Perceptions of Race and Class Among Chicano Vietnam Veterans

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"La Batalla Esta Aquí" was a rallying cry in the 1960s and 1970s for those within the Chicano community who opposed the Vietnam War. They held that the real battle was in the United States, not in Vietnam, and that the billions of dollars that were being spent on the war abroad were needed for the war against poverty at home. They felt that money which was going to support the war could be better used improving medical care, housing and educational opportunities for Americans:

With that money we could have built eight million new homes, worth $25,000 each—wiping out our slums. Every time we blow up a village in Vietnam we are spending enough money to build a new hospital or library here. While our bombers tear apart Vietnam, this war also tears apart our own nation—because there is not enough money to wage war and also deal with drugs, slums, medical care, and housing. The poor and unemployed, the Chicanos, Blacks and Puerto Ricans—these have paid the price of this war.1

Others within the Chicano community, however, felt that this was a price worth paying. Thousands of young Chicanos volunteered for military service during this period. Many felt it was an honor and a duty to serve their country. The ideology within the Chicano community reflected that of the larger society, between those who opposed and those who supported US involvement in Vietnam.

This paper presents Chicano veterans, perceptions of the Vietnam war and the race and class issues it engendered—particularly as they relate to ethnic identification, national loyalty, cultural and political socialization, and discriminatory attitudes and practices. The testimony of the veterans themselves, regarding their experience during and after the Vietnam war, provides the basis for discussion of these issues.

The issues of race and class have been discussed previously in research literature on the topic of Chicanos and the war. Robin F.
Scott (1971) stated that discriminatory practices were built into the Selective Service Act of 1940. Mexican Americans in the United States were drafted while the United States government imported workers from Mexico to replace them. Scott concluded that despite the large numbers of Mexican Americans who fought in World War 2: “The American of Mexican ancestry returned to the United States to find the same old prejudices on the home front: certain restaurants still would not serve him, swimming facilities were barred to him, and his children or brothers and sisters were still being segregated in the schools.”

In 1971, Dr. Ralph Guzman brought the issue of race and war to the forefront and confirmed what many people in the Chicano movement had suspected. In his short but powerful article, “Mexican American Casualties in Vietnam,” Dr. Guzman cited statistics which verified that Mexican American military personnel had higher death rates in Vietnam than all other servicemen. His analysis of casualty reports from January 1961 to February 1967, and December 1967 to March 1969, showed that a high percentage of young men with Spanish surnames were killed in Vietnam, and that a substantial number of Latinos were involved in high risk branches of the service, such as the US Marine Corps. Chicanos accounted for approximately 20% of US casualties in Vietnam, while they made up only 10% of this country’s population.

According to Dr. Guzman, Chicanos were under pressure to enlist because they have too often been considered foreigners in the land of their birth, and feel they must prove their loyalty to the United States. Organizations like the GI Forum have long proclaimed the sizeable contribution of the Chicano soldier and point to impressive records of heroism in times of war. Dr. Guzman emphasized that there was “a concomitant number of casualties attending this Mexican American patriotic investment.” There was also the desire for status that military life seemed to offer, and a strong economic incentive, since many Chicanos help their families by sending them money from their service allotments. Relatively few Chicanos avoided the draft by obtaining the college deferments available to students in the Vietnam era. Dr. Guzman concluded:

Other factors motivate Mexican Americans to join the Armed Forces. Some may be rooted in the inherited culture of these people, while others may be imbedded in poverty and social disillusion. Whatever the real explanation we do know that Mexican Americans are overrepresented in the casualty reports from Vietnam and underrepresented in the graduating classes of our institutions of higher learning.
The Guzman article served as a manifesto for the growing antiwar movement in the Chicano community. This movement demonstrated its opposition to the war by holding moratoriums, marches and demonstrations which took place throughout the Southwest, and in which thousands of Chicanos participated. This protest movement was most forcefully illustrated by a statement called "Chale Con El Draft" (No to the Draft), written by Rosalio Muñoz in Los Angeles:

Today, the sixteenth of September, the day of independence for all Mexican peoples, I declare my independence of the Selective Service System. I accuse the government of the United States of America of genocide against the Mexican people. Specifically, I accuse the draft, the entire social, political, and economic system of the United States of America, of creating a funnel which shoots Mexican youth into Viet Nam to be killed and to kill innocent men, women, and children...and of drafting their laws so that many more Chicanos are sent to Vietnam, in proportion to the total population, than they send of their own white youth....

