WINDOW on FREEDOM

RACE, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS 1945-1988 | EDITED BY BRENDA GAYLE PLUMMER
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Antiwar Aztlán
The Chicano Movement Opposes U.S. Intervention in Vietnam

On 20 December 1969 a contingent of some seventy Brown Berets, a militant Mexican American youth group, marched in formation and in full-dress uniform—berets, army jackets, and dark pants for the men, brown skirts for the women—down Michigan Avenue in an unincorporated section of East Los Angeles. Following the Berets, six young men acted as pallbearers and carried a replica of a coffin in a procession that organizers had labeled a “March against Death.” Behind the mock funeral, another group held upright a large painting of a bloodied Chicano soldier, with the rank of private, who had been given the Chicano common name J. J. Montez. Both painting and coffin were meant to symbolize all Mexican Americans who had died in Vietnam. Several hundred more marchers followed this dramatic vanguard. As they traveled the narrow, residential street that was Michigan Avenue, demonstrators at the front of the line shouted, “Raza Sí!”prompting those behind to thunder in return, “Vietnam No!” The call-and-response captured the most central theme of Chicano antiwar protest, that Chicanos and Chicanas should struggle at home for their raza, their fellow Mexican Americans, not fight and die in a war in Vietnam.

The first large-scale antiwar protest by Mexican Americans in the Los Angeles area, the December 1969 march also was the first of more than a dozen Chicano Movement antiwar demonstrations that took place across the Southwest in the following months under the auspices of an organization called the National Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War. The ethnic antiwar campaign culminated on 29 August 1970, when between 20,000 and 30,000 people gathered in East Los Angeles to protest the Vietnam War and its domestic consequences. The march was the largest demonstration to occur during the course of the Chicano Movement, which remains the most intense epoch of Mexican American political and cultural protest to date. Although members of the ethnic group had long sought equal treatment, beginning in the 1960s, thousands of mostly young people combined demonstrative politics and cultural affirmation in a dynamic endeavor to address such social in-
justices as poor educational opportunity, lack of political representation, pov-
erty, and discrimination. As U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia
deepened and casualties mounted, the number of Mexican American dead and
wounded was a growing concern. By the turn of the decade, international and
domestic matters had become profoundly intertwined for Chicano Move-
ment participants.

In an era that saw the advent of black, red, yellow, and brown power and
the emergence of massive opposition to the war in Vietnam, Chicano Move-
ment participants were hardly the only minority activists to condemn U.S.
involvement in Southeast Asia. African American and Asian American ac-
tivists also protested, and blacks, in particular, expressed concern about casu-
alty rates. Mexican Americans nevertheless stood alone among U.S. minori-
ties in conducting a sustained campaign against U.S. policy toward Vietnam.
Chicanos and Chicanas who protested the war were moreover forsaking a
venerable Mexican American civil rights tradition that had emphasized pa-
triotism in the hopes of obtaining first-class citizenship.

Since before World War II, many ethnic group leaders had pursued a civil
rights strategy that was both sincere and effective. They had voiced strong
support for American engagements abroad and highlighted Mexican Amer-
ican military contributions. By accentuating battlefield accomplishments, ac-
tivists emphasized that members of the group had demonstrated the ultimate
proof of patriotism: a willingness to risk one’s life for one’s country. They si-
multaneously promoted an archetypal Mexican American who met key stan-
dards of full citizenship first enshrined in the U.S. Constitution in 1789 and
sanctioned in the political, legal, and popular culture ever since. Through two
centuries of U.S. history, the ideal citizen was white, male, and willing to
serve his country during wartime. These designations were self-reinforcing,
as military service was not only an important marker of masculinity but,
throughout the long era of segregation, an important marker of whiteness as
well. Indeed, the U.S. military consistently categorized Mexican Americans
as “white,” a racial classification that ethnic activists strove to protect in
times of peace as well as war.

Chicanos and Chicanas broke apart such narrow conceptions of citizenship
to offer an alternative view of their past and present, and of their role within
the United States and beyond the borders of the country. Refusing to con-
form to long-established hierarchies of race and gender, Chicano Movement
participants instead crafted a new understanding of themselves as a people of
color, as a colonized people, and as women and men who together had strug-
gled against oppression for centuries. In the creation of each of these new
conceptions, moreover, movement activists gained critical inspiration and
confirmation by examining the conflict in Vietnam. Most important, as they both reclaimed and created a militant Chicano and Chicana identity, movement participants repeatedly identified with the Vietnamese men and women fighting against the U.S. military effort. Thus, just as recent works on African American responses to foreign affairs have provided a more nuanced portrait of black civil right efforts, an examination of Mexican American responses toward the war in Vietnam allows a much greater understanding of the Chicano Movement overall.7 Like no other issue, antiwar activism crystallized the Chicano Movement’s fundamental challenge to popular assumptions about American citizenship and national belonging.

