed the two in similar cross-hairs as the FBI’s COINTELPRO operations came into full swing during the 1960s. Many of these elements directly led to a disproportionate

number of Chicano casualties in Vietnam. This in turn led to the union of the civil rights and anti-war halves of the movement. On August 29th, 1970, this movement exploded into violence when the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) violently dispersed the peaceful National Chicano Moratorium to protest the war in Vietnam. The massacre at the Chicano Moratorium signifies a low point in the civil rights history of the United States, but it is also clear evidence of how different factions, social pressures, and motivations unified the Chicano movement during the Vietnam War.

The Chicano civil rights movement became closely linked to the anti-war movement as it became increasingly clear that Chicano soldiers were dying and being wounded at highly disproportionate numbers in Vietnam. Until the 1960s, the United States Government classified the majority of Hispanic citizens as “white”, making statistics from the war difficult to verify. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the Chicano population made up less than five percent of the nation’s population. High end estimates place the number of Chicano casualties at nearly nineteen percent of the total number of deaths in Vietnam.¹ The disproportionate number of Chicano casualties became a major point in anti-war demonstrations in Los Angeles and across the Southwest. As

¹ Steven Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War: Chicano Politics, Identity, and Masculinity in the U.S. Military from World War II to Vietnam* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018), 99.

historian Steven Rosales has argued, while these estimates certainly reflect a disproportionate number of Chicano casualties, to conclude that, “communities of color were specifically targeted for their race is shortsighted. Rather, the institutions most responsible for channeling young men into the military, including the draft, exploited the working poor throughout the nation, including working-class whites.”² In other words, disparities in wealth, education, and job opportunities meant that many poor members of the Chicano population were significantly less likely to be able to avoid the draft, thereby making them far more likely to enlist given an apparent lack of other opportunities. This meant that resolving civil-rights issues for Chicano communities would inherently improve the problem seen in Vietnam casualty numbers. A number of Chicano civil rights leaders like Cesar Chavez and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales became outspoken voices for both issues.

To understand the relationship between the Chicano Movement and the Vietnam War, and how these two spheres collided on August 29th, 1970, one must examine the history of the Chicano identity and how it evolved over the course of the twentieth century. Economic and systemic discrimination were not the only forces that drove young Chicano men into military service. Cultural discrimination and internal pressures within the Chicano community itself also resulted in a great deal of pressure towards the military.

Nearly fifty years before the war in Vietnam and the killings at the Moratorium, the unique essence of the Chicano identity began to emerge during the roaring twenties. Second-generation children often grew up alienated from both their parents’ Mexican heritage and the dominant Anglo-American culture they were surrounded by.

Additionally, many Chicanos had been left in a place of cultural uncertainty after the treaty of This led to what historians Mario T. Garcia and Ellen McCracken refer to as a unique “street culture of their own.”³ The Chicano identity was far more than just a trendy street culture, however. The blending of indigenous cultures with “modern” elements through music and art was rhetorically significant during civil and anti-war movements of the 60s and early 70s, and much of this art, poetry, and music traced its origins back to the emergence of the Chicano identity during the early twentieth century. The term “Chicano” has fallen in and out of favor over the decades, as it has historically referenced only the Mexican-American population, thus leading to the emergence of “Hispanic” and “Latinx” to represent the diverse heritage of the movement more accurately. Nevertheless, the Chicano identity was a source of pride in the 1960s that heavily drew upon Mexican heritage, indigeneity, and a romanticized view of the past. The development of this unified identity helped bring together the later Chicano activist movements under one cultural banner.

For second generation Chicanos in the 1930s and 40s, a great deal of civil rights activism was centered around education reform and ending segregation in schools. This aligned the movement with African American civil rights movements early on. It also set the stage for later harassment from anti-communist, House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) operations that traced their origins to the years just before the Second World War. As Muñoz has argued, Chicano populations experienced the education system as a means of imperial domination in a manner similar to the indigenous

² Ibid.

