

THE MEXICAN AMERICAN VIETNAM WAR SERVICEMAN:
THE MISSING AMERICAN

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ABSTRACT

The Mexican American Vietnam War Serviceman: The Missing American

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The Vietnam War brought many changes to society in that it soon became one of the most controversial wars in United States history. There was a tremendous loss of life as well as a rift in the nation with the rise of anti-war protest. Those drafted for the war came primarily from low-income and ethnic minority communities. While all who served deserve to be recognized, there is one group that has gone largely unrepresented in the history of the war. Mexican American servicemen served and died in large numbers when compared to their population. In addition, they also received high honors for their valor in the battlefield. Yet, the history of the war has been largely focused on the experience of the Anglo and Black soldier. This is due in part to the existing black-white paradigm of race that exists in United States society, which places all other ethnic minority groups in the margins of major historical events. There were also the biased Selective Service Boards that contributed to the already existing race and class discrimination present among the elite class in society.

This study utilizes interviews, oral histories, autobiographies and anthologies as its main source of information on Mexican American Vietnam War servicemen. Due to the lack of historical material in this area, most information on participation and casualty rates are estimates conducted by scholars such as Ralph Guzman, from the University of Santa Cruz. Guzman took the number of Spanish surnamed casualties in the southwestern states to calculate an approximate number of total casualties. The major aim is to highlight the contribution of the Mexican American serviceman in Vietnam and to emphasize that patriotism is just as present in the Mexican American community as it is in the Black and Anglo communities. By providing information in the area of American identity, race relations, the draft and volunteerism as well as the sacrifice of Mexican American lives at the time of the Vietnam War, this study hopes to initiate the inclusion of Mexican Americans in the war's general history.

Keywords: Mexican American, Chicano/a, Selective Service , draft boards, whiteness, New Standards Men, Project 100,000, Lyndon Johnson, League of United Latin-American Citizens (LULAC), Medal of Honor, sacrifice, patriotism

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This thesis is dedicated to the Moreno brothers: My father, Ramon J. Moreno (US Army), my uncle Porfirio Moreno (US Navy) and in memory of my uncle Lucio Moreno (US Marine Corps).

Thank you so much for your service, you are remembered.

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PROLOGUE

*Forgotten heroes from everywhere, seeking respect to know that we care
Find honor and healing at Angel Fire
Let's never forget the price that they paid
Their total sacrifice, night and day
Forgotten heroes that we can truly admire¹*

-“Forgotten Heroes,” Rebecca Linda Smith

Before his death on February 23, 2009, Vietnam veteran, Lucio Moreno, asked Dr. Robert Frank Smith and Country Artist Rebecca Linda Smith to write a song commemorating the heroes of the Vietnam War.² The song was to be performed at the annual Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Memorial Day gathering at the Vietnam War Memorial State Park in Angel Fire, New Mexico. As President of VVA Chapter 574, Lucio and his family had been taking the trip for many years. Lucio’s brother, and my father, Ramon J. Moreno, also a Vietnam War veteran, would tell me about the gathering when I was a young girl. I knew that my uncle Lucio was in the Marines, and had served in Vietnam, but I never truly recognized his dedication to war veterans. Lucio Moreno was committed to his fellow veterans and wanted to make sure that their service to the United States would be remembered. Lucio spent sixteen years as President of VVA Chapter 574 in El Paso, Texas.³ It was learning more about his pride in being a Marine and having his two other brothers serve in Vietnam, that Lucio sparked my interest in researching Mexican American servicemen of the Vietnam War.

¹Rebecca Linda Smith and Robert Fran Smith, “Forgotten Heroes,” recorded 2019, Renewed Records 884502532043, 2010, compact disc.

²“Forgotten Heroes” Performed for Our Vietnam Veterans Of America and the Vietnam Veterans National Monument at Angel Fire,” *Texas Vietnam Veterans News*, Volume 21 Issue 2, Summer 2009, 32.

³ “In Memory of Lucio G. Moreno,” *Texas Vietnam Veterans News*, Volume 21 Issue 2, Summer 2009, 9.

In a prophetic and almost poetic way, his request for a song written to remember military heroes would become the final stamp on his legacy as an advocate for veterans. Rebecca L. Smith performed the song “Forgotten Heroes” for the first time at Lucio’s memorial service on May 24, 2009 at the Angel Fire Vietnam War Memorial.⁴ At his request, Lucio’s ashes were scattered near the gravesites of the memorial’s founders, Dr. Victor and Jeanne Westphall,⁵ and a tree was planted in his remembrance.⁶

Lucio passed away before I had a chance to interview him for this project. However, I did make a special trip to Angel Fire, my first, to interview the Mexican American Vietnam War veterans that were present the weekend that Lucio’s remains would be put to rest. After the trip, my research changed from an interest to a mission. My uncle Lucio worked hard to make sure that war veterans would be respected and remembered. It is now up to me to make sure I continue his advocacy and give voice to the many Mexican American Vietnam War servicemen by documenting their service and establishing their historical relevancy in the United States.

⁴ “In Memory of Lucio G. Moreno”

⁵ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial State Park was founded by Dr. Victor Westphall and his wife Jeanne after his son, Lt. David Westfall, was mortally wounded in an ambush while serving in Vietnam in 1968. In 2005 (after the passing of Victor and Jeanne Westfall), the state of New Mexico in partnership with the David Westphall Foundation, took over the memorial dedicating it as a Vietnam War veterans state park. For more information see *Texas Vietnam Veterans News*, Volume 21 Issue 2, Summer 2009, 2,5.

⁶ “In Memory of Lucio G. Moreno”

I. INTRODUCTION

When discussing the involvement of Mexican Americans⁷ in the Vietnam War, most histories focus primarily on the Chicano Movement and the anti-war protests. The historical portrayal of Mexican Americans at the time of the war is one characterized by anti-government sentiment and a fight against the racial injustice of the war in Vietnam. According to George Mariscal, the period 1965 to 1975 initiated a significant transformation in Mexican American communities in critiquing traditional roles of assimilation.⁸ Lorena Oropeza argues that the war in Vietnam essentially produced a movement within the Mexican American youth and working class that challenged “long-held assumptions about the history of Mexican-origin people and their role within American society.”⁹ Members of the movement identified themselves as Chicanos and Chicanas¹⁰ which in the context of the Vietnam War era was more a political ideology that confronted the status quo in the United States and white Americans’ expectations of ethnic minorities to accept their racial and economic positions in society.¹¹ One of the most significant shifts was the movement’s dispute of the long-standing Mexican American tradition

⁷ The author will use the term Mexican American to identify Americans who identify as having a Mexican heritages as well as those born in Mexico who became American citizens when they joined the U.S. Armed Forces. Other terms of identity are used when the individual being cited identifies with being a Chicano, Hispanic, Latino, etc.

⁸George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 2.

⁹Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

¹⁰According to George Mariscal, the agreed upon etymology of the term *Chicano* is the abbreviated form of the Nahuatl “Mexicano.” See George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 280, note 8.

¹¹George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, 27.

of military service.¹² By the late 1960s, there was an apparently disproportionate number of ethnic minorities who were drafted and killed, specifically Latinos and African Americans.¹³ The high casualty rates among people of color helped to create a new understanding that Chicanos came from a history of colonized people suffering against the oppression of the United States. This was especially apparent when young Mexican American men were dying in a war that was further suppressing their progress.¹⁴

The Mexican American serviceman was caught in the middle of a divide in his own community. The Chicano Movement emphasized that issues at home were more important than dying in a foreign land; therefore, the conflict in Vietnam was confirmation for anti-war activists that the Mexican American had no business fighting in the war.¹⁵ However, like many families of the post-World War II period, generational expectations to serve in the military and show they were Americans influenced many young Mexican American men to accept their conscription. According to Refugio I. Rochin and Lionel Fernandez, the word “patriots” has not often been

¹²Oropeza, 5.

¹³ African Americans and Latinos both suffered disproportionate casualty rates. For Mexican Americans, statistics included casualties with home addresses primarily from the state of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. See Ralph Guzman, *Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam* (Santa Cruz, CA: University of Santa Cruz, 1969) . 1. In addition, a more comprehensive list of Latino casualties can be found in Nick C. Vaca, Octavio I. Romano-V., Andres Ybarra, and Gustavo Segade, eds. “Spanish Surname War Dead Vietnam,” *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* III, No.1 (Fall 1969). The numbers analyzed by the author came from the list of Spanish surnames among the war dead in Vietnam compiled by Octavio I. Romano-V, PhD, as part of his research at the *Center for Advanced Mexican–American Social Research* in Berkeley, CA. based on the available Congressional Record data at the time of his research. Actual Spanish surnamed casualties may be much higher than the 2035 listed. Number includes individuals from Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico which will not be included in the analysis of Mexican American casualties. According to James E. Westheider, African Americans suffered disproportionately high casualty rates in Vietnam. In the years 1961 and the end of 1967, African Americans made up more than 14 percent of American deaths in Southeast Asia. Information from James E. Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 12. The same casualty figures can be found in James H. Willbank ed., *Vietnam War: The Essential Reference Guide* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013), 5.

¹⁴Oropeza, 5.

¹⁵Ibid.

associated with Latinos, yet the Latino community consistently demonstrated loyalty to defend its country and family tradition.¹⁶ In addition, for some Mexican American servicemen, protesting against the war was viewed as a selfish pursuit and unpatriotic: “Ultimately, it boiled down to a matter of obedience to your country’s call to duty and self-sacrifice -or dissention and individual pursuits.”¹⁷

When the Mexican Americans serving in Vietnam heard of the protest, many were saddened and angered by the disrespect people of their community were expressing while so many men were dying to fight for equal rights. The war created a rift within families wherein many Mexican Americans who served or were serving did not want to associate themselves with those in the Chicano Movement for fear it would link them with the image of being unpatriotic. This was in large part due to the strong family military tradition within the Mexican American Community. Steve Guzzo explained that the expectation from those who served before is that “if you’re American, you serve your country.”¹⁸ So while the Chicano Movement’s leaders used the high casualty rates of the war to prove that Mexican Americans were being targeted as cannon fodder, the Mexican American serviceman viewed their service as the greatest evidence that they were American by the sacrifice they made to the country.

While the Chicano Movement called attention to domestic grievances against an Anglo-controlled governmental and social system, Mexican Americans serving in Vietnam demonstrated an alternative perspective in the struggle for racial equality and inclusion. Yet they

¹⁶Refugio I. Rochín, Lionel Fernandez, *U.S. Latino Patriots: From the American Revolution to Iraq 2003 – An Overview* (East Lansing, MI: Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, 2005), www.jsri.msu.edu/upload/ebooks/Latino%20Patriots.pdf (accessed December 9, 2015), 1.

¹⁷Eddie Morin, *Valor & Discord: Mexican Americans and the Vietnam War* (Los Angeles: Valiant Press, 2006), 224.

¹⁸*On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*, DVD, directed by Mylène Moreno (Arlington, VA: Public Broadcasting Services, 2015).

are rarely mentioned in the war's narrative. For many Mexican American servicemen, serving was fighting for the same equalities the Chicano Movement was advocating. When asked by a reporter about his opinion of the protests in Los Angeles, Clive Garcia, Jr. responds by calling attention to his Marine Corps uniform and stating, "I wear this, so they can do that."¹⁹ Although Clive was a proud Marine, he understood the importance of free speech and how his service allowed such freedoms to exist in the United States.

Whether he was drafted or volunteered, the Mexican American serviceman met his military obligation signifying his love and loyalty to the United States while proving the right to be called and treated as an American.²⁰ The Mexican Americans' identification with the United States together with their Mexican heritage did not hinder their patriotism, but rather defined it. The Mexican American servicemen's heroic participation in the Vietnam War and patriotic sacrifice in the face of racial discrimination is historically significant, yet his American identity is made largely irrelevant in most histories of the period due to his ethnic and social position in the United States.

The Mexican American is put in a position of being largely overlooked in history because he is caught between different aspects of society, the first of which is race. The patriotism of the Mexican American who served in Vietnam is downplayed. As a result, the Mexican American serviceman is rarely mentioned in history and his contributions are regarded as supplemental. A

¹⁹Interview with Dan Garcia about his older brother Clive Garcia, Jr. who joined the Marine Corps and lost his life in the Vietnam War. See: *On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*.

²⁰ There were woman who served in different capacities that deserve just as much study and recognition. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to narrow my focus to male Mexican-American servicemen since they made up the majority of the combat soldiers and casualties. For more information on women's role in Vietnam see: Elizabeth M. Norman, *Women at War: the Story of Fifty Military Nurses Who Served in Vietnam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Joanne Puær Kotcher, *Donut Dolly: An American Red Cross Girl's War in Vietnam* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011); Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Patricia Rushton ed. *Vietnam War Nurses: Personal Accounts of 18 Americans* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013); Keith Walker, *A Piece of My Heart: The Stories of 26 American Women Who Served in Vietnam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

significant obstacle in substantiating an accurate picture of Mexican Americans' participation in Vietnam is their categorization as "White" in military and census records.²¹ As opposed to being counted as a separate group, Mexican Americans were "folded into the white population."²² Unlike African Americans, Mexican Americans were integrated within the Anglo populace meaning the historian only has estimations of participation. However, the existing estimate for how many Hispanics²³ served in Vietnam is 170,000 out of the 9,087,000 military personnel who served on active duty during the Vietnam Era (August 5, 1964 - May 7, 1975).²⁴ This binary racial paradigm then affects accurate documentation of the Mexican American's historical role in the Vietnam War. From the 170,000 Hispanics who served, approximately 3,170 (5.2 percent of total) died in Vietnam.²⁵ The casualty rate can only be estimated due to the difficulty of accurately determining how many Mexican Americans served. However, researchers such as Dr. Ralph Guzman looked at the amount of Spanish surnamed casualties to estimate the percent of Mexican Americans from the Southwest that lost their lives. According to Guzman, Mexican Americans made up twenty percent of casualties from the Southwestern United States, yet comprised ten percent of the population.²⁶ Dr. Guzman's research, along with other supporting

²¹ Mexican American advocacy groups pushed for the Mexican American to be recognized as "White" as a way to build status within the community. See: League of United Latin American Citizens, "LULAC's Milestones", <http://lulac.org/about/history/milestones/> (accessed May 17, 2015).

²²Liset Marquez, "Vietnam War, 50 Years later: Giving a voice to Latino Veterans, *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, March 21, 2015, www.dailybulletin.com/veterans/20150321/vietnam-war-50-years-later-giving-a-voice-to-latino-veterans (accessed December 9, 2015).

²³Mexican American will be the term used to describe Americans of Mexican heritage. Latinos and Hispanic are used interchangeably to mean those Americans with Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and South American descent. Chicano is in reference to the younger generation of Hispanics most associated with the anti-war movement. However, the Mexican Americans mentioned in this study may choose different terms to identify their ethnicity.