Ironically, the December 1969 march’s beginning and ending points had paid tribute to earlier notions of minority inclusion. The demonstration had started at a memorial built just after World War II to commemorate Mexican American soldiers who had died during that conflict and ended at Eugene A.
Obregón Park, named after a Mexican American marine who had lost his life in Korea. The monument and park served as reminders that people of Mexican descent had served the country well as citizen-soldiers. Mexican Americans were understandably proud of this military record. During both World War II and the Korean conflict, the regular appearance of Spanish surnames on casualty and awards lists across the Southwest confirmed widespread Mexican American military participation. The long list of Mexican American soldiers receiving Congressional Medals of Honor, including Eugene Obregón, nineteen, who was granted the award posthumously, provided further uncontestable evidence of battlefield valor. Beyond a source of pride, however, Mexican American soldiering was powerful proof that members of the ethnic group had shown themselves to be legitimate and patriotic citizens. Just as they commemorated past heroism, the war memorial and park’s name made implicit demands for the recognition and full inclusion of Mexican Americans within the contemporary American polity. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s, Mexican American veterans and their families moved to the forefront of an invigorated civil rights effort.

Their work built on the foundational struggles of prewar Mexican American civil rights organizations, notably the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in Texas. Historians of the Mexican American experience have written extensively on LULAC, in no small part because of the organization’s rich documentary record. Of particular concern here, however, is the fundamental role the league played in promoting an understanding of people of Mexican descent as Americans. As much a part of the South as the Southwest, Texas was the site of some of the most severe prejudicial treatment directed toward people of Mexican descent. To combat this prejudice, the founders of the league, many of whom came from centuries-old Tejano families, encouraged Mexican Americans to present themselves as, in the words of the organization’s 1929 founding document, “the best, purest and most perfect type of true and loyal citizen of the United States of America.”

LULAC members understood, moreover, that the “best” Americans were those whose claims of national belonging rested upon that citizenship tripod. Several founding members were proud veterans of World War I. All of the league’s early members were men. Not until 1933 did women become voting members of LULAC and, even then, most women participated through ladies’ auxiliaries that concentrated on charitable and social works instead of civil rights activism. Via the organization’s publications, letters of protest to elected politicians, and press announcements, league members constantly maintained that Mexican Americans, albeit of mixed indigenous and European background, were “white.” By embracing and promoting a white and
masculinist citizenship, the league sowed the seeds of a civil rights strategy that reached fruition after the Second World War.

The timing for this broader civil rights effort was largely the result of changing demographics. Whereas in the 1920s the U.S. population of Mexican descent was mostly an immigrant one, by 1940 the estimated 2 million people of Mexican parentage within the United States were almost twice as likely to have been born north of the Rio Grande than south of it. With the advent of the Second World War, more Mexican Americans entered the military than ever before. Once the war ended, these citizen-soldiers took advantage of the nation’s renewed commitment to equal rights in the wake of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust. Not only did LULAC see a boost in membership after 1945, but World War II veterans founded another influential and long-lasting Mexican American civil rights organization: the American G.I. Forum.13

Like the league, the forum advocated—through both its reform efforts and its organizational framework—the idealized American citizen. Certainly as a veterans’ organization, the forum broadcast the patriotism of Mexican American men. Meanwhile, forum women, like female LULAC members, mainly participated via ladies’ auxiliaries.14 Throughout the 1950s, moreover, the American G.I. Forum joined forces with LULAC to argue successfully against the segregation of Mexican-descended people on the grounds that they were “white.” Instead of mounting an attack on segregation itself, these organizations asserted that segregation should not apply to Mexican Americans. Cognizant that the United States historically had recognized but one great racial divide between black and white, these ethnic activists continued to insist that Mexican Americans, especially in view of their wartime sacrifices, belonged to the racial category that had access to full citizenship.15

Although alternative visions of inclusion exempt from specific racial, military, or even birthplace requirements did emerge during the twentieth century, they were short-lived. As early as 1903, for example, Mexican sugar beet workers in Oxnard, California, favored a continuing union alliance with their Japanese “brothers” in the field over membership as “whites” within the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Once denied AFL support, however, the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association soon faded.16

Certain activists attempted to construct solidarity between Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals. El Congreso de Pueblo Habla Española (The Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples), launched in 1939 in Los Angeles with the apparent help of the Communist Party of the United States, refused to draw a sharp divide between immigrant and U.S.-born people of Mexican descent. Until it disbanded for the sake of home front unity during World
War II, the congress vigorously pressed for an end to such civil rights abuses as police brutality and housing discrimination as well as an end to race and gender discrimination.17