³ Mario T. García and Ellen McCracken, *Rewriting the Chicano Movement: New Histories of Mexican American Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021, 4.

populations of North America. Education for the Chicano population was focused on indoctrinating Chicano populations into the American Way of Life and disrupting traditional Mexican culture while simultaneously limiting the likelihood of Chicanos from entering institutions of higher education. This institutionalized segregation generally drove Chicano people into jobs involving manual labor, agricultural work, or military service. This de facto segregation led to a solidarity with not only other American minorities and indigenous populations, but also with international victims of imperialism. During the years of the Vietnam War, many Chicano soldiers would later see a striking resemblance between their own plight and that of the Vietnamese.

For decades the Chicano population was largely restricted to participation in the economy as a source of cheap farm labor, with only a very few members joining the ranks of the middle class or earning college degrees.⁴ A major early success came with the 1947 ruling of “Mendez v. Westminster” which ruled in favor of the nine-year-old Sylvia Mendez and her right to an education free of discrimination. Case precedent from “Mendez v. Westminster” was later invoked by Thurgood Marshall in “Brown v. Board of Education.”⁵ Marshall had represented Mendez, and the case is a clear example of the early overlap between the African American and Chicano civil rights movements. This overlap continued into the 1950s and 60s during President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s own political career.

Johnson’s rise to the presidency was widely supported by Chicano activists who saw a great deal of promise in Johnson’s Great Society policies. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting

Rights Act of 1965 of course benefited African Americans, they were just as beneficial to Mexican Americans and other ethnic minorities. As historian Lorena Oropeza has argued, Johnson’s Civil Rights policies and his War on Poverty combined to build a very strong basis of support among Mexican American communities. Still, many Mexican American activists felt their own struggle was being sidelined in favor of the African American Civil Rights Movement within the Johnson administration.⁶ Chicanos often found themselves caught in the middle in struggles between white and black, especially during the race riots that rocked the military after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. In addition to his own Texas heritage and time in politics during the Great Depression, Johnson’s familiarity and respect for Mexican Americans developed during the Second World War. He once commented: “The American soldiers of Mexican origin served with distinction. They fought courageously. They gave their lives, when need be, valiantly.”⁷ Neither white nor black, the Chicano identity fully emerged as its own movement during the 1960s. The Second World War was a way to align Mexican American interests with the larger civil rights movement, while also paying homage to their own cultural heritage and unique identity within the established American status quo. Nevertheless, the social pressures to serve in the military were only reinforced by such sentiments as expressed by public figures like Johnson. For better or worse, as much as Johnson’s Great Society policies helped marginalized communities, the events of the Second World War and its place in American memory solidified the association between military service and being Chicano. By the time of the Vietnam War, this

⁴ Carlos Muñoz, “The Chicano Movement: Mexican American History and the Struggle for Equality,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 17, no. 1–2 (2018): 32–33. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691497-12341465>.

⁵ Carlos Muñoz, “The Chicano Movement,” 34.

⁶ Lorena Oropeza. *Raza Si, Guerra No: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, Accessed December 1, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 49–50.

⁷ Johnson as quoted by Oropeza, *Ibid.*, 50.

meant far more Chicano's were pressured to enlist into the military.

The Second World War played a major role in reshaping the demographics and culture of the Chicano population. While the vast majority continued to work as laborers and farmers, many Chicano veterans of the war were able to take advantage of the G.I. Bill to pursue degrees in higher education. This increased the size of the Chicano middle-class and became clear proof that military service was one of the best ways to find success in the world. While this was a great boon to many Chicano veterans and their families, it also marked a division in the Chicano Movement. To many Chicanos the new middle class represented an Americanized and watered down version of Chicano heritage. It was an identity that had been shaped through shedding blood in service of the state which, in the eyes of many, had repressed Chicano livelihood for generations. The generations that followed found themselves torn between living up to an honorable family tradition of serving in the military while also perpetrating a system of violence against the Vietnamese that in many ways paralleled their own subjugation a century prior. In his self-produced documentary, Chicano veteran Charley Trujillo recalls how the Vietnamese, "would compare arms and they'd say 'same same'... it seems as though they took our farm workers to go fight their farm workers."⁸ With cultural and political pressures driving many Chicanos into military service, such sentiments as expressed by Trujillo reflect a growing dissatisfaction with both the war and the civil inequalities back in the United States.