²⁴ "Sobering Statistics from the Vietnam War," <http://www.nationalvietnamveteransfoundation.org/statistics.htm> (accessed December 3, 2015). Information from the Veterans of Foreign Wars Magazine and the Public Information Office, April 12, 1997.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ralph Guzman, *Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam*.

documentation, helps to reveal that casualties for Mexican Americans were disproportionately high. Again, this is an area where the Mexican American is unfortunately underrepresented in the history of the war and further research is needed.

The loss of life is what blurred the lines between the drafted and the enlisted servicemen who gave the ultimate sacrifice. Many Mexican Americans found themselves in high risk units, which raised their possibility of combat.²⁷ The Mexican American serviceman's bravery was overlooked by the United States government and significant players in the war remain in the shadows. While twenty three Medals of Honors were awarded to Hispanic Americans, approximately sixteen were awarded to Mexican Americans.²⁸ Overall there were 257 Medals of Honor awarded for actions in the Vietnam War.²⁹ Yet, this prestigious medal did not come so easily for some or even at all for others. It took heroes like Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez, whose act of bravery can be a story on its own, over ten years to receive the Medal of Honor.³⁰ Current Vietnam War Medal of Honor nominees are Ramon Rodriguez, Sergeant Angel Mendez, and

²⁷Mexican Americans were largely represented in the Army and Marine Corps which were the two branches of military to see the most action in Vietnam. According to Ralph Guzman, Mexican Americans investigation into Spanish surnamed casualties of the Vietnam War reveals a considerable number of Mexican Americans who were in high branches of service. See Ralph Guzman, *Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam*.

²⁸List of Hispanic Medal of Honor recipients provided by the United States of American Hispanic Medal of Honor Society, "Hispanic Medal of Honor Recipients," hispanicmedalofhonorsociety.org/recipients.html (accessed December 9, 2015). Three of the recipients are natives of Mexico, however, are considered Mexican American in this study due to their service in the United States military.

²⁹An estimated 219 Medals of Honors were awarded to Anglos and other non-Hispanic and African American races. List obtained from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, "Recipients," <http://www.cmohs.org/searchresults.php?q=&x=54&y=4&rank=&organization=&division=&company=&conflict=Vietnam+War> (accessed, July 10, 2015). An estimated 15 African Americans were recipients of the Medal of Honor. See U.S. Army, "Medal of Honor Recipients: African-American Heroes," www.goarmy.com/black-history/medal-of-honor.html (accessed, November 20, 2015).

³⁰Roy P. Benavidez, *Medal of Honor*, 158.

Isaac Camacho.³¹ Mexican Americans who were previously overlooked are just recently being recognized for their sacrifice.

Socially, Mexican Americans endured many obstacles to obtain equal opportunity in education and employment. Due to high poverty rates among the Mexican American community, they were conveniently placed in the position to be drafted or chose the military as their way of gaining better opportunity. The Selective Service boards were strongly bureaucratic and “were hardly representative of mainstream America.”³² Directed by General Lewis B. Hershey, ninety percent of the directors of local boards were former or current top-ranking officers in the military who appointed members that shared the same mentality.³³ According to James Westheider, “[t]he average local board member was male, white, middle-aged, and middle class...”³⁴ This unfairly targeted ethnic minorities and poor whites for military duty. During the Vietnam War, more than 15,410,000 draft-age men received deferments, were exempted, or were disqualified to serve.³⁵ The majority of those who did receive deferments were white and middle to upper-class men which indicated that “a disproportionate number of working class whites and minorities were drafted.”³⁶ Called “manpower channeling,” men who went to college were seen as having important skills that needed to be preserved at home, therefore, those who were not

³¹United States of American Hispanic Medal of Honor Society, “Hispanic Medal of Honor Recipients.” Isaac Camacho was the first Prisoner of War to escape and survive. His story can be read in Billy Waugh, *Isaac Camacho: An American Hero* (Florida: Digital Publishing, 2009).

³²Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 38.

³³Ibid. Reference to Lawrence M. Baskir and William A. Strauss, *Chance and Circumstance: The Draft, The War and The Vietnam Generation* (New York: Random House, 1978), 16.

³⁴James Westheider, *Fighting in Vietnam: The Experiences of the U.S. Soldier* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2007), 32.

³⁵Ibid., 33.

³⁶Ibid.

eligible for educational deferments because they could not afford it or were “not as smart,” were likely to be drafted into the military.³⁷ Seen as a way to combat poverty, the government developed “occupational” programs within the military to assist young men in obtaining employable skills. In reality, the programs, such as Project 100,000, were designed to increase military manpower with the growing demand of the war. The United States government took advantage of the ethnic minorities and poor whites through its unfair Selective Service boards and deferments for the more privileged.

It is the hope of this study that the contributions of the Mexican American serviceman in the Vietnam War’s history will be brought to light. The Mexican American is not a marginal member of society expected to assimilate into an Anglo-centric community in order to be considered a citizen. Through his service in Vietnam, the Mexican American demonstrated that to be American is not to belong to a racially or socially dominate group, but to abide by basic patriotic principals: Honor, Duty, Country. Scholarship must identify the Mexican American’s role in the Vietnam War in order to portray the complete history of the war’s American heroes.

Currently, the body of work on Mexican Americans in the Vietnam War is expanding, yet there is little focus specifically on all aspects of their participation and the lack of recognition in scholarship. The literature available is broken up into four main categories: collection of narratives and interviews, autobiographies, biographies, and recognition of heroism. It is the aim of this study to contribute to the body of work that is at its infancy by providing a more compressive history of the Mexican American serviceman of the Vietnam War.

Oral narratives from veterans provide what Mario T. Garcia refers to as:

³⁷Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War*, 38.

[A] testimony of life, struggles, and experiences that speak to a collective effort. Combined with but more than just narrating life stories, testimonies are intended to educate others and inspire them to continue the struggles of the story tellers.³⁸

Oral narratives on the subject have been the most instrumental in giving Vietnam veterans a voice in their experiences of the war. Charlie Trujillo's, *Soldados: Chicanos in Việt Nam* is a collection of narratives from resident Vietnam veterans of Corcoran, CA. An emphasis on the "poverty of information" in regards to the Chicano's role in America is put in perspective on exactly where Mexican Americans "stand in relation to a society of which they are paradoxically both citizens and aliens."³⁹ Trujillo's aim is to supply Mexican American veterans' stories of the war due to the lack of literature on this group's contributions.⁴⁰ Trujillo argues that regardless of the Mexican American's background, each soldier "was united by a common culture and history" illustrated in his collection of narratives.⁴¹ Moreover, the collection serves as a lesson as to the extent of Mexican Americans who served in Viet Nam.⁴² However, because Trujillo limits his focus on one city, *Soldados* represents the experiences of a select few Mexican American servicemen. Gil Dominguez seeks to demonstrate that patriotism was not a new idea to the Chicano community in his book, *They Answered the Call: Latinos in the Vietnam War*.⁴³ Regardless of their economic or social background, Mexican Americans and other Latinos proved their loyalty and bravery during their service in Vietnam. Dominguez touches on yet

³⁸Mario T. García, *The Chicano Generation: Testimonios of the Movement* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 2.

³⁹Victor Martinez, "Preface" in Charlie Trujillo, *Soldados: Chicanos in Việt Nam* (San Jose, CA: Chusma House Publications, 1990), p. II.

⁴⁰Charlie Trujillo, *Soldados*, VII.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, VIII.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Gil Dominguez, *They Answered the Call: Latinos in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore, Publish America, 2004), 14.

another important aspect of Mexican American involvement in the Vietnam War: how they handled being drafted. Dominguez argues that while the privileged Americans escaped their military obligation by going to Canada to dodge the draft, “Mexican Americans and Latinos in general obediently answered their nation’s call. When they fought, they did so bravely.”⁴⁴ The aim of Dominguez’s book is to highlight the dedication he claims is “inherent in the Hispanic spirit.”⁴⁵ Dominguez’s collection of oral narratives adds more names to the growing list of neglected Mexican American veterans.

The lack of historical literature in the area of Mexican American military service in Vietnam results in their insubstantial presence in the history of the war. Eddie Morin’s *Valor and Discord: Mexican Americans and the Vietnam War* brings to light the lack of reference to the heroic undertakings by the servicemen of Mexican descent emphasizing that “their stories have not been honestly told.”⁴⁶ Morin claims his work serves as a testament to veterans by arguing the most compelling facet about the Mexican American’s service in Vietnam was his demonstration of valor that went beyond duty.⁴⁷ In addition to casualties, Morin draws attention to the Mexican American Medal of Honor recipients as well as those who went unrecognized for their honorable acts of duty. Like Morin, Lea Ybarra claims Mexican Americans were overrepresented in combat and casualty rates of the Vietnam War, yet underrepresented in the academic literature.⁴⁸

In *Vietnam Veteranos: Chicanos Recall the War*, Ybarra concentrates on a social history of the

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Eddie Morin, *Valor & Discord*, 3.

⁴⁷Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸Lea Ybarra, *Vietnam Veteranos : Chicanos Recall the War* (Austin, TX, USA: University of Texas Press, 2004), xii.

Mexican American servicemen's life before, during, and after the war. By recording the veteran's experience, Ybarra's aim is to give credit to the Mexican American's military contributions as well as emphasize the effects of war on the individual and his family.⁴⁹ Ybarra's work centers on the social aspects of Mexican American military involvement, taking on an intimate look in the lives of the veterans compared to Morin's more observational approach to Mexican Americans involvement in the war.

Autobiographies and biographies from Mexican American veterans provide two important pieces of information: the view of the war from their perspective as well as how they identify with being American having a Mexican heritage. The autobiographies cover an array of experiences from being a prisoner of war like Sergeant Everett Alvarez Jr.⁵⁰ and Isaac Camacho⁵¹ to experiencing a seemingly impossible survival after rescuing eight wounded men from a jungle ambush in Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez's *Medal of Honor: One Man's Journey from Poverty and Prejudice*.⁵² Autobiographies also provide the perspective of men who did not necessarily start out as patriots, but after their tour of duty, identify as true Americans as in the life of Juan Ramirez in, *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet*⁵³ and *Never a Hero* by Richard De Soto.⁵⁴

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Everett Alvarez, Jr. and Anthony S. Pitch, *Changed Eagle: The Heroic Story of the First American Shot Down over North Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2005) and Everett Alvarez, Jr. and Samuel Schreiner, Jr., *Code of Conduct* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1991).

⁵¹Billy Waugh, *Isaac Camacho: An American Hero* (Florida: Digital Publishing, 2009).

⁵²Roy P. Benavidez, *Medal of Honor*, 144.

⁵³Juan Ramirez, *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

⁵⁴Richard De Soto, *Never a Hero* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010).

George Mariscal's *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War*, touches on the pressure from family that existed for many Mexican American men of an obligation to serve and how that played into the meaning of patriotism and manhood.⁵⁵ Mariscal also highlights how the Selective Service System under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, established methods of systematically channeling ethnic minorities, particularly Africans and Mexican Americans, into the battlefields of Vietnam.⁵⁶ Mariscal takes on a political view of the exploitation of ethnic minorities by the elitist upper-class government. Like Trujillo, Mariscal focuses on the experiences of Mexican Americans through interviews, poems, and essays.

Together with the available sources and the veterans' experiences, this thesis helps to fill in the many holes in the existing scholarship. It does so by first examining the American context during the 1960s and how racism and discrimination shaped the way Mexican Americans viewed themselves in society and participation in the military. It will also touch on the draft system and programs created by the United State government that channeled some men into the military while others received exemptions or deferments. How Mexican American servicemen identified as Americans will also be examined as well as how the anti-war movement solidified their loyalty to the United States. Additionally, the patriotism of the Mexican American serviceman is highlighted through reading the words of the veterans themselves and by noting their tremendous sacrifice through disproportionate casualty rates and unrecognized acts of valor. Finally, specific individuals will be discussed as examples of the heroism and patriotism often not associated with the Mexican American who served in the military during the Vietnam War.

⁵⁵ George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁶George Mariscal, *Aztlán and Viet Nam*, 19.

II. THE AMERICAN CONTEXT OF WHITENESS

*...belonging is everything, and belonging is defined as sameness and in not being the other.*⁵⁷

The Concept of Whiteness

The Mexican American serviceman's patriotism for the United States during the Vietnam War was part of his American identity, yet his significance is overshadowed by the exclusionary Anglo-centric institutionalized conception of race. Historically, United States society's underlying prerequisite of full citizenship has been established based on belonging to the "white" race. Professor Juan F. Perea refers to this as the axiom of "...the centrality of Anglo-centric premises for full American identity..."⁵⁸ Therefore, race is developed into a social grouping in which people are divided and measured. Ruth Frankenberg refers to this categorization as a "construction of relationships [...] of domination and subordination, normativity and marginality, privilege and disadvantage – the white identity is given content."⁵⁹ When the white race is positioned as superior, by default a non-white identity is its inferior opposite.⁶⁰ Historically, the African American or the "black" race has been portrayed in scholarship and society as the primary representative of the inferior race. What this means for the Mexican

⁵⁷Stephanie M. Wildman, *Reflections on Whiteness and Latino/a Critical Theory*, *LatCrit Primer: Vol I* (Summer 2002), 212.

⁵⁸Juan Perea, *Five Axioms in Search of Equality*, In *LatCrit Primer* (Summer 2002): 175-181, 175.

⁵⁹Reference to Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 236-237 in Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 165.

⁶⁰Haney López, *White By Law*, 29.

American⁶¹ is an ambiguous place in society where he is not black, yet the white man denies him an equal standing.⁶²

The Vietnam War is an appropriate context in exploring the dynamics of the Black/White paradigm of race and its involvement of producing the theory that whiteness is the qualification of legitimizing the ideal American. The concept of whiteness as a social measure of citizenship affected the Mexican American serviceman's image of his place in society. Roy Benavidez grew up resenting the racism and social discrimination he experienced, yet was taught that his future was dependent on a world that was managed by the white race.⁶³ If he worked hard, got educated, and lived a disciplined life he "would earn the Anglo's respect."⁶⁴ In this context, racism was a motivation for Mexican Americans serving in the military to demonstrate that they were not a marginal group in society. In fact, the discrimination that they experienced only made them identify more as an American while still holding on to their ethnic heritage.

Between Two Colors

Life in the United States between the 1950s and 70s was based on a well-defined class and racial structure that pressured Mexican Americans to incorporate into the Anglo culture in order to obtain upward mobility in society. Juan Ramirez remembers how his father was conflicted between the pride and shame of who he was while compromising his Mexican identity

⁶¹The Mexican American is not the only group that falls is negatively affected by this racial binary paradigm. Other non-whites such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Puerto Ricans are marginalized.

⁶²Juan F. Perea, *The Black/White Paradigm of Race: The Normal Science of Racial Thought*, 85 Cal. L. Rev.1997. Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/californialawreview/vol85/iss5/3,1213>.