After the war, the Asociación Nacional México-Americana, or ANMA, assumed the radical mantle. Like El Congreso and with some of the same members, ANMA broadly advocated civil rights. The association’s most controversial position by far, however, was labeling the Korean War “unjust and unnecessary.” Making an accusation that Chicano antiwar activists were to echo during the Vietnam War, ANMA members complained that Mexican American soldiers were being used as “cannon fodder.” Such opinions were dangerous during the height of the domestic Cold War. In addition, a few ANMA members were also Communist Party members, although according to one of the most prominent ANMA activists in California, the party’s influence upon the organization was “negligible.” In 1954 the U.S. attorney general listed ANMA as a subversive organization. By then, the Immigration and Naturalization Service’s persistent harassment of members—including deportation—already had fatally weakened it.18

In contrast, mainstream Mexican American organizations not only survived but also thrived. Membership was one indicator. ANMA at its height boasted a few thousand members in the five states of the Southwest. With even fewer members, El Congreso never organized beyond southern California. Yet by 1960 150 LULAC councils had been founded across the country.19 The influx of Korean War veterans, meanwhile, similarly swelled the forum’s ranks to an estimated 25,000 members in eighteen states by the turn of the decade.20 Whereas radical organizations struggled against a tide of anti-Red hysteria, the G.I. Forum and LULAC, both staunchly anticommunist in any case, enjoyed a kind of protective cover. Their ready patriotism and strong endorsement of an accepted brand of citizenship made their civil rights demands less suspect. Banding together, the league and forum won several landmark court cases in Texas and California during the 1950s that all but dismantled the segregation of people of Mexican descent in schools and other public places.

The strategic foundation for these domestic successes, however, was unequivocal support for United States foreign policy. This tendency probably reached its most ludicrous height in October 1965 when a California group passed a resolution that both requested greater federal attention to the problems of Mexican Americans and cast Spanish-speaking Californians as dedicated U.S. allies in the Cold War since the early 1800s. As the resolution sponsored by California’s Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) asserted, “Over 150 years ago, Spanish speaking Mexican Americans stopped
the Russian colonial advance and conquest from Siberia and Alaska, and preserved the Western portion of the United States for our country.”21 State representatives from LULAC and the California G.I. Forum also signed the declaration, ignoring its historical inaccuracies in favor of the resolution’s retrospective claim that Mexican Americans were always staunch defenders of the United States—even against tsarist aggression. The declaration epitomized the determination of civil rights organizations well into the 1960s to present their constituents as stalwart backers of the U.S. international agenda, and as the ultimate Cold Warriors.

This emphasis on military service and patriotism served to curb criticism within Mexican American civil rights organizations regarding the war in Vietnam. Early on, the American G.I. Forum voiced its strong approval of U.S. military intervention. Indeed, in 1965 and 1966, local chapters of the American G.I. Forum went so far as to organize marches in support of U.S. troops and the aim of helping the “South Vietnamese Remain Free.”22 Similarly, in 1964, certain members of the Mexican American Political Association introduced a resolution at the annual state convention expressing “unconditional support for President Johnson’s war in Vietnam.”23 Others, however, were more sympathetic to the intensifying public concern over the war’s morality, efficacy, and costs, and the 1964 resolution was tabled. Two years later, an antiwar resolution by the organization’s liberal executive board encountered similar, effective resistance. In sum, tradition served to silence criticism: not until 1968 did the association publicly declare its opposition to the war in Vietnam.24

Incredibly, the same year, a loose coalition of organizations called La Raza Unida, specifically founded to express Mexican American frustration with President Lyndon B. Johnson, also sidestepped the war issue. “Speaking of war,” the conference proceedings of the 1968 Raza Unida gathering in San Antonio noted, “thoughtful reasons have been advanced for and against this involvement.”25

The reticence of conference participants to directly engage the war issue was even more surprising given that by 1968 the war’s impact upon Mexican Americans was a source of grave concern for many. The year before, Rafael Guzmán, a political scientist with the Ford Foundation’s Mexican-American Study Project, released a report comparing the percentage of Spanish-surnamed Vietnam War dead from the five southwestern states to the percentage of Spanish-surnamed men of military age living in the U.S. Southwest. Widely publicized in Chicano Movement newspapers, his conclusion was stark: “American servicemen of Mexican descent have a higher death rate in Vietnam than all other G.I.s.”26 Although the number of Mexican American dead was soon to become a central indictment put forth by movement antiwar pro-
testers, the San Antonio group preferred to use the same evidence to bolster their civil rights cause. As the conference proceedings advised, whenever Mexican Americans confronted “insensitive and stupid people” who questioned their loyalty, “the best answer we can possibly give them is to point to the disproportional number of Mexican-American casualties in the war in Vietnam.” Once again, activists embraced the notion of massive ethnic group sacrifice in battle, even though this war was becoming extremely unpopular. To do otherwise was to risk unraveling a previously successful civil rights strategy premised upon a white, masculinist, and militaristic citizenship.