The emerging Chicano identity was intimately

connected with the concept of machismo as well as the lengthy history of Chicano military service throughout World War II and the Korean War.⁹ In the early years of the Cold War, military service became a common motif in Chicano ballads and culture as a way to signify service to one's country, a way to earn equality with white Americans, and as a way to reinforce "a profound sense of patriarchal responsibility..."¹⁰ It also came to reflect a growing desire to associate with the legendary Chicano gunslingers of the Wild West and the ancient warriors of the pre-colonial Aztec Empire. The rise of paramilitary youth organizations, such as the Brown Berets in 1967, aligns closely with this trend. On being questioned as to why he enlisted, Chicano veteran Larry Holquin answered "I joined the service because my country called for it, and I was proud to be an American and I was proud to be an athlete. I was proud."¹¹ Trujillo similarly remarked: "I wanted my family to be proud of me. My dad was a World War II veteran, my uncle Sam was a World War II veteran, my uncle Alfredo fought in Korea, and I wanted to be a hero."¹² In Lea Ybarra and Edward James Olmos's book *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War*, the majority of the veterans interviewed share similar answers. Many were drafted and had no clue what was going on in Vietnam, but countless others enlisted either out of a sense of patriotic or familial duty or as a way to avoid getting drafted.¹³ These answers are hardly unlike the responses any number of white or black veterans might give to the same question but many of the veterans interviewed in Trujillo's documentary agree that they had a unique preparation for the war. Farm hand experience

⁸ Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, "SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam," PBS, September 2, 2003, YouTube video, 25:54. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsdizlRrf1U>, 00:13:30

⁹ Steven Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War*, 119; Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, "SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam," 00:7:13

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, "SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam," 00:3:45

¹² Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, "SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam," 00:3:55

¹³ Lea Ybarra, "Chapter Two", in *Vietnam Veterans: Chicanos Recall the War*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, Accessed November 27, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central.

and time in the cotton fields of the Salinas Valley and beet farms along the Front Range made them tougher and more equipped for soldiering than most of the non-Chicano soldiers they encountered while serving in Vietnam.¹⁴

The experience of many Chicano soldiers in Vietnam was closely shaped by their agricultural backgrounds in the United States. The history of farm labor and Chicano civil rights activism is equally connected. In addition to his outspokenness against the war in Vietnam, Cesar Chavez, and the United Farm Worker (UFW) labor union focused a great deal of his activism on the plight of the rural Chicano laborer. Even before the increasingly militant tone that was to come in the Chicano movement, UFW grape and lettuce strikes in California brought together the Black Panther Party (BPP), who the Brown Berets would later be modeled on, and the UFW Chicano Movement as part of what Lauren Araiza has identified as a class struggle that transcended racial lines and methodologies.¹⁵ Though, as Araiza has pointed out, the pre-1970 Chicano Movement was hardly socialist in nature, the BPPs willingness to work with a wide variety of civil rights organizations regardless of political affiliation or race encouraged such an alliance. The produce strikes of the late 60s brought together the Chicano Movement and the BPP as a united front for racial equality and workers' rights, something that brought dire consequences for the Chicano Movement in later years. Though COINTELPRO had not been officially made public, many in the civil rights movements were aware that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was practically at war with the BPP at this point. Though, as Escobar has concluded, there is little

if any evidence publicly available that confirms the FBI or LAPD's direct orders to conduct such operations against either the UFW or the Chicano Movement using COINTELPROs verbatim, it's clear that government officials took a similar attitude to the Chicano activists as they did the BPP and other potentially subversive civil rights groups.¹⁶