⁶³Roy P. Benavidez, *Medal of Honor*, 21-22

⁶⁴Ibid.

to “be and have what the whites had.”⁶⁵ Ramirez further explains how his parents restricted him and his siblings from speaking Spanish in and outside of the home.⁶⁶ The Spanish language was a primary indicator of non-whiteness. Charlie Trujillo views the corporal punishment he received at school when he spoke Spanish as “very symbolic of how the institutions have managed to suppress the culture.”⁶⁷ Most Mexican American families believed that they could incorporate into the white way of life without denying their Mexican identity; however, it often led them to deem Anglo society as the authority on accepting them as Americans. When Mexican Americans submitted to the belief that the Anglo was superior, they were implicating themselves in what Professor Ian F. Haney Lopez refers to as “the construction of the patterns of domination and subordination that mark race relations in the United States.”⁶⁸ To be viewed as “white” in society opened doors of opportunity for ethnic minorities while being associated as “non-white” led to segregated treatment and a denial of equal rights.

The polarization between a superior and inferior race positioned Mexican Americans in a discomfited place in society where they were accepted if they identified as white, while at the same time marginalized when they were coupled with the black community. Mexican American families, especially those of the 1950s and early 1960s, made efforts to disassociate themselves from society’s negative perceptions of African Americans. In reality, Mexican Americans understood that they were not white, however, as Juan Ramirez states, “...given a choice we certainly didn’t want to be on the black side.”⁶⁹ Ironically, Mexican American middle class

⁶⁵Juan Ramirez, *A Patriot After All: The Story of a Chicano Vietnam Vet* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999), 13.

⁶⁶Juan Ramirez, 14.

⁶⁷Charlie Trujillo, interview by author, San Jose, CA, November 20, 2011.

⁶⁸ Ian F. Haney López, 150.

advocacy groups were most active in establishing the “white” label to reference the racial identity of Mexican Americans. In 1936, The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) pressured the United States Census Bureau to change the classification of “Mexican” in the 1940 Census to “White.”⁷⁰ In the following excerpt from Robert Leza, Corresponding Secretary of LULAC, to Virgil Reed, Acting Director of the Bureau of the Census, Leza illustrates the power of the Black/White binary paradigm conception of race:

in truth and in fact we are not only part and parcel but the sum and substance of the white race . . . All that we recognize is that these three groups be reduced to two, namely, Whites and Negroes, instead of Whites, Mexicans, and Negroes, and we shall be eternally grateful to you . . . for that in the final analysis this classification of “Mexicans” may not be discontinued in 1940 and thereafter.⁷¹

The preference to be absorbed into the white racial group continued throughout the 1960s largely as a defense against being associated with negative stereotypes attached to the term “Mexican.” In 1967, the Latin American Advisory Council in San Fernando California accepted a compromise with law enforcement to describe them as “Latins” as opposed to Mexican American.⁷² However, the goal of the Latin American Advisory Council was for Mexican Americans to be identified as “Caucasians”:

We will not be satisfied until we are identified solely as Caucasians...They tend to lump us all together in an ethnic group while other citizens are identified on racial lines – Caucasians, Orientals and Negroes...There are no categories for German-Americans,

⁶⁹ Juan Ramirez, 16.

⁷⁰ League of United Latin American Citizens, “LULAC’s Milestones”, <http://lulac.org/about/history/milestones/> (accessed May 17, 2015).

⁷¹ Michael Calderón-Zaks , “Debated Whiteness amid World Events: Mexican and Mexican American Subjectivity and the U.S.’ Relationship with the Americas, 1924–1936” in *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 325-359.

⁷² “Mexican-Americans Accept ‘Latin’ Label, Favor Caucasian Description,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 19, 1967.

Irish-Americans or Danish Americans, why should there be one for Mexican-Americans?⁷³

Elizabeth Martinez argues that the binary definition of race encouraged people of color to base their lives in relation to the concept of whiteness and fixate on the acceptance of the Anglo.⁷⁴

While an earlier generation of Mexican Americans was advocating a white identity, the Mexican Americans growing up in the late 1950s and early 1960s were caught in the middle of a concept of race that made them develop an uncertain sense of belonging. Perea claims American society “has no social technique for handling partly colored races.” Therefore, the Mexican American’s racial autonomy is further marginalized as irrelevant.⁷⁵ Marvin Martinez understood this reality as he reflected back when he was living in California before entering the military: “But I had lived in California...so I knew what it was like to deal with a background as a Chicano versus white people, you know, I already knew that I was different and that I fell in a minority.”⁷⁶ Like Martinez, Juan Ramirez acknowledged he had a Mexican heritage, however, had to grow up denying certain aspects of it: “But I do not believe my parents wanted me to deny my heritage as a whole. They were trying to counter Anglo America’s negative perceptions about us, perceptions that we were dirty, lazy, and dumb.”⁷⁷ Because many of the Mexican American young men saw how racism negatively affected their parents’ concept of belonging, some were more apt to resist the notion that whiteness defined an American.

⁷³*Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 19, 1967.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Martinez, “Beyond Black/White: The Racism of Our Time,” in *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories*, ed. Mary Rogers and George Ritzer (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., Inc., 1996), 236.

⁷⁵Perea, *Black/White Binary Paradigm*, 1213.

⁷⁶Melvin Martinez, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico, May 24, 2009.

⁷⁷Ramirez, *Patriot*, 178.

Mexican American military serviceman would experience discrimination and mistreatment by the white community; however, it did not impede their strongly held belief that they were just as American as the Anglo and in many cases even more so. Steven Hernandez was taught by his father to be proud of his Mexican identity because it made him smarter, stronger, and “braver than anyone else.”⁷⁸ In addition, when Juan Ramirez was told by a fellow soldier that he was white, he immediately rejected that classification: “What are you talking about, Chuck? Are you blind? I’m not white, I’m brown, you idiot! Where I come from, I’m considered nonwhite; you know, a spic, greaser, dirty Mex, wetback. Get it?”⁷⁹ Although Ramirez acknowledged society’s negative views of the Mexican American, he did not identify as being part of the white race. Hernandez and Ramirez are examples of the many Mexican American servicemen of the Vietnam War that did not view their racial and cultural differences as hindrances to their core American values and political obligations to the United States.⁸⁰ Therefore, many Mexican Americans saw the war in Vietnam as an opportunity to demonstrate service to their country. As will be revealed, the Vietnam War highlights the elevated extent of patriotism of the Mexican American.

Service as Proof of Citizenship

Serving in the military was viewed by the Mexican American community as a way to break through discriminatory barriers that hindered their American identity. Military service was

⁷⁸ “Hispanic Veterans Remembered,” YouTube video, 1:15:08, posted by “TimeFlashProductions,” October 13, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXnHeWV-Xh4>.

⁷⁹Ramirez, 87.

⁸⁰Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia “Will The Real Americans Please Stand Up: Anglo and Mexican-American Support of Core American Political Values in the *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (May, 1996), pp. 335-351, 348.

proof that they *were* American not that they wanted to be American. Gilberto, Vietnam veteran explains it best:

When I went into Vietnam, when I got drafted, I was very patriotic and I was proud to wear the uniform. I was a flag waver, but I knew who I was. I knew I was Chicano. I knew I was from the barrio. I felt a real sense of calling to duty, to the country, and to demonstrate, maybe more than anyone else, how patriotic I really was...I had to validate myself, that I *was* [emphasis added] in fact American...⁸¹

Not only was their military service evidence of their loyalty to the United States, but it also reflected that the Mexican American serviceman's values coincided with the expectations of an ideal soldier. When Roy Benavidez read the West Point motto of "Duty, Honor, Country," it made a great impression on his life and how he would conduct himself in the military.⁸² George Mariscal warns that the Mexican ideology of warrior patriotism, "the idea that masculine behavior must include a readiness to die for *la patria* (the fatherland) coupled with the Mexican American's motivation to prove his American identity, becomes a dangerous combination when it is connected with the United States' war objectives.⁸³ Therefore, the Mexican American became a target for conscription by the government due to his socioeconomic and marginalized status coupled with his patriotic enthusiasm.

Although the Mexican American lived in a society that defined race in a binary paradigm that pressured him to fit into the majority Anglo population, the generation of men that would soon serve in Vietnam resisted identifying as white, and rather demonstrated their American citizenship through military service. Aspects of his place in society and willingness to serve in

⁸¹Lea Ybarra, *Veteranos: Chicanos Recall the War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 25.

⁸²Benavidez, *Medal of Honor*, 58-59.

⁸³George Mariscal, ed. *Aztlán and Viet Nam: Chicano and Chicana Experiences of the War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 28.

the military, or at least take responsibility when called upon, placed the Mexican American in a vulnerable position to be among those that would be drafted into the war.

Targeted through Poverty

*Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both.*⁸⁴

- President Lyndon B. Johnson, January 8, 1964

The racial prejudice that existed in the United States created a system that took advantage of the Mexican Americans' economic position in society. After World War II, job prospects for white veterans increased, while most Mexican American veterans got stuck doing the same jobs that they had done before, not fully understanding why their service did not bring them greater economic rewards.⁸⁵ World War II veterans, Ignacio "Buck" Avila and Jesus Muñoz Aguilera describe how the only work available to Chicanos after returning from war was in the sugar cane fields because they "couldn't get a job that was worth anything."⁸⁶ The work in agriculture done by World War II vets continued on with their children.

Before serving in Vietnam, many Mexican Americans were working in some sort of agriculture-based employment. Manuel Martinez remembers spending his summers picking apricots with his family in Hollister, California.⁸⁷ Growing up in Corcoran, California, Eddie Rodriguez knew he would probably end up working in the fields so he followed his father's

⁸⁴The Council of Economic Advisers, *The War On Poverty 50 Years Later: A Progress Report*

⁸⁵Ramirez, *A Patriot*, 12.

⁸⁶"Hispanic Veterans Remembered," YouTube video, 1:15:08, posted by "TimeFlashProductions," October 13, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXnHeWV-Xh4>.

⁸⁷Manuel F. Martinez Jr., *Don't let me die Lieutenant, Don't let me Die: Life and Love After Vietnam* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2014), 18.

advice and volunteered for the draft after graduating high school.⁸⁸ Working in the fields required long hours and little pay, but it was what was available to the Mexican American community. Medal of Honor recipient Alfredo Gonzalez of Edinburg, Texas worked twelve-hour days with his mother in the fields when he was a boy only to earn twenty to eighty cents per hour.⁸⁹ The few choices for Mexican Americans after high school lead many young men to choose the military as the best alternative. Vietnam veteran Porfirio Moreno of El Paso, Texas gave his reason for joining the Navy:

When I grew up around the place where I grew up, all the jobs were taken by whites. You had three choices: you either went to college if your parents had the money, or go to work for Willy Farah who was the only one hiring Mexicans, or go into the service...me, I went to the service.⁹⁰

Getting a higher education was a substitute to going to the military, yet due to limited job opportunities for Mexican Americans, they often could not afford to go to college.

Targeted through Education

Because of their socioeconomic status, many young Mexican American men were unable to get a higher education and chose to enlist in the military, knowing there was a high chance of getting drafted right after graduating high school. Steve Hernandez performed academically well in school, however after graduating he did not have the financial means in order to go to college. Therefore, Hernandez joined the service, as he states, “just to join the service.”⁹¹ Eddie Rodriguez reflects Hernandez’s sentiment in that one of the reasons he joined the Army was “to

⁸⁸ Charlie Trujillo, *Soldados*, 1.

⁸⁹John W. Flores, *When the River Dreams: The Life of Marine Sgt. Freddy Gonzalez* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2006)15.

⁹⁰Porfirio Moreno, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico May 24, 2009).

⁹¹“Hispanic Veterans Remembered,” 2011.

get it over with,” acknowledging that he did not have the grades to go to college.⁹² Ray Hernandez was enrolled in college and wanted to stay in school, nonetheless was drafted stating that, “they were drafting just about everybody then, unless you had a good excuse.”⁹³ Mexican Americans were often discouraged from going to college and led to pursue other avenues after high school. Juan Ramirez’s mother was told by the school counselor that Juan would have a difficult time in college and it would be unfair to put those types of expectations on him suggesting that he consider vocational training instead.⁹⁴

Mexican Americans who were able to attend college were disappointed to put a pause in their higher education when they received their military draft notices. Richard De Soto was denied a renewal of his deferment while being enrolled as a full-time college student,⁹⁵ although the Selective Service Act of 1948 read:

Any person who, while satisfactorily pursuing a *full-time course* [emphasis added] of instruction at a college, university, or similar institution of learning, is ordered to report for induction under this title, shall, upon the facts being presented to the local board, have his induction under this title postponed (A) until the end of such academic year or (B) until he ceases satisfactorily to pursue such course of instruction, whichever is the earlier.⁹⁶

De Soto eventually did receive his deferment approval only hours after he had left home for his induction – a timing that he said changed the course of his life forever.⁹⁷ Unlike De Soto, Juan Jose Pena was more resistant to the notification of being drafted one month after graduating with his bachelor’s degree:

⁹²Charlie Trujillo, 1.

⁹³“Hispanic Veterans Remembered,” 2011.

⁹⁴Ramirez, *A Patriot*, 22.

⁹⁵ Richard De Soto, *Never A Hero*, 5.

⁹⁶The Selective Service Act of 1948 later amended in Section 6(h) (50 App, ILS.C. 456(h))

⁹⁷DeSoto, *Never a Hero*, 12.

I thought there was no reason why I should go when Chicanos were being hounded into the military...I knew that the vast majority of people who were being drafted in New Mexico were Chicanos – about seventy seven percent of all draftees, I found out later... I was pissed off because they had scotched my master's program and my possibility of going to law school.⁹⁸

Pena reveals more than anger for being unable to continue his education, but also the fact that the military was drafting Mexican Americans at a high rate. There existed systematic channeling of Mexican Americans towards combat duty where they would die protecting a society that still marginalized them as citizens.⁹⁹ War veteran Gilberto remembers his experience of being drafted when he was a young man living in Salinas, California, emphasizing that a large proportion of Mexican Americans from Salinas ended up serving in Vietnam: “A lot of Chicanos from my community got drafted. I think they wiped out half the Mexican American community in Salinas in one year.”¹⁰⁰

The line between the Anglo and Mexican American was clearly defined when entitled white youth obtained college deferments or military assignments that kept them from combat duty. Some economically well-off Anglo families were able to keep their men from going to Vietnam through college deferments or political connections. Izemrasen Nat Musawally claims that those who avoided the draft “were mainly the white, better educated children of comfortable families.”¹⁰¹ Mexican Americans viewed the preferential treatment wealthy Anglos would receive from the government as a lack of work ethic by being born with a “silver spoon”

⁹⁸Gil Dominguez, ed. *They Answered the Call: Latinos in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Publish America, 2004), 164-165.

⁹⁹Ramirez, *A Patriot*, 174.

¹⁰⁰Lea Ybarra, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 16.

¹⁰¹Izemrasen Nat Musawally, *African Americans and Mexican Americans: Two American Stateless Nations in the Lions Mouth*, (Denver, Colorado: Outskirts Press, Inc., 2011), 136 reference to Binkin Martin and Eitelberg Mark, *Black in the Military* (Washington, D.C.: the Brookings Institute, 1982), 1.

mentality when their country required they contribute.¹⁰² Juan Ramirez recalls an incident when one of his squad leaders was allowed to leave Vietnam after his family pulled some strings:

I don't know the details, but I think his mother had influence with a congressman or someone like that. He was one of the first middle-class guys I'd seen in Vietnam, and when those guys started being part of the war... [a] lot of middle-class families found ways to get their boys back. The rest of us didn't have those kinds of connections.¹⁰³

The reality that the wealthy Anglo youth could more readily find loopholes to serving in the military was evidence that the Selective Service System was flawed and biased resulting in a funneling of Mexican American and other poor ethnic minorities into the military to be killed.