During the turbulent era of the 1960s, however, Mexican Americans increasingly confronted the limits of that strategy. Just as the war in Vietnam raised questions about the aims of American foreign policy and the value of military service, the civil rights movement and the quest for black power undermined several long-standing ethnic group assumptions about race. Facing many of the same socioeconomic hurdles as African Americans, for example, Mexican Americans as “whites” initially received little attention from policymakers constructing Johnson’s Great Society. Ironically, what had once been a successful civil rights strategy now appeared to promote not only silence on international questions but also group exclusion from the benefits of domestic reform.

Under these circumstances, the aggressive tactics and militant speech of emerging Chicano Movement heroes held a tremendous appeal to many young Mexican Americans eager to be part of the decade’s impulse toward protest and reform. The United Farm Workers, for example, led by Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, marched, picketed, and organized a national boycott in support of the union’s five-year strike against grape growers. One result was a union contract. Another was extraordinary public attention to the plight of Mexican Americans in general. In New Mexico, meanwhile, Reies López Tijerina and members of the organization he led, La Alianza Federal de Mercedes Reales (The Federal Alliance of Royal Land Grants), were staging spectacular—and sometimes violent—protests to restore Spanish and Mexican land grants to the descendants of the original grantees. Finally, the poetry, plays, and speeches of Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, founder of a Denver-based organization called the Crusade for Justice, were a particular inspiration for young, urban Chicanos and Chicanas. In 1969 the Crusade hosted a Chicano youth conference that issued the premier document of Chicano cultural nationalism, or Chicanismo, El plan espiritual de Aztlán. Rejecting assimilation, the plan advocated Chicano autonomy in the realms of education, culture, and politics as a means of obtaining “total liberation from oppression, exploitation, and racism.”
The same document, however, made only one indirect reference to the then raging Vietnam War when it endorsed Chicano control over “the utilization of our bodies for war.” That the topic received scant mention was not so surprising. Although Chavez, Huerta, Tijerina, and Gonzales were each early opponents of the war, at first other issues dominated the Chicano Movement agenda. Inspired by events in California, for example, farm workers in the Southwest and Midwest, typically with student support, likewise organized and went on strike. Issues of economic justice also occupied Tijerina’s Alianza, which headed the Southwest contingent to the 1969 Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, D.C. Elsewhere Chicano Movement participants sought an end to police brutality, the establishment of an independent political party, and, above all, improved education. Starting in 1968, thousands of Chicano high school students in California, Arizona, Colorado, and Texas launched a series of strikes to protest racist teachers, shoddy campuses, and a lack of culturally significant coursework. Mexican Americans on college campuses meanwhile pushed for Chicano Studies programs and greater minority enrollments.

As they energetically advanced demands to increase the Mexican American presence on campus, however, Chicano activists raced against the looming specter of war. Precisely because they were not enrolled in college, the vast majority of draft-age Mexican Americans were ineligible for student deferments, one of the most common exemptions from military service. In 1967, for example, only seventy Mexican American students were enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles. At the time, Los Angeles was home to the largest population of Mexican-descended people in the country. Chicano college enrollees and graduates were similarly scarce across the Southwest, while high school dropouts abounded. According to the 1960 census, about half the Mexican American population had less than eight years of schooling. This low educational achievement, moreover, characterized a population that was, by 1960, overwhelmingly U.S.–born and raised. Chicano Movement activists argued, however, that students did not so much drop out of school as were pushed out by second-rate facilities, culturally insensitive curricula, and hostile staff. All too often, they protested, young men who left school fell into the arms of eager army recruiters who purposefully sought out working-class youth.

As pockets of Chicano antiwar activism began to emerge in 1968 and 1969, the Selective Service System and the egregious class biases of the draft were immediate concerns. Even the founder of the American G.I. Forum found the process inequitable and complained in a series of letters to President Johnson and his representatives about the complete absence of Mexican Americans on
south Texas draft boards. A more pervasive concern was that few Mexican Americans understood the draft or its exemptions. Certainly Rosalío Muñoz, a draft resister and former UCLA student body president who later chaired the National Chicano Moratorium, noticed an immense gap in opportunity and savvy between Anglo-American campus friends and the young Mexican American men whom he met in his 1969 job as a college recruiter. While the first group prided themselves on the outrageous means they had devised to escape the draft, Muñoz remembered, Mexican Americans from California’s interior agricultural valleys simply assumed they would be going to Vietnam. They told Muñoz that they were not bothering to continue their education.