It is a misconception that COINTELPRO operations had to be directly undertaken by FBI operatives, as a major strategy of the program was built around operating through smaller government agencies, local law enforcement agencies, state and county level courts, and unaffiliated individual actors. Given Hoover's animosity towards the BPP and the lengthy campaign of violence directed against that organization, when one considers the close working relationship between the Chicano Movement, through Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Brown Berets, and the BPP, the violent string of arrests, political smear campaigns, and protest disruptions by city level law enforcement agencies in California and Colorado as, if not fully endorsed by the FBI, at least in line with COINTELPRO interests.

Many Chicanos were pressured by family members to drop out of school early to help work. Even though the G.I. Bill had increased the number of Chicanos with college degrees, they were still a minority in the higher education system. Rosales argues that Chicano populations were channeled into the military through various institutions and systemic causes, and that this resulted in a higher percentage of poor enlisted men, and by extension a higher percentage of minority enlisted troops.¹⁷ While this is a very sound argument and one that is widely supported, the firsthand accounts in

¹⁴ Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, "SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam," 00:6:30

¹⁵ Lauren Araiza, "'In Common Struggle against a Common Oppression': The United Farm Workers and the Black Panther Party, 1968-1973," *The Journal of African American History* 94, no. 2 (2009): 201-208, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25610076>.

¹⁶ Edward J. Escobar, "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1483-1514. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080213>.

¹⁷ Steven Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War*, 100.

Trujillo's documentary and Ybarra's text make the case that Chicano and Puerto Rican soldiers were far more likely to walk point, carry supplies, or be sent out on dangerous night ambushes. This meant that while systemic issues may have resulted in a greater proportion of poor and ethnic minorities serving in the military, there was still an increased sense of danger for those men on the ground.¹⁸ For Chicano soldiers, this was especially heightened by internal social pressures in addition to systemic and racial prejudices within the Armed Forces. These risky postings may have come from discrimination within the armed forces or from a risk-taking attitude associated with machismo in masculine Chicano culture, or most likely a blending of the two, but nevertheless it culminated in an undeniably disproportionate number of Chicano soldiers being wounded in combat. As a result, protests demanding equality and civil rights inherently aligned with the demands of Chicano anti-war activists.

To people like Cesar Chavez, the Chicano civil rights movement had little to do with nationalism, rather these activists were focused on labor rights and bringing an end to the inequalities that the Chicano population faced throughout the Southwest. Along with the United Farm Worker movement founded by Chavez in the labor force, Chicano activism found a major basis of support in the student body of the nation.¹⁹ Throughout the 1960s, numerous student-led Chicano walkouts occurred in high schools and colleges alike throughout the southwest. The 1970 Chicano Moratorium was the largest walk out, but a similarly large student protest had occurred in Los Angeles only two years before in 1968. The presence of nationalistic Chicano leaders such as Rodolfo

“Corky” Gonzales at the Moratorium and the subsequent brutal reprisal by the LAPD marked a significant shift in the public image of the Chicano movement. Gonzales' Denver based paramilitary and civil rights organization Crusade for Justice would come under great scrutiny for his activities throughout the Southwest. While the LAPD clearly struck first in 1970, a series of violent skirmishes and bombings with the FBI and Denver Police whittled away the group's public support in the post war years.

During the mid-1960s however, a great deal of uncertainty was brewing as to where the Chicano population stood in relation to the rest of the nation. As Oropeza has argued, the 1967 poem *Yo soy Joaquín* (I Am Joaquín) written by Corky Gonzales marked a significant turning point in the rhetoric of the Chicano movement and what it meant as an identity.²⁰