The Johnson Administration acknowledged the discrimination against Mexican Americans in society; however, no significant changes were made to improve the biased structure that prevented Mexican Americans from obtaining just treatment. At an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Conference held in 1966, President Johnson recognized that his administration needed to focus its attention on Mexican American issues of injustice by stating, "I think they have been discriminated against in housing, in education, in jobs. I don't think we can be very proud of our record in the field."¹⁰⁴ However, the President's words would become empty promises that served the Mexican American very little.

Selective Service

In a Special Message to Congress in 1967, President Johnson confronted the issue of reforming the Selective Service Act to create fair conditions in military conscription. The National Advisory Commission on Selective Service, headed by Burke Marshall, presented a

¹⁰²De Soto, *Never a Hero*, 16.

¹⁰³Ramirez, *A Patriot*, 99.

¹⁰⁴Julie Leininger Pycior, "From Hope to Frustration: Mexican Americans and Lyndon Johnson in 1967," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1993): 469-494.

report entitled “In Pursuit of Equity: Who Serves When Not All Serve?” with recommendations to amend the 1948 Selective Service Act to allow for a fair selection of draftees.¹⁰⁵ Days after the message to Congress, the President held a news conference where he was confronted with the question of whether revamping the measures of the Selective Service would “correct the situation for minorities.”¹⁰⁶ The question was in connection with the Advisory Commission’s suggestion “that the Negro and other minority groups were getting a poor shake in many areas of this country in military policy.”¹⁰⁷ President Johnson responded by admitting that the Selective Service boards and the draft had been discriminatory against minority groups, assuring he would do all he could to correct the problem.¹⁰⁸ In 1970, four years after President Johnson spoke out against his administration’s negligence in providing equal standards of living for Mexican Americans, a *Los Angeles Times* article revealed ongoing obstacles to their economic mobility by revealing that Mexican Americans made up fourteen percent of the California work force while it also made up fifteen percent of casualties in Vietnam.¹⁰⁹ However Mexican Americans only made up three and a half percent of its state employees.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, of the 117, 741 state

¹⁰⁵Lyndon B. Johnson: "Special Message to the Congress on Selective Service.," March 6, 1967. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28685>. The report of the National Advisory Commission on Selective Service is entitled "In Pursuit of Equity: Who Serves When Not All Serve?" (Government Printing Office, 219). The Military Selective Service Act of 1967 (Public Law 90-40, 81 Stat. 100) was approved on June 30, 1967.

¹⁰⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson: "The President's News Conference," March 9, 1967. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28122>.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Philip Hagar, “Jobs with State Asked for Mexican-Americans: Six Organizations Charge Unfair Ratio of Minority Work Force in Government,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 18, 1970. Mexican American agencies involved included the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund, Mexican-American Political Association, American G.I. Forum, League of United Latin-American Citizens; various Latino political associations, and the Chicano Law Students Association.

¹¹⁰Lyndon B. Johnson: "The President's News Conference."

employees, 86 percent were Anglo, while 5.8 percent were African American according to 1969 figures.¹¹¹

“This is tragic,” said Mario Obledo, general counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund. “Despite California’s unique heritage, its Mexican Americans are still at the bottom of the totem pole”... [A]lthough 37,918 state job opening existed from 1966-1969, only 948 (or 2.5%) were filled by Mexican-Americans.¹¹²

With the war in Vietnam escalating, the need for replacements increased, adding pressure for President Johnson to provide the military with more able bodies. The Selective Service System directed by General Lewis Blaine Hershey was made up of high ranking officials and members from the armed forces that were biased in choosing like-minded white men to represent local draft boards.¹¹³ After serving his time with the Air Force, Julian Camacho attended San Jose State University and worked his way up to manager of industrial engineering for Salinas and Santa Cruz, California.¹¹⁴ He was recruited in 1970 by the local draft board in Santa Cruz to be a member and during that time Camacho witnessed children of the privileged being preferred for deferments.¹¹⁵ This caused Camacho to make a public announcement stating his resignation from draft board 59 stating he was very upset due to the biased nature of the board’s members.¹¹⁶ Camacho was one of the few Mexican Americans that served on the local draft boards that were hardly representative of the population that was drafted.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Musawally, *African Americans and Mexican Americans during the Vietnam War*, 132.

¹¹⁴*On Two Fronts: Latinos & Vietnam*.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

Mexican Americans were underrepresented in the draft boards located in the Southwestern United states, where they made up a large portion of the population.¹¹⁷ According to the 1960 census, there were 3.5 million “Mexican Americans living in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas” constituting the largest ethnic minority of the Southwest.¹¹⁸ Census figures also showed seventy percent of the population with Spanish surnames lived in urban neighborhoods known as “barrios” – “the ghettos of Anglo-oriented cities”¹¹⁹ This meant that Mexican Americans were concentrated in isolated low-income areas confronted with “conditions of concentrated poverty” that made it exceedingly difficult to improve their socioeconomic status.¹²⁰ The war’s military demands coupled with the United States’ marginalization of non-Anglo Americans, created a military pipeline that largely targeted ethnic minorities.

Project 100,000

The belief that reforming the Selective Service Act would establish a more equal and balanced way of sending men to war, was in line with President Johnson’s on-going “War on Poverty.”¹²¹ Project 100,000 was instituted by Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, in October of 1966 to accept men that were previously rejected due to deficiencies in their

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Mexican Americans and the Administration of Justice in the Southwest* , Clearinghouse Publication no. 26 (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1970), 2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰Rachel F. Moran, “Neither Black Nor White,” 2 *Harv. Latino L. Rev.* 61 (1997) *LaCrit Primer* 1 (Summer 2002): 112-132, 120

¹²¹ In 1964, Johnson initiated a plan to improve and implement programs designed to confront poverty and low education rates in American society. Unpopular within the military institution, the Johnson Administration lowered military entrance standards allowing the recruitment of thousands of socioeconomically disadvantaged men into military service. See Thomas G. Sticht, William B. Armstrong, Daniel T. Hickey and John S. Caylor, *Cast-off Youth Policy and Training Methods From the Military Experience* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 39.

education or because they failed to pass the military's standard entrance exams.¹²² It was perceived that the military's structure would improve the conditions for disadvantaged young men by developing the largest institution for testing and occupational training.¹²³ McNamara linked poverty as having an effect on national security "by its appalling waste of talent."¹²⁴ The premise of Project 100,000 was that the security of the United States was being underserved due to the rejection of disadvantaged youth who should be given the opportunity to contribute to the war effort.¹²⁵

What Project 100,000 became was ultimately justification to pull more men from poverty stricken neighborhoods into military duty. It was perceived by McNamara that the men unwanted for military service due to education or minor physical disability "could be saved" by being given valuable skills to obtain employment after their tour of duty.¹²⁶ Many of the men who were recruited for Project 100,000 were estimated to be more than fifty percent African American with Latino communities perceived to have been impacted the same, yet exact numbers are not available since the Selective Service categorized recruits as Caucasian and non-Caucasian.¹²⁷ In an article from *Race Issues and Vietnam: A White Man's War* the Lisa Hsiao argued that Project 100,000 aligned with the escalating war situation by pointing out that McNamara announced his

¹²² I. M. Greenberg, "Project 100,000: The Training of Former Rejectees," *The Phi Delta Kappan*. 50, no. 10 (1969): 570-574, 570.

¹²³ Thomas G. Stichtet. al., 39.

¹²⁴ Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (New York: Harpers and Row Pub., 1968) 130.

¹²⁵ Greenburg, 570.

¹²⁶ Robert S. McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office*, 131.

¹²⁷ George Mariscal, "Mexican Americans and the Viet Nam War," in *A Companion to the Vietnam War*, ed. Marilyn B. Young and Robert Buzzanco (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 348-366, 354.

Project 100,000 at the same the war in Vietnam was escalating and in need of more soldiers.¹²⁸

Hsiao further states that McNamara neglected to mention the fact that General Hershey had made a declaration that there would be a draft call each month of up to 40,000 men by October of 1966, four months before McNamara requested the same amount of enlistees for Project 100,000.¹²⁹

As opposed to being a solution to the problem of unjust military selection, Project 100,000 became an extension of the reach that the Selective Service already had in marking Mexican Americans as ready conscripts for war. The recruits selected under Project 100,000 were known as the “New Standards Men.” Among the Mexican Americans who did not do as well on the military exams were English learners, making them easy targets for the program’s objectives of providing “occupational opportunity.” According to George Mariscal “the probability that many primary Spanish-speakers did not fare well on the AFQT is high,” placing hundreds of Chicanos and Latinos among the New Standards Men.¹³⁰ Additionally, due to a high poverty rate among Mexican Americans, there was a low educational advancement, providing Project 100,000 a large supply of men. Musawally argues that “...the Chicano community presented a valuable source of military manpower since its young male high school dropouts were automatically targeted and drafted during the Vietnam War.”¹³¹

Aside from the image that Project 100,000 would provide occupational training for the less fortunate, it was also an indirect way of giving the more educated an opportunity to stay out

¹²⁸Lisa Hsiao, “Project 100,000: the Great Society’s Answer to Military Manpower Needs in Vietnam,” *Race Issues and Vietnam: A White Man’s War*, 1, no. 2, (1989),14-37.

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰ George Mariscal, “Mexican Americans and the Viet Nam War,” 354.

¹³¹Musawally, 172-73.

of the war. Congressmen that targeted the poor and disadvantaged whites and ethnic minorities questioned the draft system and Armed Forced Qualification Tests arguing that “the nation was sending too many of its brightest and healthiest off to fight while its weakest and least intelligent stayed home to procreate.”¹³² McNamara reiterates this sentiment stating that the “present Selective Service System normally draws on only a minority of eligible young men. That is an inequity...”¹³³ McNamara is implying that the disadvantaged and uneducated are not shouldering the weight of the war equally. In fact, McNamara goes so far as to state that the accepted societal value of achievement is lost in the youth coming out of poverty resulting in low motivation to attain anything meaningful.¹³⁴ A solution to the problem would be to place the “low aptitude” young man “in a situation that offers the encouragement he has never had before.”¹³⁵ However, as McNamara would soon learn from commanders’ reports, the New Standards Men demonstrated more motivation in active duty than those from more a more privileged upbringing.¹³⁶

Mexican Americans may have been targeted by the military, and in fact many young men were quite aware of the possibility of going to Vietnam, yet they still considered it their duty to serve the United States in time of war. Whether it was through the unfair draft boards, Project 100,000, or a desire to serve, the majority of Mexican Americans answered the call even if it was not part of their future plans. A major contributor to the Mexican American’s obligation to serve

¹³²Ibid., 132-33.

¹³³Robert S McNamara, *The Essence of Security: Reflections in Office* (Harpers and Row Pub: New York), 1968, 157.

¹³⁴McNamara, *The Essence of Security*, 135.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Ibid, 137.

came out of his strong sense of country and family tradition. For him, it was not to earn his American citizenship, but to prove it.

III. OWNERSHIP & IDENTIFICATION AS AN AMERICAN

*...I chose to rise above that prejudice and prove that I was a better person than those bigots.*¹³⁷

Defying Ethnic Dilution

For the majority of Mexican American servicemen, mixing into a unified American identity did not entail a dilution or denial of their racial heritage. In fact, it defied the Anglo-centric concept that the willingness to assimilate led to the acceptance of the white American way of life. The Mexican American serviceman viewed the racial discrimination he encountered as an opportunity to prove his value as an American. Roy Benavidez's uncle encouraged him to respect the laws put in place by society so that he may be able to one day "...get inside the system and enforce the laws fairly."¹³⁸ Initially, Benavidez did not understand why he had to endure racially-based segregationist policies. It is in his military service that Benavidez would realize that in order to gain respect and make an impact in society, he needed to go through the Anglo's channels and obtain his place within the system to change the laws of inequity. If the opportunity would arise for Benavidez to move up in the Anglo-controlled social hierarchy, he would have to put aside his indifference and exist within the American "melting pot."¹³⁹ For the majority of Mexican American servicemen, mixing into a unified American identity did not mean a dilution or denial of their racial heritage, but instead defied the Anglo-centric concept of assimilation.

¹³⁷Benavidez, 172.

¹³⁸Ibid., 22.

¹³⁹Ibid. 21-22.

For the Mexican American servicemen, assimilating equated with the rejection of their American identity. The process of assimilating was to identify with the overriding Anglo culture to the extent that to be viewed as white meant the Mexican American became “socially indistinguishable from other members of society.”¹⁴⁰ However, the discrimination and limitation of social mobility for the Mexican American painted a clear picture that no amount of adopting the Anglo way of life would afford equal treatment. Prisoner of war (POW), Everett Alvarez Jr., viewed the persistent polarization of race as a deterrent of cooperation between members of the same society.¹⁴¹ Alvarez references the North Vietnamese’s method of using the African and Mexican American’s fight for civil rights in the United States as propaganda to discourage unity between the white and non-white prisoners of war.¹⁴² The North Vietnamese understood that there was an apparent schism in race relations in the United States allowing them to use the concept to weaken the American prisoners’ morale. For many Mexican Americans who served in Vietnam, the knowledge that they were set apart from the Anglo culture did not necessarily trigger a want to be viewed as other than Mexican American or Chicano, but rather to be identified as primarily American regardless of their ethnic heritage. As Everett Alvarez states, “I had a right to be as proud of my Spanish/Indian/Mexican background as other Americans were of their different heritages...If they misjudged me by my skin color or the spelling of my name, it *was* a form of ignorance, and *they* were the poorer for it.”¹⁴³ As opposed to assimilating - through their military service - Mexican Americans hoped to be incorporated as patriotic members of society.

¹⁴⁰ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Assimilation," accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/39328/assimilation>.

¹⁴¹ Everett Alvarez Jr. with Samuel Schreiner Jr., *Code of Conduct* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1991), 204.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 66.