Likewise, Lea Ybarra and Nina Genera, who together operated a Bay Area organization called Chicano Draft Help during the war, saw firsthand how poverty and minimal education contributed to a perception of inevitability. The two women, both college students with brothers in Vietnam (and, in Ybarra’s case, eighteen cousins), literally ran interference at the Oakland Army Induction Center for months on end during 1969 and 1970. On those mornings that buses from the agricultural towns of Watsonville and Salinas arrived, Ybarra and Genera greeted the new arrivals, who were overwhelmingly of Mexican descent, and pleaded with the young men to at least examine their available options. Although the vast majority always entered the building, some turned around. Years later, Ybarra remembered how she was able to obtain conscientious objector status for one young man who, although philosophically a pacifist, had had no idea what “conscientious objector” meant. In a like manner, Nina Genera recalled securing a medical deferment for another Mexican American with a severe back ailment. From a poor family, he had never seen a doctor until after Genera convinced him to delay reporting for duty.

By the turn of the decade, Chicano antidraft activism was in full bloom. Chicano Draft Help was one of the longest-running counseling centers, continuing until 1972. Yet similar draft counseling efforts also opened in New Mexico, south Texas, and especially southern California. Nor was Muñoz’s status as a Chicano draft resister entirely unique. A recognized student leader, Muñoz had received substantial media attention when he declared his independence from the Selective Service System on 16 September 1969. Yet he was joining perhaps a half dozen Chicanos who already had publicly announced their decision to refuse induction as well as untold others who had taken the same step quietly. Momentum against the draft was visible even in Texas, the home state of the American G.I. Forum and LULAC. Once members of a Chicano political party gained majority control of the Crystal City school board in 1970, the town’s sole high school became a sanctuary of
sorts. Chicano school board members hired a campus draft counselor, barred army recruiters from visiting the school, and prohibited any district employee from serving as a registrar for the Selective Service System.41

The turn of the decade also marked the launch of the Chicano moratorium campaign. Although Rosalío Muñoz and others had worked against the draft, the idea for a large antiwar campaign took root after Chicano activists from Los Angeles attended the massive New Mobilization against the War demonstration in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park on 15 November 1969. While the gathering of perhaps as many as 250,000 people impressed these Chicano activists with the saliency of the war issue, racism within the national antiwar movement also convinced them to work independently. They resented being treated as second-class protesters by the event’s organizers and as second-class thinkers by representatives of the sectarian left. The future leaders of the moratorium campaign also perceived a distinct lack of concern within a movement dominated by whites regarding the war’s cost to minorities. In a later interview, Muñoz, then the moratorium’s chair, labeled the national antiwar movement “institutionally racist” for this reason. As Muñoz explained to a radical journalist, attending the New Mobe helped convince him that “the main thing the white peace groups were doing was keeping whites out of the service. That means only one thing: More Chicanos are in.”42

By 1970 the Chicano Movement’s opposition to the Vietnam War, including the nascent moratorium effort, broadened beyond a strict emphasis on who was serving and dying to disputing the war’s aims and the value of military service. A telling example was a bilingual pamphlet called *La batalla está aquí* (The battle is here) that Ybarra and Genera coauthored in 1970. The major portion of the pamphlet featured “Legal Ways to Stay Out of the Military,” a detailed listing in English and Spanish regarding what deferments were available. Yet the publication was also an antiwar manifesto. Ybarra and Genera made an emotional appeal to the entire Mexican American community, “young and old, male and female,” to turn against what they considered an immoral war. Featuring several horrific photographs of dead and wounded Vietnamese children, all victims of American bombs, the booklet aimed to compel Mexican Americans to consider the suffering of the Vietnamese as much as the danger faced by their relatives in combat. In the light of the American war machine’s awesome destructive capability, the authors dismissed military service as an avenue of ethnic group uplift. By supporting the killing and maiming of countless Vietnamese men, women, and especially children, they wrote, Mexican Americans “only lose— our men and our own honor and our pride.” Representing a dramatic break with earlier attempts to claim citizenship because of military service and wartime sacrifice,
Ybarra and Genera challenged Mexican Americans to reconsider what truly made a man “courageous and honorable.”

No doubt the greatest challenge the two women offered, however, was a sweeping reexamination of the Mexican American experience that emphasized a shared history of oppression and invasion with the Vietnamese. According to Ybarra and Genera, injustice and suffering rendered by “the same imperialist system” inextricably linked the Chicano—and indigenous—past to the Vietnamese present. In advancing this alternative reading of the Chicano past, furthermore, Ybarra and Genera, on behalf of all people of Mexican descent, laid claim to the region that was now the American Southwest. “Just as the North Vietnamese are accused of ‘invading’ a city in their own country” whenever they crossed the seventeenth parallel dividing Vietnam into north and south, they wrote, “so are Chicanos considered foreigners in our own country—the land that originally belonged to our forefathers.”