My blood runs pure on the ice caked hills of the Alaskan Isles, on the corpse strewn beach of Normandy, the foreign land of Korea and now Vietnam...Here I stand, Poor in money, Arrogant with pride, Bold with machismo, Rich in courage and, Wealthy in spirit and faith. My knees are caked with mud. My hands calloused from the hoe. I have made the Anglo rich yet, Equality is but a word, the Treaty of Hidalgo has been broken and is but another treacherous promise. My land is lost and stolen, my culture has been raped...My faith unbreakable, my blood is pure, I am Aztec Prince and Christian Christ I SHALL ENDURE! I WILL ENDURE!²¹

The poem drew heavily upon romantic and nationalist themes., This connected the ethnic identity of the Chicano population to a semi-

¹⁸ Charley Trujillo and Sonya Rhee, “SOLDADOS: Chicanos in Vietnam,” 00:6:55

¹⁹ Steven Rosales, *Soldados Razos at War*, 99.

²⁰ Lorena Oropeza. *Raza Si, Guerra No: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, Accessed December 1, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central, 81.

²¹ Rodolfo Gonzales, *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales / Compiled, with an Introduction, by Antonio Esquibel; with a Preface by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, a Foreword by Rodolfo F. Acuña and an Editor’s Note by Henry A.J. Ramos*, Arte Público Press, 2001, 25-29.

mythical Aztec heritage that endowed the Chicano population with the right to self-determination and control of the Southwest. This increasingly nationalistic and militant edge to the Chicano Movement drew its validation from the failure of the United States government to recognize the property rights of Mexicans in the aftermath of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.²² It also reflected increasing concerns about illegal immigration and the inevitable impact on the labor of “legal” Chicanos represented by the UFW. Gonzales’ rhetoric also spoke to much larger concerns surrounding the nature of American imperialism, manifest destiny, and cultural genocide. If the sentiment of soldiers like Charley Trujillo that the Chicano had no reason to fight against the Vietnamese was felt strongly in the field, those feelings were doubled on the home front where the loss of young community members to the military significantly impacted families already suffering from difficult economic and social pressures. The poetic claim that the United States was using Chicano blood as currency in a white man’s imperialist war became an iconic rallying cry from Los Angeles to Denver.

The slogan “¡Raza Sí! ¡Guerra No!” perfectly encapsulated Gonzales’ thesis in *Yo soy Joaquín*, and it became a hallmark of Chicano protests throughout the war. In the eyes of Gonzales, and the thousands of protesters who followed his lead, one could not be Chicano and also participate in the war in Vietnam. Such increasingly radical and potentially separatist leanings within the Chicano movement furthered its association with other militant groups such as the Black Panthers. This was especially true in the eyes of government officials at both the local and national level.

The crowd that gathered on August 29th,

1970, was diverse. Some were members of the Brown Berets, a paramilitary wing of the Chicano Movement modeled on the Black Panther Party. A large portion were students from local high schools and universities who had staged mass walkouts in protest of the war. Others were Chicano nationalists seeking to unite the Chicano people to reclaim the mythical Aztec territories of Aztlán in the five Southwestern states occupied by the United States. Many were musicians and poets. The rest were probably members of the community who showed up in an act of solidarity. After catching a rumor of shoplifting in one gas station, the LAPD arrived at the protest, where they declared the gathering illegal and ordered thousands of people to disperse. The event quickly turned violent as law enforcement officers began to use tear gas to disperse the crowds while violently attacking men, women, and children of all ages. Numerous people were severely injured in the violence and three people were killed by police, including the renowned Los Angeles journalist Ruben Salazar.²³

Tragically, the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles became one of the most notable events of the Chicano movement. As the different anti-war and civil rights factions worked against a background of intense internal and external social pressures, many of these different actors and motivations became unified in speaking out against the Vietnam War for various reasons. The unfair treatment of Chicano soldiers and veterans became a rallying cry for activists from across the nation, many of whom had been raised on a false promise of equality through the fulfillment of military obligation. The protests that arose from this united voice drew the ire of the FBI and local law enforcement agencies who ultimately settled on violence as a response to peace.

²² Carlos Muñoz, “The Chicano Movement, 32.

²³ Edward J. Escobar, “The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971,” *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1483. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2080213>.

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