In some ways, the Vietnam War provided the foundation on which Mexican Americans could confirm their identification as citizens without compromising their Mexican roots. For Eliseo Perez-Montalvo being born in Monterrey, Mexico and immigrating to the United States at a young age, led him to join the Air Force as a way to prove his place in society.¹⁴⁴ Eliseo attributes his ability to do well in academics as the reason he was not subjected to the high level of racial prejudice as other ethnic minorities might have been, yet he still lacked a sense of belonging.¹⁴⁵ After serving in Vietnam, Eliseo no longer tolerated his isolated status in society due to his Mexican identity believing that any racist mistreatment would be unwarranted:

I didn't come back to Texas because of that. I feared that my attitudes had changed to the point that I would wind up getting killed or arrested because when I came back, when I became a civilian, I was very American, very independent, very proud. I was not going to come back here and be anybody's boy.¹⁴⁶

While it may be viewed that serving in the military reflected the Mexican American's willingness to prove his loyalty to the United States, there are those who claim that it was more than a willingness, but rather an obligation. An observation that can be made is that the Mexican American's ethnic heritage did not hinder his incorporation as an American, but according to Rodolfo de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia, may have augmented it.¹⁴⁷ This can be seen in the pride that Mexican American servicemen took in both their Latino and military tradition. For example, Frank Gutierrez maintains his service was instilled in him by the inherent *machismo* (strong masculine pride) of the Latino culture stating, "It was already part of my

¹⁴⁴Eliseo Perez-Montalvo, interviewed by Richard Burks Verrone, July 15; August 5, 2003, transcript, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

¹⁴⁵Perez-Montalvo, interview.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia, 348.

attitude to be like that. So, it wasn't difficult at all to get in there and do what I was supposed to do."¹⁴⁸

Reaction to the Draft

Mexican Americans, just like other military-age men, had doubts about serving and did not fully understand the realities of the war, yet their strong connection to family and ownership to their American identity largely shaped their reaction to the draft. A draft notice was an indication that it was time to meet their obligation as Americans, so whether they liked it or not, many Mexican Americans fulfilled their orders to report for duty. Humberto Navarrez migrated from Chihuahua, Mexico to the United States as a part of the Bracero Program.¹⁴⁹ The same year Humberto received his United States residency he was drafted into the Army: "I didn't speak English, but I went to the Army. I learned English in the Army, I never went to school and became a citizen...then I got my orders for Vietnam."¹⁵⁰ George Mariscal remarks that he had been taught by his grandfather, a World War II Marine Corps veteran, to respect authority over his own opinions; therefore, his response to being drafted "was a passive one."¹⁵¹ Likewise, when asked if he would have still gone into military service if he was never drafted, Victor Flores responded that the thought never came into his mind since his father had served.¹⁵² This

¹⁴⁸ Frank Gutierrez, interviewed by Kim Sawyer, January 24, 2001, transcript, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

¹⁴⁹ For history on the Bracero Program See: Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transitional Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and The I.N.S.* (Louisiana: Quid Pro LLC, 2010)

¹⁵⁰ Humberto Navarrez, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico, May 24, 2009.

¹⁵¹ George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 11.

¹⁵² Victor Flores, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico, May 24, 2009.

patriotism is not unique to the Mexican American, but rather largely missing in the historical narratives when discussing family obligation and the expectation to serve.

Military Service, a Family Tradition

In connection with the innate patriotic qualities of the Mexican American community, was the family tradition of military service to the United States inherited by the next generation of war veterans. Alfred Alvarez recalls that regardless of his mother's reluctance to have him go into the Army, coming from a military family, she viewed it as carrying on "the military genes" and gave Alfred her blessing.¹⁵³ Jack Cobo states that when it was his turn to go to war, "it wasn't a big deal," since his service was built on a strong veteran foundation having a father that served in World War II as well as family members who participated in the Korean War.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, for many Mexican Americans serving in Vietnam it simply meant it was their turn to walk in the footsteps of family members that served before them. Frank Gutierrez attributes his higher education and military service to his uncle stating, "...if it were not for him I probably would not have even thought about joining the military. But, he had been in the Army, he came to Texas Tech, and I wanted to follow his lead and be like him."¹⁵⁵ Although, it was his uncle that inspired him to serve, Frank was one of seven siblings that went to the military. Yet he was the only one who experienced combat in Vietnam.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³Alfred Alvarez, interviewed by Kelly Crager, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project, June 3,5, 2008, transcript, , Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.

¹⁵⁴"Hispanic Veterans Remembered," 2011.

¹⁵⁵Frank Gutierrez interview.

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

For the Mexican American serviceman, continuing the military family tradition was also about fighting for social and ethnic equality – freedoms that were part of being an American. When Eddie Morin was drafted in 1964, his father’s words provided the best reason to enter the service when he talked about the many Chicano heroes who fought and sacrificed their lives “so others of their race could benefit.”¹⁵⁷ Juan Ramirez echoes this sentiment when discussing his father’s belief that by serving in World War II “...somehow he and his kind would finally be accepted in their own country.”¹⁵⁸ Both the military service and injustice that their parents and family members experienced instilled in the next generation of Mexican American servicemen a bravery and resistance in accepting limitations placed on them based on their race or social status. Everett Alvarez Jr. recalls his father’s strong independence and perseverance against negative circumstances and how it shaped the way he would live his life: “He didn’t believe in getting trapped, in meekly accepting unfairness and injustice. He let me know that I should have the same attitude...”¹⁵⁹ For the Mexican American, the United States was the land it which they raised their family, grew their food, and buried their loved ones. To be denied claim to the land where their lives were established was an injustice, and to go even further and be marginalized as an inferior people only made the Mexican American’s military service more interwoven into their identity.

The Mexican American’s bond to the United States went beyond a political agenda. When Melvin Martinez told his family that he was going to be in the Army, his father “knew that *la patria* (fatherland) was the name of the game” and understood the duty his son had to

¹⁵⁷Eddie Morin, *Valor and Discord*, 299.

¹⁵⁸Juan Ramirez, *A Patriot After All*, 11.

¹⁵⁹Alvarez, *Code of Conduct*, 63.

follow.¹⁶⁰ Beyond the political ideals of freedom, by creating a familial bond to the nation, the Mexican American was committed to defending its honor without question. Ramon Moreno recalls that he didn't fully understand the reasons the United States was getting involved in Vietnam, yet if his country called him to serve, resistance would not be an option stating, "It's still your country, even if you don't approve. If you didn't go, you would be going against your country. What's the use of being in the military, why be there? You can dodge the draft. You go for a reason."¹⁶¹ For Ramon, being in the military had a purpose and those who did not want to fulfill their obligation could easily get out of it. In other words, no one was forced to fight, even if they were drafted. When Richard De Soto explains his reason for writing about his experience in Vietnam, his only request was that those who serve in the military be appreciated: "Like my father-in-law, I want people to know that I did what I had to do on behalf of my country."¹⁶² The tie that the Mexican American serviceman illustrates to the United States is filled with an extreme familial loyalty and honor to be next in line to serve. When Juan Ramirez hears about the war going on in Vietnam, he was not quite out of high school, yet his concern was that the war would be over by the time he graduated in 1968: "It scared me. Maybe somebody said something to me about it. Or maybe I just knew that this would be my rite of passage too...Perhaps it was a given that I would serve also."¹⁶³ Many Mexican Americans volunteered for the military anticipating that their draft notice would soon arrive requiring them to serve. Frank Gutierrez observed that members from his family and friends were getting drafted, creating the basis to volunteer stating that it "seemed like the reasonable thing to do because they

¹⁶⁰Melvin G. Martinez, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico, May 24, 2009.

¹⁶¹Ramon Moreno, interview by author, Angel Fire, New Mexico, May 24, 2009.

¹⁶²Richard De Soto *Never A Hero*, ix.

¹⁶³Juan Ramirez, *A Patriot After All*, 19.

were going to get you one way or the other.”¹⁶⁴ Their acceptance of entering the military is another reminder that Mexican Americans, like many men of the time, wanted to defend the country.

Response to Anti-War Protest

Connection to family and country in addition to the pressure to prove his citizenship in United States society, made draft resistance difficult for the Mexican American. Loyalty to the United States and the masculine tradition of military service to the nation are reasons why draft resisters among Mexican Americans were low compared to other ethnic groups.¹⁶⁵ George Mariscal points out that the promotion of denying military service during the Vietnam War came primarily from the privileged student, ignoring the pressures that the Mexican American working-class experienced when confronted with military conscription.¹⁶⁶ In response to a reporter who asked World War II veteran Vicente T. Ximenes about his thoughts on anti-war protesters who choose to burn their draft cards, Vicente answered, “We don’t burn our draft cards because we have none to burn – we volunteer.”¹⁶⁷ Ximenes’ statement may have been overstated, but it demonstrates the divide that the war created within the Mexican American community in respect to what justice entailed.

This divide came with the draft resistance represented by the Chicano Movement that began a campaign against white oppression toward people of color. In 1968, Ernesto Vigil

¹⁶⁴Frank Gutierrez, interviewed by Kim Sawyer, January 24, 2001, transcript, The Vietnam Archive Oral History Project, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

¹⁶⁵Ibid.

¹⁶⁶George Mariscal, *Atzlán and Viet Nam*, 28.

¹⁶⁷Lorena Oropeza, *¡Raza Si! ¡Guerra No!*, 58

mailed back his draft notice to the Selective Service and became known as the first Chicano in the Southwest to refuse service in Viet Nam.¹⁶⁸ Vigil's resistance did not come without a price, repeatedly being called to court and spending time in prison.¹⁶⁹ However, with the assistance from the Crusade for Justice, a Chicano organization born out of the Chicano Movement, Vigil eventually gained his freedom.¹⁷⁰ Vigil's resistance represented the growing sentiment among young Mexican Americans that the war in Vietnam symbolized the government's oppression of minorities in the United States. As war casualties increased, solidarity within the Mexican American community, specifically among students, established the notion that they must defend their claim to their race and remain in the United States where the real battle for justice was taking place. The anti-war protest by the young Chicano activists rejected the long-established patriotism shared by many Mexican American servicemen, proclaiming that "they would put their own struggle first."¹⁷¹ The Chicano Movement's motives were to bring justice to *la RAZA* (the Race) in education, social equality, and Mexican American's who were dying in high numbers while fighting in Vietnam. Yet, for the majority of Mexican American servicemen, the movement represented a step backwards in the fight to prove they were not a marginal group.

Many times, Mexican American servicemen did not hold a specific political agenda outside their service to the United States military. Their identification with "*chicanismo*" or a

¹⁶⁸Lorena Oropeza, 59, See Ernesto Vigil, "First Chicano in Southwest Refuses to Kill in Viet Nam," *El Gallo*, May 1968, I. Ernesto Vigil, native of Denver, Colorado joined the Crusade for Justice, a civil rights organization. See: Ernesto B. Vigil, *A Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government's War on Dissent*, First ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

¹⁶⁹ Ernesto B. Vigil, *A Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government's War on Dissent*, 73-79.

¹⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁷¹Lorena Oropeza, 112. For more on the Shift of the Mexican American identity during the Chicano Movement, reference: Ernesto Chávez, *¡Mi Raza Primero! (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966 – 1978* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Carlos Muñoz Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement*, Rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2007).

Mexican heritage was more based on concrete cultural and familial reality as opposed to a Pan-Mexican ideology or stance. What is important to note is that many, such as Everett Alvarez Jr. believed that a movement that only represented one culture was divisive:

I was, as mentioned earlier, always proud of being a Mexican-American, while I was growing up in Salinas and in the service, but I never considered it an element in my relations with other people or my work. Both Fred and I maintained that we were Americans and proud of our country, under all pressure and against all temptation, and our fellow-captives accepted us as such. It is not a position from which I will ever retreat.¹⁷²

For Alvarez, being proud and aware of his Mexican heritage did not correlate with being set apart from other races/ethnicities that made up America. His Mexican roots are seen as being connected to his American citizenship. He emphasized that divisive thinking would have threatened unity during his imprisonment. Indirectly, Alvarez is stating that there is no one ethnicity that makes up an American, and focuses on values and service as a measure instead. So while the Chicano anti-war protester and Mexican American serviceman appeared to be at odds with their politics, in reality both groups were working to accomplish the same goal which was to rid society's perception that to be an American meant to identify as white.

Many Latino advocacy organizations held the belief that anti-war attitudes went against what being Mexican American represented. Protests focused on the government's neglect in dealing with issues such as poverty and poor education: emphasizing that domestic concerns were separate from foreign policy. After attending a Raza Unida conference in El Paso, Texas, Jesus Hernandez wrote a letter to President Johnson explaining his reasons for involvement in the protests: "Probably you are disgusted with us because we demonstrated in El Paso, but I want you to know that I will never join a group that is against the draft, because I believe in

¹⁷²Everett Alvarez Jr., *Code of Conduct*, 132.

democracy and that we should fight for our freedom.”¹⁷³ While some organizations such as the Federation for the Advancement of Mexican Americans used the disproportionate death rates of Mexican American servicemen as reason for anti-war protest, groups like The Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) interpreted the information as proof of the Mexican American’s loyalty to citizenship and country.¹⁷⁴ In addition, MAYO connected anti-war activity with whiteness and disagreed with any Latino advocacy group collaborating with the unpatriotic attitudes of Anglo-based anti-war organizations.¹⁷⁵ The Mexican American had too long a history of military service to put a halt to the progress that they had made in the United States.

The division in attitudes about the war within the Mexican American community brought feelings of betrayal among veterans and servicemen when family members refused to serve their country. The following letter from World War II veteran to his son, Douglas MacArthur Herrera, illustrates the significant affect rejecting orders to go to Vietnam had on one Mexican American family:

Dear Son: Your Mom and I were very shocked to read your letter and you know we have never had a Herrera yet who has refused to serve his country. Your family will never live it down and your life will be ruined. You should not question your country’s motives...Your objections will be widely publicized here in Texas and your family will have to move out of Texas to get over the embarrassment and humiliation of what you are doing...don’t make us ashamed of you. Go back and serve your country...Please call us and tell us that you are going to do the right thing to your country and to your family.¹⁷⁶

Herrera’s service represented more than a political obligation, but his actions reflected the values of his entire family. Therefore, when Mexican Americans chose to dodge the draft, they were also making the decision to put their relationship with their families at risk. Many veterans and

¹⁷³Lorena Oropeza, 76-77.

¹⁷⁴Ibid. 79, See “Mexican American United Conference: La Raza Unida,” box 13, folder 12, Galarza Papers.”

¹⁷⁵Ibid, 77.

¹⁷⁶George Mariscal, *Atzlán and Viet Nam*, 29.

serviceman were angered that draft evaders who went to Canada and then came back received the same freedoms that many who went to Vietnam risked or lost their lives to protect.¹⁷⁷ Eliseo Perez-Montalvo recalls when President Ford pardoned the draft dodgers and how his cousin was among those who were forgiven: “It really burned my gut...my cousin Alfonso exists but I don’t really care for him... he doesn’t exist to me.”¹⁷⁸ As the Vietnam War progressed, division among those who would serve and those who would refuse to serve widened within each ethnic community; nevertheless, the Mexican American met the draft with little resistance. In regards to war protesters, Ramon Moreno put it best when he stated that “they shouldn’t treat American soldiers like they were nothing, while fighting for somebody’s freedom.”¹⁷⁹

While denying dilution to their ethnic heritage, the Mexican American serviceman also resisted questioning of their military service. The draft was taking many men to war, specifically ethnic minorities and poor whites. However, the Mexican American serviceman’s reaction to anti-war protest was for the most part unfavorable and those who did resist faced consequences by both the government and their family. The patriotism that existed among the Mexican American soldiers must be highlighted. Not as an indication that Mexican Americans were the only group to be patriotic, but more as a reminder that they were among those in history that demonstrated that patriotism through their service.