Denoting the powerful merger between international and domestic affairs within the Chicano Movement, La batalla está aquí also made clear that Chicano antiwar activists had imbibed deeply the era’s brew of protest politics. During the 1960s leftist critiques flourished within the national antiwar movement and elsewhere. Chicanismo in particular drew inspiration from the black power movement and its insistence on race pride, political liberation, and recapturing one’s cultural identity. Just as important, Chicano Movement participants looked to their own ethnic group’s long history of struggle on the North American continent. One of the appeals of Tijerina’s land grant movement in New Mexico, for example, was in reminding both Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans that Spanish-speaking and indigenous people had inhabited and cultivated the U.S. Southwest for centuries before 1848. Less noted by scholars, however, is that Chicano Movement participants also looked to events in Vietnam to develop and reinforce their sense of themselves as a people who had long struggled for self-determination. The result was more than a Mexican American echo of other groups’ protest politics.

Chicano antiwar activism advanced a revolutionary vision of race within the ethnic group, of the potential contributions of men and women within the movement, and of Mexican Americans within the United States. Whereas a previous generation of activists had insisted that Mexican Americans were white, Chicano Movement participants contended that they were brown-skinned—just like the Vietnamese. Whereas American citizenship had placed males in the foreground, Chicano Movement participants carved out a new role for men and women alike within their cultural nationalist movement. Both could be partners in advancing la causa—just as women as well as men served as National Liberation Front soldiers, diplomats, and supporters. Most
important, by drawing parallels between the American conquest of Mexico’s northern territories in 1848 to the U.S. military effort in Southeast Asia, Chicano antiwar activism embraced and promoted the radical thesis that Chicanos and Vietnamese were together a “Third World” people facing a common enemy. Thus did Chicano protest against the war exemplify the essential boldness of Chicano cultural nationalism overall. In refusing to render support to the U.S. military effort in Southeast Asia, activists completely rejected the tripod of white, masculinist, and military-based citizenship. Engaged in a vibrant nationalist project, they sought instead to reclaim and create a Chicano cultural, and perhaps even political, homeland called Aztlán.

Labeled Chicano cultural nationalism’s “most brilliant political maneuver” by one scholar, the adoption and prominence of the concept of Aztlán underscored the extent to which Chicano Movement participants were intent upon celebrating and reclaiming their indigenous heritage.\(^{45}\) Shrouded in myth even before the Spanish conquest, Aztlán was the ancient place of origin of the Aztecs before they migrated southward to build their capital of Tenochtitlán, present-day Mexico City. Within the Chicano Movement, Aztlán, literally meaning in Nahuatl “the lands to the north,” became geographically synonymous with the U.S. Southwest.\(^{46}\) Equally important, the word referred to a people with deep ties to this region, the Mexican Americans. As the participants at the 1969 Denver Youth Conference proudly proclaimed, “We are Aztlán.”\(^{47}\) In both cases, Chicano Movement activists were striking a new claim for legitimacy that rested not upon their willingness to die in battle but upon their status as natives to the continent.

This racial repositioning had profound implications for how Chicano Movement participants saw themselves and their national allegiances. “We are so brainwashed. We keep thinking we are a minority . . . and . . . we are not,” one of the leading movement columnists, Enriqueta Vásquez y Longeaux, explained in a 1970 newspaper interview. “We are a majority in this hemisphere.” Chicano activists claimed a special relationship not only to their “Brown brothers” in Latin America as a result of their indigenous heritage, but to the Vietnamese as well.\(^{48}\) The connection even became biological for some activists. As early as 1968, David Sanchez, one of the founders of the Brown Berets, a Chicano paramilitary group, and an early member of the Chicano moratorium committee, argued that “since Chicanos came down through the Bering Straits part Oriental, and that honkie, what’s his name? Cortez, came across over and raped our women, so we’re half mongoloid and half caucasoid, that makes the Viet Cong our brothers.”\(^{49}\) As “Orientals,” Sanchez implied, the Vietnamese were not “white.” As mestizos, a racially mixed people, he and other activists insisted, neither were Chicanos.
Embedded in Sanchez’s comments, however, was a celebration of the masculinity and patriarchy—the Viet Cong were brothers, women belonged to men—that the Chicano Movement certainly embraced. Many of the earliest cultural productions of the movement were uncritical presentations of male supremacy. The male warrior, an archetype that originated with the glorious Aztecs and extended to contemporary Chicano GIs, recurred in movement literature and art. Movement participants sympathized with this icon even as they protested the war. Also abounding as image and metaphor was the concept of la familia de la raza. The idea implied not only that all Chicanos were family, but also that the family unit—headed by the father—was the cultural and political foundation of Chicanismo. Chicanas thus were most important as the caretakers of present-day activists and mothers of future revolutionaries. In its most extreme incarnation, such nationalism even opposed birth control as yet another way of limiting the Mexican American population: similar to, but cheaper than, sending soldiers off to Vietnam. At best, the movement’s dominant cultural nationalist motifs relegated Chicanas to a fixed, lesser role. At worst, they ignored movement women altogether.