¹⁷⁷Lea Ybarra, *Vietnam Veteranos*, 213.

¹⁷⁸ Eliseo Perez-Montalvo interview.

¹⁷⁹Ramon Moreno interview.

IV. DEMONSTRATION OF PATRIOTISM

Patriotism of the Mexican American Soldier

*Duty isn't what I'm told to do but what I know I have to do - my responsibility, my obligation, what I owe.*¹⁸⁰

While Mexican Americans were being drafted, it is important to note that they also enlisted in the military, strongly believing that it was their responsibility to answer the nation's call to serve in time of war. Alfred Alvarez was concerned that the war in Vietnam would be over if he waited to enlist after college so he volunteered once graduating high school: "I would see the soldiers with the 1st Cav patch and I would tell myself, 'When I go to Vietnam that's what I want to do.' So it seemed that my dream came true."¹⁸¹ One cannot ignore that the military targeted young ethnic minority men to fill the needs of the ever growing war, yet like Alvarez, discussion of the Mexican Americans who believed the military as their destiny must be viewed as just important an element to their participation and identification as American.

When discussing claims to nationality, patriotism has been a primary indicator of "Americanness." Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia, reference that a core value in United States society is the belief that a "good American" is one who is patriotic¹⁸² and "defends the nation against its critics."¹⁸³ In this sense, specific cultural or racial distinctiveness plays no role in diluting society's expectations of patriotic values. In fact, de la Garza, Falcon and Garcia claim that Mexican Americans conveyed elevated levels of patriotism when

¹⁸⁰Alvarez, *Code of Conduct*, 227.

¹⁸¹ Alfred Alvarez, Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech, June 3,5, 2008

¹⁸²Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia, 342

¹⁸³Ibid.

compared to Anglos.¹⁸⁴ However, the United States' history of an institutionalized racial and cultural Anglo-centric society positioned Mexican Americans as a marginal group in need of assimilation to qualify as true citizens. According to Lorena Oropeza, the existing "Anglo-American sentiment refused to recognize Mexican Americans as equals, on the grounds that they were both excessively foreign and insufficiently Caucasian."¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, in relation to Mexican American patriotism and self-identification, the notion of assimilation and being accepted by society played an insignificant part when quantifying their American identity.

Although they were frequently confronted with racial and social discrimination in their everyday lives, Mexican American servicemen openly voiced and demonstrated their patriotism to the United States through their service in the Vietnam War. For the Mexican American soldier, race and ethnicity would not be the standard by which their patriotism and loyalty would be measured, but instead it would be considered a part of their "Americanness" therefore, there would be no need to conceal it. Army Major General, Freddie Valenzuela (RET.), affirms he would never encourage any "aspiring officer – regardless of their background – to conceal their heritage in order to get ahead in their career."¹⁸⁶ Mexican American soldiers represented the essence of Honor, Duty, and Country by establishing their loyalty to the United States as the measure of a patriotic American.

When Mexican American veterans address the topic of race in the military, they often speak of the confusion and anger they experienced when confronted with comments about their Mexican heritage and why it mattered to their service in the military. Juan Ramirez remembers a

¹⁸⁴Rodolfo O. de la Garza, Angelo Falcon and F. Chris Garcia, 343.

¹⁸⁵Oropeza, 14.

¹⁸⁶Freddie Vanzuela and Jason Lemons.*No Greater Love: The Lives and Times of Hispanic Soldiers* (Austin: Ovation Books), 2008, 66.

fellow soldier who would antagonize him by continuously referring to him as “Mexican” in front of others expecting a negative reaction: “At first I was puzzled. Why did he think I would be insulted by what I was?”¹⁸⁷ Ramirez continued to experience negative comments about his ethnicity when he was arrested while back at home in Palo Alto, California. A police officer assumed his military occupation was burning waste because he was Mexican.¹⁸⁸ The officer could not believe that he could have been in a position to kill even after Ramirez had told him he was in the infantry.¹⁸⁹ Although the officer was offending both his military position and ethnicity, Ramirez was most angered by the denial of his service: “Motherf[**]ker! Calling me names was one thing, but to demean my sacrifice was quite another thing altogether.”¹⁹⁰

Service and sacrifice became the focus of how many Mexican Americans wanted to base their American identity. Everett Alvarez Jr. understood that growing up in Salinas, California his family was not wealthy and racism did exist, however, he refused to become too involved in groups that advocated one race over the other believing it would only add on to the division that existed in society: “As an American of Mexican heritage that had begun life in what today would be called underprivileged circumstances, I was dismayed by this self-limiting polarization. I had tried in my own person and career to represent another kind of America, an America on unity and open opportunity...¹⁹¹ I didn’t get beat up because I was Hispanic. I was an American fighting man.”¹⁹² Polarization between soldiers based on their race, ethnicity or social status became a secondary issue for many Mexican American servicemen believing that such division

¹⁸⁷Ramirez, *A Patriot After All*, 32.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁸⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁹¹Alvarez, *Code of Conduct*, xxi.

¹⁹²*Ibid.*, 134.

was unrepresentative of a true American. Their loyal military service was reason enough to no longer be defined by where they came from or what language they spoke.

The Mexican American defined himself as American first and foremost, especially since he was risking his life along with the rest of the soldiers - regardless of race. As Roy Benavidez put it when referencing his identity, “I call myself an American. But, like every other American, I am an American with a heritage. My heritage is Mexican and Yaqui Indian.”¹⁹³ Like Benavidez, when Mexican American servicemen were asked about their involvement in the war, the majority of the time, their response highlights their American identity and pride in serving for the United States. When Manuel Martinez was asked what he learned from going to Vietnam he answered that he “learned the importance of being an American and of fighting to protect all of our country’s freedoms,”¹⁹⁴ Martinez’s answer comes after earlier stating that his favorite colors were “red, white and blue, the colors of the American flag.”¹⁹⁵ Martinez is one representation of many Vietnam War soldiers who truly loved the country they protected. However, regardless of how they self-identified, according to Freddie Valenzuela, throughout history, the Hispanic’s loyalty to the United States “and their willingness to contribute to American progress” has been questioned.¹⁹⁶

Loyalty and what can be described as love for their country, is unquestionable when reading what Mexican Americans had to say about their duty to serve in military. When asked about what kept him alive and continue to follow the military’s orders, Melvin Martinez answered by stating that it was his duty as a soldier: “I had a responsibility as a soldier, and I had

¹⁹³Benavidez, 1.

¹⁹⁴Martinez, *Don’t Let me die*, 218.

¹⁹⁵Ibid, 92.

¹⁹⁶Valenzuela, *No Greater Love*,4.

a two year commitment, and I was willing to do that.”¹⁹⁷ As Richard DeSoto explained, “Every day I asked myself why we are here and could someone please explain to me again? As a soldier, I just continued to do my duty.”¹⁹⁸ Loyalty was about answering the call because it was what all Americans were expected to do: “Soldiers don’t pick their wars; they respond to orders from their commander-in-chief.”¹⁹⁹

Not only did they say it of themselves, but others recognized the patriotism demonstrated by Mexican Americans. In a 2008 Fox News conference, presidential nominee Senator John McCain spoke of Roy Benavidez’s words of pride in being an American as he laid in his death bed in a San Antonio hospital ten years prior: “May God bless his soul and may American’s, all Americans, be very proud that Roy Benavidez was one of us.”²⁰⁰ McCain was including Benavidez in the overall American population as opposed to signaling him out as belonging to a separate group in society. In a letter written to Everett Alvarez Jr. from President Ronald Regan, Regan expresses his gratitude to Alvarez while serving as a prisoner of war for eight and a half years emphasizing that he “displayed courage and determination that serves as a model for all Americans to emulate.”²⁰¹ President Regan did not see skin color when it came to Alvarez’s service to the country and stated that Alvarez exemplified the qualities that all Americans should have. As demonstrated in the words of two well-known and respected public officials and the words and experiences of the serviceman themselves, there should be no question that focusing

¹⁹⁷ Melvin Martinez, interview, 2009.

¹⁹⁸ DeSoto, *Never A Hero*, 64

¹⁹⁹ Benavidez, 169.

²⁰⁰ John McCain, Fox News, 2008.

²⁰¹ Excerpt from letter to Alvarez written by Ronald Regan on Everett’s resignation from the Veterans Administration as Deputy Administrator of Veteran’s Affairs. May 10, 1986. See Alvarez, *Code of Conduct*, 184.

on Mexican Americans in the Vietnam War will “converge a huge gap in understanding the true meaning of American Patriotism.”²⁰²

The words of the soldier become important when discussing the Mexican American serviceman’s patriotism. As revealed in their want to serve and their acknowledgement of their ethnic heritage, it is apparent that the Mexican American did not let the way society defined them as reason not to be proud of being an American. Benavidez believed in defending the United States up to his last breath, illustrating the immense commitment that existed among Mexican American servicemen to their country. This is most illustrative in the ultimate sacrifice a soldier can give, his life.

²⁰²Refugio I. Rochina, Lionel Fernandez, and Jose Alonso Oliveros, *U.S. Latino Patriots: From the American Revolution to Iraq 2003 – An Overview* (Michigan: Michigan State University), 2005, 3.

V. SACRIFICE AND HONOR

*We continue to pay a heavy price for our identity.*²⁰³

Brotherhood: Loyalty to Fellow Servicemen

The Vietnam War allowed Mexican Americans to develop a strong bond with other soldiers that went beyond the color of skin. Aside from loyalty to their country, their strong commitment to the lives of their fellow comrades contributed to the serviceman's sense of duty on the battlefield. For all servicemen, those they fought with became members of a family that transcended race, class, and social status. There was even a sense of guilt when a soldier had to leave his men after he had completed his time of service or was severely injured. Then there were those servicemen who never returned, believing it was better to sacrifice their own lives to save their brothers in arms. Mexican American servicemen demonstrated just as much loyalty to the lives of their army family, if not more, than of the family they left back home.

The color line that created polarization in the United States, for most Mexican Americans, was blurred in the military. The awareness of who they were and how they may be treated different because of their race did not disappear. However, when discussing their relationships with the other soldiers, many Mexican American servicemen rarely factored in race or ethnicity when it came to watching over each other. Ramon Moreno recalled that his unit had a noticeable amount of Mexican Americans, yet he refused to confine himself to associating with only those of his race making friends with anyone regardless of color: "I believed everyone was the same, we were all there for a reason to take care of each other. Some people didn't understand that. I felt good, because if someone messed with me I would have back up. We were

²⁰³Juan Perea, *Five Axioms in Search of Equality*, 175.

a family.”²⁰⁴ Moreno’s sentiment about friendship may appear typical of any soldier who shared the same fears on a daily basis, yet the idea of family among men of different races and backgrounds had a profound meaning for the Mexican American due to the sense of protection and indication that someone valued his life, regardless of color. This built a stronger sense of loyalty to the military because it created a color blind community where the Mexican American can just be American. Willie Zavala Jr. described it as a diverse group of men from all parts of the world and “varied histories, personalities and cultures fused together to become a brotherhood.”²⁰⁵

The strong connection that Mexican American servicemen had with fellow soldiers is a reason why many served second tours of duty or felt significant guilt when forced off the battle field. When Freddie Gonzalez returned home after serving a tour in Vietnam, he had told his mother he would not go back, yet after receiving a letter from one of his friends informing him that men from his unit were killed in an ambush, he decided he must return.²⁰⁶ Freddie’s mother, Dolia, pleaded with him not to serve a second tour in Vietnam. Although Gonzalez truly did not want to return, he felt responsible for his friends’ deaths telling his mother: “And I know if I had been there, some of them would be alive...I should have been there for them.”²⁰⁷ Richard De Soto shared the same feeling of responsibility when he was given orders to leave his men when his tour in Vietnam had come to an end: “I called them back and told them that I cannot leave until we all come back to LZ Sandy. I don’t think that I was trying to be a hero or martyr, but it

²⁰⁴Ramon Moreno interview.

²⁰⁵ Willie Zavala, Jr. *Childhood Lost: A Marine's Experience in Vietnam* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005).

²⁰⁶John W. Flores, *When the River Dreams*, 70-71.

²⁰⁷Ibid, 71.

was important to me that I could not abandon my men.”²⁰⁸ Moreover, although he was critically injured and at the cusp of death, Manuel Martinez wanted to go back and finish his tour with his friends sharing that he felt like he had left his “brother behind without being able to help them anymore.”²⁰⁹ The thought of abandonment often surpassed the serviceman’s own condition or fate creating an almost paternal need to watch over the life of other soldiers, a feeling that existed in soldiers of all races. The commitment to their fellow soldiers was highly significant for the Mexican American serviceman because the relationship had been bound by an unbiased love that they were leaving behind when returning to the hate awaiting them back in the United States.

As the war progressed and intensified, it became more controversial in the United States causing the Mexican American serviceman to feel even more alone and attached to his brothers in Vietnam. Soldiers were not oblivious to the course the war had taken and the large amount of lives that had been lost, many in front of their own eyes. However, their loyalty to protecting the rights of people back home in the United States and the lives of those on the battle ground exceeded any political reservations they may have had. Juan Ramirez admitted that he felt the war was wrong, yet knew there was nothing he could do to stop or change it emphasizing: “my sense of duty to my fallen comrades was strong.”²¹⁰ Especially for the Mexican American serviceman, going being back to the United States and witnessing young Mexican Americans protest against the war only put them in a place of loneliness and confusion. As Eddie Morin described it, “It wasn’t a lack of social contact or shared experiences, but something that conversation just couldn’t bridge. I wanted to be understood but yet couldn’t understand

²⁰⁸De Soto, *Never A Hero*, 249-50

²⁰⁹Martinez, *Don’t let me die*, 61.

²¹⁰Ramirez, 96.

others.”²¹¹ Although he understood the inhumane racism against Mexican Americans and the reasons for protesting the war, Morin could not relate as much as he would have liked to because of the fact that there was the missing acknowledgement that people sacrificed their lives believing in the justice it would bring back for the discriminated. Those who lost their lives protecting fellow soldiers as well as the freedoms of those back home is where the Mexican American serviceman more than did his part, yet recognition for those deaths is primarily bound within the Mexican American community.

The Fallen, but not Forgotten, Casualties among Mexican American Servicemen

On Memorial Day 1988, the Edgewood High School graduating class of 1967 spearheaded the Vietnam War memorial at Edgewood Veterans Stadium located in San Antonio, Texas. The memorial was established to honor the 54 former students from the Edgewood Independent School District who were killed in Vietnam or never found.²¹² The significant detail of those honored, is that only three of the casualties were non-Hispanic and most were from “one of the poorest school districts in the state.”²¹³ This snapshot of those who died from the Edgewood district illustrates the much larger picture of Mexican American casualties of the war in general. Although the numbers may not seem as significant when compared to the total of casualties of the war, they demonstrate a proportionately large loss for a community. The loss is further illustrated when understanding that the Edgewood High School graduating class of 1967

²¹¹Morin, *Valor and Discord*, 209.

²¹²David, Flores, “Edgewood Vietnam Memorial Honors a Community’s Fallen,” *Kens5 Eyewitness News San Antonio*, May 25 2015, accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.kens5.com/story/opinion/contributors/david-flores/2015/05/24/edgewood-vietnam-memorial-honors-a-communitys-fallen/27893821/>.

²¹³*Ibid.*

lost ten of its students as casualties in the Vietnam War.²¹⁴ The total number of graduates from the Edgewood School District was 812.²¹⁵ Expanding even further out, from 1965 to May 1967 approximately 98 Mexican Americans from San Antonio died in Vietnam which means that 51 of the 98 casualties came out of the Edgewood school district, located in Bexar County.²¹⁶ The significant loss of lives to come out of one community is only one example of areas in the United States where there was a concentrated amount of Mexican Americans leaving their home town to serve in the military.

In 1969 the journal, *El Grito*, published a list of Spanish surnamed casualties from all states including Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico, from 1965 to May 1969. Utilizing the names from *El Grito*, graphs were created to show the estimated Mexican American Vietnam War casualties for the United States. As shown, in the western United States: Arizona, California, Colorado, and New Mexico had the highest percentages of Mexican American casualties, California being the highest at 28 percent (see Figure 1). These figures demonstrate the Southwest had a high percentage of Mexican American casualties overall. In a study done from the 1980 Census, it was discovered that states in the Southwest and West had the highest rate of veterans of Spanish descent.²¹⁷ In addition, more than one of every four veterans living in New Mexico was Hispanic.²¹⁸

²¹⁴Ibid.

²¹⁵Number includes both Edgewood High School (452 graduates) and Kennedy High School (360 graduates). Numbers obtained by the Edgewood County Office of Education Records department by author through phone conversation with the Records clerk.

²¹⁶Nick C. Vaca, Octavio I. Romano-V., Andres Ybarra, and Gustavo Segade, eds."Spanish Surname War Dead Vietnam," *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* III, No.1 (Fall1969).

²¹⁷Stephen J. Dienstfrey and Robert H. Feitz, *Chart Book on Black and Hispanic Veterans: Data from the 1980 Census of Population and Housing* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Information Management and Statistics, Statistical Policy and Research, Research Division, 1985).

²¹⁸Ibid.

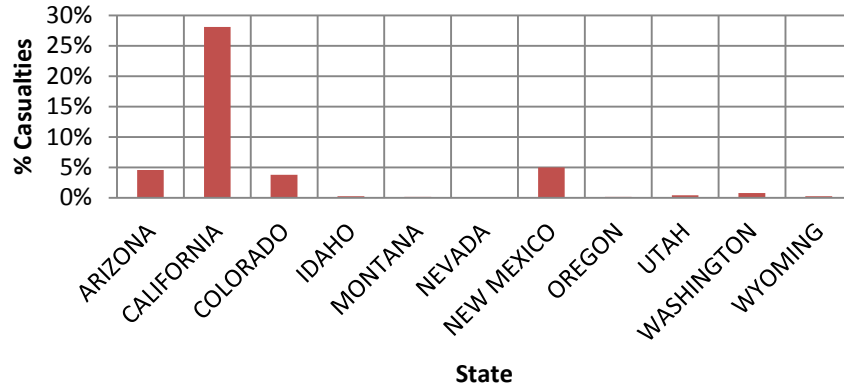


Figure 1. Western United States Mexican American Casualties

While for the Midwestern United States, Illinois held the highest casualties with 3.2 percent (see Figure 2), and in the south, Texas took the highest toll at 28.7 percent Mexican American casualties (see Figure 3).²¹⁹

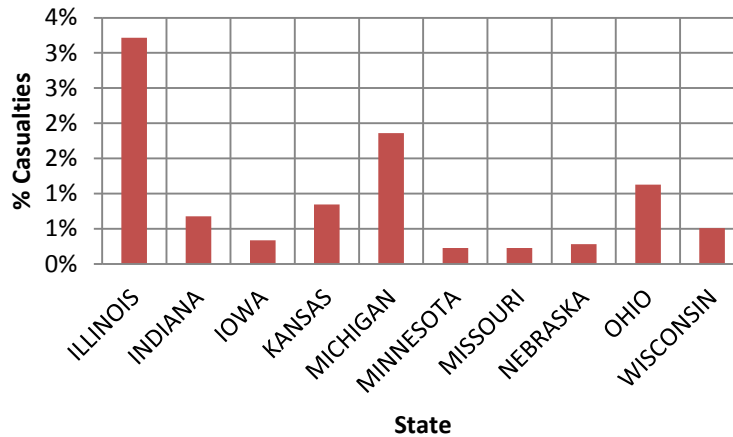


Figure 2. Midwestern United States Mexican American Casualties

²¹⁹The North Eastern United States graphic was not included due to the uncertainty of how many casualties was Mexican American as opposed to Puerto Rican. New York had the highest amount of Spanish surnamed casualties at 10.8%.

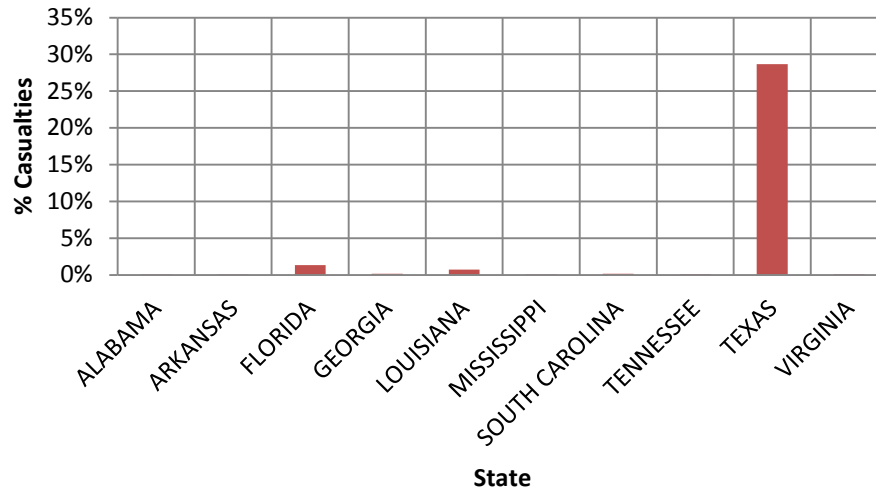


Figure 3. Southern United States Mexican American Casualties

The numbers give a visual representation of the approximate number of Mexican American casualties throughout the United States specifically the high percentages in the states where Mexican Americans made up a large portion of the population. Unfortunately, due to their categorization as “white” the actual amount of Mexican American casualties and the total who participated in the war compared to those of Anglo heritage cannot be accurately calculated. However, by using Spanish surnames, an indication of Mexican American lives lost in the Vietnam War can be estimated to give significant results.

Ralph Guzman took the number of Spanish surnamed men who died in Vietnam, focusing primarily on the southwestern states.²²⁰ Guzman looked at two periods, period one was from January 1961 to February 1967 and period two was from December 1967 to March 1969. According to Guzman's findings, period one showed 1,631 casualties with 19.4 percent being Spanish surnamed while period two had 6,385 casualties with 19 percent of which were Spanish surnamed servicemen.²²¹ Guzman points out that the numbers are more significant when

²²⁰These included casualties with home addressed from the state of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. See Ralph Guzman, *Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam* (Santa Cruz, CA: University of Santa Cruz, 1969) , 1.

factoring in that Mexican Americans made up 11.8 percent of the total Southwest population.²²²

Guzman’s casualty study is the most widely used in the scholarship that exist on Mexican Americans in the Vietnam War. A recent study is needed to more accurately estimate the total number of Mexican American casualties since Guzman did not cover the entire time period of the war. Figure 4 comes from Guzman’s study comparing Spanish surnamed casualties with those of non-Spanish surnamed. The data compiled in this research adds to Guzman’s estimates since it is more comprehensive of all Mexican Americans in the United States, focusing beyond the southwestern states.

State	Total Number of Casualties	Distinctive Spanish Surnamed Casualties	SSN% of Total	Non-Spanish Surnamed Casualties	Non-SSN% of Total	Percent Total
Arizona	354	86	24.3	268	75.7	100.0
California	3543	525	14.8	3018	85.2	100.0
Colorado	336	66	19.1	270	80.9	100.0
New Mexico	231	91	39.4	140	60.6	100.0
Texas	1921	434	25.2	1437	74.3	100.0
Total	6305	1252	19.6	5133	30.4	100.0

Figure 4. Vietnam Casualties From All Causes In Each Of The Five Southwestern States Between December 1967 And March 1969²²³

SOURCE: Congressional Record, vol. 115, No. 51 (Barch 25, 1969), pp. H2043-H2169
 Congressional Record, vol. 115, No. 57 (April 3, 1969), pp. H2509-H2526
 Congressional Record, vol. 115, No. 122 (July 22, 1969), pp. H6173-116186

It was certainly apparent during the war, that the Mexican American community was losing many of its young men in Vietnam. In an article from the *Sacramento Bee* in 1968, Democratic Representative George E. Brown stated that “Mexicans-Americans from California

²²¹ Ralph Guzman, *Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam*, p. 1-2.

²²²Ibid., 1. Data taken from the 1960 report of the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

²²³Ibid., Table 4.

died in the Vietnam war last year at more than twice their ratio in the general population” referring to the casualties in 1967.²²⁴ For Los Angeles County alone, Brown reported 132 Spanish surnamed casualties.²²⁵ In conclusion, Brown brings up the issue that the “the draft law is unfair because young men from minority groups such as Mexican-American and Negroes do not qualify for or cannot afford methods of obtaining deferment status-primarily attendance at a college or university.”²²⁶ Following Brown’s point, there are different factors to consider when determining the reasons why casualty rates among the Mexican American population were so high. Like the African Americans, the assumption can be made that due to their socioeconomic status, Mexican Americans had less access to educational deferments as well as increased family pressure to serve in the military to prove ones citizenship.

Factors to Consider

One reason that can be given for the large number of casualties for Mexican Americans was many were part of high risk units within the military that more often than not were involved in major operations with high casualty rates. According to Guzman, a significant number of Mexican Americans were “involved in high-risk branches of the service such as the U.S. Marine Corps.”²²⁷ It was no secret that to be in the Marines meant a guaranteed trip to Vietnam and to confronting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. When Richard De Soto was drafted and told he was going to be in the Marines, he loudly voiced his refusal:

²²⁴ “Mexican-American Death Ratio is High in Vietnam,” *Sacramento Bee*, Feb 26, 1968.

²²⁵Ibid.

²²⁶Ibid.

²²⁷Guzman, 1.

“I made it clear to him and everyone within listening distances that there was no way I was going into the a Marines...We discussed my reason for not wanting to be a Marine and he finally conceded after I asked him; ‘Are you a Marine?’ He said ‘He[ck] No!’ He then said, ‘Private De Soto, OK, you are in the Army...’”²²⁸

De Soto, like many others, was aware that the Marines were a branch of the military that only a few would be willing to be a part of. Specifically, the 9th and 26th Marines were the units that had experienced the most combat. Juan Ramirez was assigned to the 26th Marines and recalls crossing paths with other Marines on their way home from Vietnam: “Some of them warned us about being assigned to the 9th or 26th Marines.”²²⁹ Before his last operation with the 26th Marines, Ramirez recalls that there had been fifty men in his platoon and within a span of seven days there were only seven left.²³⁰ Whether in the Marines or the Army, the fact of the matter was that Mexican Americans were represented in all branches of the military and very often placed in the infantry where their lives were always at risk.

It can be determined that those making the decisions in Washington D.C. did not take into account the lives they were affecting until years after the war. Robert McNamara writes in 1968 that “the situation in Vietnam is too complicated and threatening for abandonment of collective defense.”²³¹ However, in 1995 he admits “...we exaggerated the dangers to the United States of their actions.”²³² McNamara revealed that there were errors in the organization of those in charge of the war and it caused a loss of life that otherwise may not have been lost.²³³ What this indicates is that the lives of the soldiers were not valued and this in large part

²²⁸De Soto, *Never A Hero*, 8-9

²²⁹Ramirez, *A Patriot After All*, 41.

²³⁰Ibid, 67.

²³¹McNamara, *The Essence of Security*, 8.

²³²Robert S. McNamara with Brian Van De Mark. *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (Random House. New York. 1995), 321.

also contributed to the drafting of men of colored and disadvantaged neighborhoods. McNamara did acknowledge that ethnic minority soldiers were racially discriminated when going back to the United States, specifically mentioning the high casualty rates of African Americans.²³⁴ This illustrates the continued negligence of the Mexican American and the recognition of his courageous sacrifice. Why Mexican Americans are not included in McNamara's statement about casualties is unknown, however, one thing that can be said is those who governed the decisions about the war did not fully understand the extent of their choices on the lives of the soldiers that would fight it. As Richard De Soto put it, "...if it was Robert McNamara or LBJ who made these rules, why aren't they the ones walking around the jungle chasing the NVA?"²³⁵

The Mexican American's loyalty to his comrades was demonstrated in the disproportionate amount of lives that were lost. While recognition of the lives sacrificed has been initiated by the Mexican American community with memorials and dedication of schools, parks, and streets, acknowledgment of the men who went above and beyond the call of duty is lacking. Recognition of the Mexican American servicemen who earned the Medal of Honor and those who were held captive as prisoners of war is deficient in historical scholarship. Statistics and facts for this study were made difficult to locate due to the scarce amount of primary sources and research. Their story must be told in order to fully know the extent of the Mexican Americans' willingness to die for a country that has marginalized their sacrifice.

²³³Ibid, 323.

²³⁴McNamara, *In Essence*, 125.

²³⁵De Soto, *Never a Hero*, 79.

VI. HONOR AND DELAYED RECOGNITION

With all Honor

In connection with their disproportionate casualty rates, Mexican American servicemen have received a significant number of Medal of Honors and there are also those who are just being recognized for their acts of bravery. Much like the exact number of Mexican Americans who died in Vietnam, there is no concrete evidence why some men went unnoticed. It could have been the simple fact that the paperwork was lost, not filed on time or that the requirements were not met. However, there are Mexican American servicemen who went beyond what they were expected to do to save the life of others while their life disappeared in the wind. For the Vietnam War alone approximately sixteen Medal of Honors were awarded to Mexican Americans.²³⁶ Some of these medals may have never been awarded had it not been for the persistence of the men and their supporters to get their case approved. Moreover, three of the medals were earned by Mexican-born serviceman who served in the United States Army, claiming their right to be called an American. Through sacrifice comes honor, and the Medal of Honor is the United States' highest accolade. While all their stories are just as important, there are those Mexican American servicemen who went unrecognized for much too long.