Many Chicanas, however, actively resisted subordinate status by revising the movement’s cultural nationalist imagery to better fit them. Even as the movement esteemed such heroes of the Mexican Revolution as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, women activists began to portray themselves as modern Adelitas, the soldaderas who fought beside male troops in that long war. Similarly, in her regular columns for New Mexico’s El Grito del Norte, Vásquez y Longeaux continually reframed the notion of la familia de la raza to include an equal, if not starring, role for la Chicana. As a woman who had survived extreme poverty during her youth (five of her eleven siblings died in childhood), who had raised two children on her own as a divorced parent, and who had encountered blatant job discrimination, Vásquez y Longeaux was impatient with any implied subordination. Instead, she insisted that the Chicano family “must come up together.” The role for a woman in the movement was not behind a man, she declared, but “alongside him, leading.”

Turning to the Mexican past as well as their own experiences as mothers, wives, and daughters, activists like Vásquez y Longeaux helped promote an understanding of Chicanas as defenders of their people, as equal partners in struggle.

As the Chicano Movement became increasingly radicalized, Chicanas began to look to Vietnamese women as role models. From the Chicana standpoint, here were tenacious, brave, and, above all, womanly warriors and leaders. A 1971 meeting that took place between Indo-Chinese women and Third World women in Vancouver, Canada, was for Chicana participants an occasion to record their positive impressions of their Vietnamese counterparts.
According to one Chicana attendee, the Vietnamese were physically delicate, “small, about five feet tall,” but extraordinarily gracious, “humble and kind.” Yet their apparent gentleness and fragility did not in any way compromise their political resolve. “One sister from South Vietnam . . . had been an ordinary housewife when she was arrested,” the same participant noted. “When she was finally released (six years later) she became a dedicated fighter for her people.” To Chicanas, Vietnamese women appeared to be both feminine and, as fearless contributors to their struggle, equal to men. Perhaps that is why Vásquez y Longeaux, in a 1971 attempt to persuade Chicanas that their first loyalties remained to the Chicano Movement and not to “the white women’s liberation movement,” again depicted the Vietnamese woman as an exemplar. Exaggerating to make her point, she wrote, in a column entitled “Soy Chicana Primero” (I am first a Chicana), “We have seen the Vietnamese woman fight for survival with a gun in one hand and a child sucking on her breast on the other arm.” Notable for their acceptance of many traditional values, Chicana activists were going to be motherly, feminine, and heterosexual. These early writings by Chicanas nevertheless carved a space for women within a deeply patriarchal movement.

As women activists forcefully challenged their exclusion from the Chicano Movement’s mainstream, moreover, their questioning inevitably extended to men’s roles and ultimately demanded a revision of both machismo and patriotism. In a typical article, a Chicana college student flatly declared, “‘machismo’ is not proven by joining the armed forces.” In the service, and especially in Vietnam, she wrote, the presumed fearlessness of Mexican Americans only awaited exploitation. The problem was not “machismo” per se, Corinne Sanchez argued, but where that male energy had been directed. She encouraged women in particular to persuade Chicanos that “manliness is a beautiful cultural concept that should be utilized for the betterment of our people not for the destruction of another people.” At home, she wrote, men and women could work together to change “those institutions in this country that have oppressed our people.” The argument soon had male adherents. A male writer, dismayed at the injustices he confronted everyday in the barrio, likewise rejected the notion that Chicanos could prove themselves to be “real men” in the military. “You’re not much of a man if you let your own people go hungry, live in poverty and get ripped off by this country,” he asserted. “Our people need you to fight for our freedom right here.” No longer willing to be a soldier, the writer furthermore wondered why the United States apparently valued him only in that role. “Dig man, something’s wrong when you live in a country that offers people a better life in the Army than at home,” he wrote.

For Chicano activists, the domestic and international spheres had become
inextricably connected. Protest against the Vietnam War strengthened an emerging anticolonial, anti-imperialist perspective among Chicano Movement participants that was rooted in their own experiences within the United States as well as their view of the world at large. As a pioneering historian of the Chicano experience pronounced in 1972, Chicanos constituted “a colonized people.” Like other members of the Third World, like the Vietnamese, they had survived conquest, invasion, repression, and subsequent political and economic powerlessness. Here was a radical revision of the relationship between Mexican Americans and majority society that contended that the ethnic group suffered second-rate citizenship, not as the result of any inherent shortcomings but as the logical consequence of Anglo-American racism, exploitation, and oppression. Therefore the burden did not fall upon people of Mexican descent to prove themselves worthy of first-class citizenship. To the contrary, by examining their plight in the American Southwest in relation to the war in Southeast Asia, Chicano Movement participants began to articulate criticisms about their status within the United States and that of Chicanas in relation to Chicanos. These reflections all but unraveled long-held notions of legitimacy based upon military service, whiteness, and masculinity.