In 2002, Congress mandated that the military review hundreds of cases of Hispanic and Jewish serviceman who participated in World War II as well as the Korean and Vietnam War in

²³⁶The approximate number of Hispanic Medal of Honor recipients is twenty two of which six were recently added in 2014. See Edward F. Murphy, *Vietnam Medal of Honor Heroes* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005) and "Obama Honors 24 Heroes Who Didn't Get Their Due," *Huffington Post*, March 18, 2014, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/18/obama-medal-of-honor_n_4988670.html.

order to find those deserving of the Medal of Honor.²³⁷ The review found seventeen Hispanic soldiers that met the requirements for the Medal of Honor, and on March 18, 2014 President Barack Obama presented the two living recipients Santiago Erevia and Jose Rodela, with their overdue medals.²³⁸ Erevia was a Sergeant with the 101st Airborne Division while Rodela was in the Army's 5th Special Forces.²³⁹ There is no question that both these men are grateful for having received recognition for their valor, even if it came at a much later time. However, why were they overlooked in the first place? According to the Pentagon, out of the 6,505 cases of recipients who received the Distinguished Service Cross from World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, it discovered 600 eligible soldiers of Jewish or Hispanic heritage.²⁴⁰ It can only be speculated that Mexican Americans were overlooked due to their marginalized status in society. One thing that is certain is that Mexican American servicemen paid the highest price to defend the values of the United States military - further proving their patriotism.

Medal of Honor recipient, Alfredo Rascon is quoted as saying that he is "Mexican by birth, American by choice,"²⁴¹ signifying that the American identity was not equated to being born in the county, but instead measured by loyalty through protecting its freedoms. The paperwork recommending Rascon for the Medal of Honor in 1966 was lost and it took the United States thirty four years to finally award the medal to Rascon on February 8, 2000 due to

²³⁷ Luis Martinez, "Belated Medal of Honor for 24 Soldiers Overlooked Due to Race," *ABC News*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2014/02/belated-medal-of-honor-for-24-soldiers-overlooked-due-to-race/>).

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹"Valor 24 Medal of Honor: World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War," *Army.Mil*, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://www.army.mil/medalofhonor/valor24/>.

²⁴⁰The Army worked in collaboration with the American GI Forum to locate potential Hispanic Medal of Honor recipients. See: "Obama Honors 24 Heroes Who Didn't Get Their Due," *Huffington Post*, March 18, 2014, accessed November 23, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/18/obama-medal-of-honor_n_4988670.html.

²⁴¹"Alfred Rascon," *Ojos*, Smithsonian Institution, 2004, accessed November 23, 2015.

the request by the men he saved to reopen the process.²⁴² When the men were asked why Rascon should receive the medal after so many years, their response was, “We don’t want to change history, we just want to correct it.”²⁴³ Mexican American servicemen’s heroic actions should not be examined as a new discovery in history, but rather as filling the gaps to important details of the contributions they made in the war. In addition to Rascon, Jesus S. Duran and Jose Jimenez were also Mexican-born Americans who were awarded the Medal of Honor for losing their lives to save those of their fellow soldiers.²⁴⁴ The fact that three Mexican American men who received the Medal of Honor were born outside the United States further signifies that patriotism goes far beyond ethnicity owing these men recognition as true Americans.

Roy Benavidez

When speaking in regards to true Americans, no man represented it more than Master Sergeant Roy P. Benavidez (1935 – d.1998). Benavidez voluntarily risked his life to rescue the lives of others coming so close to death that doctors believed him to be dead. Benavidez’s jaw was broken and he had over thirty-seven puncture wounds in addition to having his intestines exposed.²⁴⁵ Benavidez recalled when the doctor put his hand on his chest, checking for a heartbeat: “I spat into his face. He quickly reversed my condition from dead to ‘He won’t make it but we’ll try.’ I was truly once again totally in God’s hands.”²⁴⁶ Benavidez saw his fair share of

²⁴²Peter Collier, *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty* (New York: Artisan, 2011), 214.

²⁴³Alfred Rascon interview, *Medal of Honor: Oral Histories*, October 4, 2011, accessed May 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_EY7MXFuKM.

²⁴⁴See Edward F. Murphy, *Vietnam Medal of Honor Heroes and Valor 24 Medal of Honor: World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War.*”

²⁴⁵Benavidez ,145.

²⁴⁶Ibid.

wounded and dead while serving in the Vietnam War. He also suffered serious injuries that almost paralyzed him for life. In 1965, Benavidez stepped on a landmine, damaging him so severely that physicians believed he would never have use of his legs.²⁴⁷ However, Benavidez pushed himself to the limit of rehabilitation and not only walked again, but joined the Army's Special Forces Airborne unit for a second tour in Vietnam.²⁴⁸ Benavidez encountered challenges that would demonstrate his loyalty to the United States military and later earn him the highest honor of all.

Roy Benavidez was a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the premier military tribute given for going above and beyond the call of duty. On May 2, 1968, Roy volunteered to board the helicopter that was sent to extract a Special Forces Reconnaissance Team placed in Cambodia²⁴⁹ on a mission to gather intelligence information.²⁵⁰ The team was experiencing heavy enemy fire and in dire need of rescue. Roy's dedication to comrades gave him the courage and strength to heed their call, even at the risk of his own life. The following is an excerpt from the official Medal of Honor citation describing Benavidez's extraordinary act of self-sacrifice:

With little strength remaining, he made one last trip to the perimeter to ensure that all classified material had been collected or destroyed, and to bring in the remaining wounded. Only then, in extremely serious condition from numerous wounds and loss of blood, did he allow himself to be pulled into the extraction aircraft. Sergeant Benavidez' gallant choice to join voluntarily his comrades who were in critical straits, to expose himself constantly to withering enemy fire, and his refusal to be stopped despite numerous severe wounds, saved the lives of at least eight men.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷Benavidez, 85.

²⁴⁸Ibid., 115.

²⁴⁹Official citation says west of Loch Nih only because it was classified at the time to be in unrestricted area

²⁵⁰ See Murphy, 278 for Medal of Honor citation details.

²⁵¹Ibid.

Benavidez did not receive the Medal of Honor until 1993 due to what he said were political reasons since he was in the Army Special Forces on a classified mission in Cambodia: “You were in Cambodia...the army doesn’t want to admit that. If they decorate you with the highest medal there is, they’ll have to acknowledge you where you were.”²⁵² This statement is a symbolic parallel to the lack of recognizing Mexican American servicemen for their patriotism. If it is recognized that they fought and valiantly risked or lost their lives in Vietnam, then it must be acknowledged that they were there. Through acknowledgment the Mexican American is given a place in the history of the war and an American identity, placing value on their lives.

Evidence of that the Mexican American was overlooked is through examining another Medal of Honor recipient by the name of James P. Fleming, an Anglo American who demonstrated his heroism in the same year of Benavidez’s action while on a classified mission in Cambodia.²⁵³ However, the only difference in Fleming’s situation is that he received the Medal of Honor on May 14, 1970, only two years after his ordeal.²⁵⁴ If operations taking place in Cambodia were classified, Fleming would have also been recognized much later in his life. Yet despite the delay, Benavidez was proud to wear the medal and honored by the men who fought to get him recognized for his valor.

Never did Benavidez imagine that he, a Mexican-Yaqui Indian American from the small town of Cuero, Texas, would be standing in front of President Ronald Regan while he placed the Medal of Honor around his neck. The journey from Cuero to the White House was not easy, nor was it anything that Benavidez anticipated. The morning of May 2, 1968 would determine Roy

²⁵²Benavidez, 156.

²⁵³Murphy, 154.

²⁵⁴Ibid, 156.

Benavidez's legacy as a true American hero – a legacy that is hidden in the shadows of history, despite his tremendous display of service to the United States. He, like many unrecognized Mexican American servicemen of the Vietnam War, adhered to a call of duty that went beyond patriotism, but never beyond the battlefield.

These are but a few of the Mexican American men who went beyond the call of duty to do what they believed was expected of a soldier and an American. Through the discrimination and struggle to be recognized and valued, the Mexican American serviceman of the Vietnam War is yet to be included as part of the overall historical narrative. Their invisibility today lies in the lack of knowledge of their sacrifice and participation. Not all Mexican American soldiers, like many soldiers, volunteered to serve or even want to acknowledge that they were part of such a controversial war, yet they should still be made visible in history. As demonstrated through their lack of resistance to the draft and their loyalty to the United States through their volunteerism and ultimate sacrifice, the Mexican American is not a marginal ethnic minority hoping to assimilate into whatever an American should be. The Mexican American serviceman defines the true meaning of a united country where color, language, religion, and social status has nothing to do with being called and identified as an American.

VII. CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL INVISIBILITY

All the information in the world will not do the Mexican American serviceman any justice if he is kept in the shadows of the established history that has made Latinos a stereotypical foreign group that belong in the footnotes of historical scholarship. For both African and Mexican Americans, the constant confrontation with discrimination created a need to prove oneself deserving of equal treatment. Yet, when we talk about the role models of justice in America, there seems to be either a black or white representative that is to cover the full range of civil right accomplishments. Individuals such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. become the images of what it means to be an American and struggle to obtain the rights of the oppressed. Rachel Moran argues that the Black-White model of race relations in the United States explains Latinos' limited success in having their civil rights claims heard.²⁵⁵ According to Juan Perea, Latino history is different from that of African Americans, and remains not well known resulting in the perception that Latinos are “perceived as late-arriving trespassers...encroaching on the already-settled and distributed terrain of civil rights.”²⁵⁶ Any group that is associated with familial ties and traits outside of the United States are given the attributes of foreigners therefore undergoing a "symbolic deportation" with a “foreign history” that is not significantly a part of the history of the United States.²⁵⁷ Bob Blauner, who focuses on racial oppression in America, describes the marginalization of Mexican Americans in history as a type of “academic colonialism” by white scholars leading to an omission of their

²⁵⁵Rachel F. Moran, “Neither Black Nor White,” 2 *Harv. Latino L. Rev.* 61 (1997). In *LaCrit Primer* 1 (Summer 2002): 112-132, 112.

²⁵⁶Perea, *Axioms*, 178.

²⁵⁷*Ibid*, 179.

contributions and struggles.²⁵⁸ This omission is damaging to the value and identity of Mexican Americans creating ignorance that establishes false images among students at all levels of education of Latinos immense struggle for equality²⁵⁹ especially when sacrificing their lives for those rights in the military.

Just like the World War II serviceman that fought before them, for Vietnam War Mexican American veterans what remains most important in their memory is the ability to have survived the tortures of war and come out proud of having lived through it.²⁶⁰ World War II veterans Marty Ramirez and Nick Garcia reflect on how growing up, they never learned about any Latino heroes in their history courses and how it affected their pride in their Mexican American heritage stating that it established a feeling “[t]hat evidentially we didn’t do anything of significance that contributed to American history, especially in the military.”²⁶¹ Marty further goes on to say that the Hispanic presence in the military has existed as long as the United States has had to go to war and that the major contributing factor is the Mexican American’s pride in his country, never denying his service: “It’s that sense of pride that, I think, helped Nick and I not to say, we’re not going to go fight.”²⁶² Nick adds that Mexican Americans did not escape their duty when called upon by the United States: “And that’s where our pride is. Because we, you know, stay here.”²⁶³ Mexican Americans want their stories to be told, not to glorify

²⁵⁸Bob Blauner, *Still the Big News: Racial Oppression in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 170.

²⁵⁹Parea, *Black and White Paradigm of Race*, 1257.

²⁶⁰Alvarez, *Code of Conduct*, 168.

²⁶¹Marty Ramirez and Nick Garcia, interview, *The War: Nebraska Stories*, An NET Television, 2007.

²⁶²Ibid.

²⁶³Ibid.

themselves as individuals but to highlight the sacrifice of many of those who lost their lives protecting the freedoms that were never freely given to them.

The historical study of Mexican American servicemen of the Vietnam War era is currently on the rise. The most recent evidence of this is the release of *On the Two Fronts: Latinos and Vietnam*, a PBS documentary focusing primarily on Mexican Americans from New Mexico and California. The documentary includes authorities on Latinos and the Vietnam War such as Lorena Oropeza, Lea Ybarra, and Christian Appy to name a few. In addition, an interest in Mexican American or Chicano issues has been initiated by the Latino community through the contributions of autobiographies by veterans themselves. Contributors draw attention to Mexican Americans' identity and role in time of war to ensure they are justly represented as patriotic Americans. However, the most important stories have been those told by the soldiers themselves. Although with any oral narrative the facts may not always be accurate, the experience, when compared to one another, is undeniably real. Veterans have expressed the need for Mexican Americans to be incorporated in the general history of the war, articulating in their own words the importance of the Mexican American's story serving as a voice for all soldiers regardless of race or ethnicity. As Richard De Soto emphasized, "Although I consider myself an average soldier, I too just want to be a small bump in the road in the history of our country and the Vietnam War. My story is the story of the average soldier."²⁶⁴

Mexican American autobiographies are written with the intention of serving as the advocate for all Latinos who were discriminated, who lost their lives during their service, and are not forgotten. Juan Ramirez felt it was important that Mexican Americans be recognized for the contributions they made by sacrificing their lives in disproportionate numbers.²⁶⁵ While Roy

²⁶⁴ De Soto *Never A Hero*, ix.

Benavidez wanted to capture the cost of freedom through the sacrifice of the soldier that his life be honored through the transfer of knowledge to the younger generation.²⁶⁶ In 1969, Octavio I. Romano-V wrote on how he would like to “live in a society in which the peoples who make up its composition write their own history...Any enlightened modern nation should bestow upon, and subsidize, its citizens this one, basic human right: the right to record their own history.”²⁶⁷ Although there are still many miles to cover before the Mexican American can fully be incorporated in the United States’ history, the experiences and words of the Mexican American serviceman has made part of Ramano-V’s hope a reality.

As for the future on the historical scholarship of the Mexican American Vietnam serviceman, scholars outside the Latino community need to reexamine the war’s most vital players in totality including Mexican Americans as key players as opposed to special cases. Furthermore, there needs to be a rethinking of racial dynamics in American history that uncovers racial and social biases infringing on an accurate definition of an American. My hope is to expand on Dr. Van Nguyen-Marshall’s idea that the established memories of the war, specifically in the United States, attempt “to suppress those that do not contribute to the construction of a positive national image or to national unity.”²⁶⁸

In conclusion, through the racial and social discrimination he experienced, the unjust and disproportionate draft and casualties, the loss of life through valorous sacrifice, the Mexican

²⁶⁵Ramirez, 178.

²⁶⁶Benavidez, xv, 173.

²⁶⁷Octavio I. Romano-V. “Editorial” in *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* (Spring 1968), 7.

²⁶⁸ Paul Budra and Michael Zeithlin, eds. *Soldier Talk: The Vietnam War in Oral Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 162-3.

American serviceman of the Vietnam War is significant because he never lost faith in the country that denied him an American identity. Mexican Americans' loyalty has been demonstrated through their service and demonstrated by their heroic acts. Most importantly, the Mexican American servicemen's unquestioned dedication and pride in their service, apart from the discrimination they faced, is the most telling of their patriotic spirit. I end this thesis appropriately with the words of Vietnam veteran Juan Ramirez:

As for myself, I am resigned to the fact that I always will be perceived first as a Mexican immigrant. Regardless of how you see me, I am an American. Whether you call me that or not makes no difference. It can't be taken away. I am a patriot after all.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹Ramirez, 180.

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