As powerful as that tripod had been for earlier civil rights efforts, the Chicano Movement and, in particular, Chicano antiwar activism offered an alternative. The distance Chicanos and Chicanas had traveled politically was perhaps best captured again by Enriqueta Vásquez y Longeaux in a piece that was part of a special antiwar edition of El Grito del Norte. Published to coincide with the 29 August 1970 Chicano Moratorium demonstration, members of the newspaper staff brought several hundred copies of the paper to Los Angeles and distributed them among the thousands of Chicanos and Chicanas who had gathered to protest the war that day. In her antiwar article, Vásquez y Longeaux offered a new take on gender roles and patriotism. She urged men to fight for their raza in Aztlán, not Vietnam; she gave notice that Chicanas were no longer willing to suffer silently. Indicating the ethnic group’s changing view on patriotism, she referred as much to the American invasion of Mexico as to the conflict in Vietnam. “We hear the first line of the Marine hymn . . . ‘from the Halls of Moctezuma,’” she explained. “And we stop to wonder, ‘What the hell were the Marines doing in the Halls of Moctezuma?”

Notes

1. The Brown Berets, founded in Los Angeles in 1967, were similar to the Black Panthers in endorsing paramilitary means to secure social change. The group became one of the most popular Chicano organizations, with dozens of chapters soon appearing across the country. Unlike the Panthers, who eventually espoused a revolutionary
socialism, the Brown Berets remained overwhelmingly cultural nationalist in orientation and saw protecting barrio residents from police abuse as one of their primary concerns.

2. People’s World, 27 Dec. 1969, 1. I reserve the words “Chicano,” “Chicana,” and their respective plurals to describe participants in the movement and use “Mexican American” as a more general term. “Chicanas” always refers to women only, while “Chicanos” usually refers to men alone and, more rarely, to a mixed group of men and women. The word “Chicano” also appears as an adjective, as in “Chicano moratorium.”

3. A partial list derived from Chicano press reports includes San Diego, Santa Barbara, San Francisco, Oakland, San Bernardino, Fresno, and Riverside, California; San Antonio, Austin, and Houston, Texas; and New York, Chicago, Denver, and the tiny border town of Douglas, Arizona.


22. Plans for the 1965 march are mentioned in *Carta Editorial*, 23 Nov. 1965, 3. Newspaper clippings on the 1966 march from the *San Antonio Express News*, 2 July 1966, and *Corpus Christi Caller*, 3 July 1966, can be found in box 8, scrapbook 8.3, Dr. Hector P. García Collection, Special Collections, Library, Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi.


25. “Mexican American United Conference: la raza unida,” in box 13, folder 13, Ernesto Galarza Collection, Department of Special Collections, Stanford University, Stanford, Calif.

26. Guzmán’s findings were published in La Raza Yearbook (Los Angeles), no. 13 (1968): 33, but were circulated among Mexican American and Chicano activists beforehand. A copy of Guzmán’s report with the accompanying data can be found in box 2, folder 38, Social Protest Collection.


29. A dozen or so books, most by journalists, have been written about Cesar Chavez and the farm workers’ struggle. One of the most recent is Susan Ferriss and Ricardo Sandoval, The Fight in the Fields (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997). The Ferriss and Sandoval book is the companion volume to the 1997 film documentary of the same name produced by Rick Tejada-Flores and Ray Telles.


33. Ibid., 173.

34. Manuel G. Gonzales, Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 199; a 1968 oral history interview with Tijerina concerning his role in the Poor People’s Campaign, labeled RJB 194, can be found in the Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Oral History Department of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.


39. Author’s oral history interview with Lea Ybarra, Fresno, Calif., 19 Jan. 1993, in
the author’s possession; author’s oral history interview with Nina Genera, Hayward, Calif., 12 Mar. 1997, in the author’s possession. On Ybarra’s eighteen cousins, see Gonzales, Mexicanos, 212.

40. Locations gathered and estimates obtained from Chicano Movement newspapers.


44. Ibid., 6.


46. El plan espiritual de Aztlán offers this translation.

47. From the preambles of El plan espiritual de Aztlán.


52. Espinoza argued that Vásquez y Longeaux sought “to place women at the center of the popular struggle.” “Pedagogies of Nationalism and Gender,” 169.


56. Ibid., 26 Apr. 1971, 11, 14.