The ideas of unquestioning loyalty to the United States and of doing one's duty as a patriotic citizen were also challenged in an increasing number of publications, including Chicanos and the War (1972):

Historically, Chicanos have played major heroic roles, particularly during World War II and the Korean War, where there were a great number of Chicano war veterans who were heroes. But for every Chicano hero that made it home alive, there were a great many more Chicanos who died in battle. Today, with the Viet Nam war, Chicanos are still fighting and dying to become war heroes, many because of the influence and pressures put upon them by their own families to continue the tradition that their fathers and uncles initiated 20 and 30 years ago. It is time that Chicanos begin to realize that our sons and brothers, husbands and boyfriends, cousins and nephews are the ones being used to fight a war from which La Raza gains nothing. We only lose....

Charles Ornelas and Michael Gonzalez (1971) conducted an opinion survey among the Chicano community in Santa Barbara. Their results suggested that Chicanos were more troubled by the war than Anglo Americans, and that their worries matched those of other non-white communities. Chicano antiwar protests seemed to be more reflective of community sentiment than was generally accepted by critics. Chicanos expressed strong feelings against US involvement in
Southeast Asia, as well as against the war policies of President Nixon. There was also dissatisfaction with the draft. At the time the poll was taken, almost half of the respondents considered the Vietnam conflict as the single most important problem facing the nation. Sixty percent agreed with the statement that the US should “withdraw from Vietnam as fast as we can pull out the troops.” Only 11% of the males, and 4% of the females polled stated that we should “send more troops and step up the fighting till we win.” The majority of the Chicanos polled also voiced disapproval of the way President Nixon was handling the Vietnam situation, with only 20% of the adult males and 12% of the adult females approving of his policies in Vietnam. Ornelas and Gonzales found that the level of support for Nixon was lower than that offered by the combined non-white populations in an August 1970 Gallup poll, and was substantially less than the support given Nixon by the general public. The study also found that a majority of adults and two-thirds of youth would not encourage their sons to join the service. Although the majority of the respondents disapproved of violence and rioting, 60% did approve of some forms of protest against the war, including protest marches. Ornelas and Gonzales concluded:

It ought not to be surprising if Chicanos speak out against the Asian conflict and relate it to problems at home. The impact of the war is not limited to the disproportionate higher casualty rate suffered by the Spanish-surname in comparison with the national average. Conditions in the barrios are aggravated by the inflationary war economy that strikes hardest at the many families with incomes below the poverty level. Funds for poverty programs and educational opportunities have been sacrificed for military spending and other priorities.... The nation’s preoccupation with the conflict abroad has slowed down progress in the area of civil rights. It was the continuing bigotry experienced by him and other Chicanos that moved WW II hero Guy Gabaldon to return his Navy Cross to President Nixon.... It is because barrio conditions were here before Vietnam and because they will not disappear with the end to the fighting, that the Chicano Moratorium efforts have been increasingly linked to grievances attributed to internal colonialism and cutbacks in domestic programs. The war in Vietnam may fade away, but the struggle in the barrios will go on.

Since these early studies, relatively little work has focused on Chicanos and the military, or more specifically on the subject of Chicano involvement in the Vietnam war and antiwar movement. There have been some personal accounts, such as Benavidez’s The Three Wars of Roy Benavidez. There is also some recent data
available on Hispanic veterans, of all war eras. The Chart Book on Black and Hispanic Veterans (1985), comprised of data from the 1980 census, provides a general portrait of Hispanic veterans in the US. As of March 1980, there were 888,100 Hispanic veterans in the US. Of these, five percent were women. Hispanic veterans possessed certain group characteristics: they were generally younger than their non-Hispanic counterparts (56% were under 45 years of age as compared to 39% among non-Hispanics); they had less formal education; there was slightly higher representation of Hispanic veterans among the unemployed; and, income levels were consistently lower than their non-Hispanic peers throughout virtually the entire age spectrum.

The states in the Southwest and the West had the highest percentage of Hispanic veterans. New Mexico had the highest proportion of all—one out of every four veterans there is Hispanic. Five other states had populations of Hispanic veterans which comprised at least 5% of the whole; Texas (10.8%), Arizona (9.4%), California (8.8%), Colorado (7.7%), and Hawaii (5%). New York, Nevada, and Utah were the only other states with concentrations of Hispanic veterans in excess of 3.1%, the overall national average. More Hispanic veterans (38%) served during the Vietnam era than during any other single period.

Becerra and Greenblat (1983) conducted a study of veterans of all war eras to find out the utilization rate of Veterans Administration (VA) health services and the major factors influencing these utilization patterns. They stated that the Hispanic veteran was of particular interest to the VA because they were a population heavily represented during the Vietnam war, and yet they seemed to use VA medical services less often than persons belonging to other minority groups.

Of the Hispanic veterans they interviewed, the majority were Army veterans. However, during the Vietnam war, there was a higher percentage of Hispanics who served in the Marine Corp. Several factors were thought to account for that choice, including a greater prominence of the Marine Corp during the Vietnam conflict and the desire of young men to belong to a "real man's" outfit. 60% of the Hispanic veterans interviewed had been promoted to the rank of sergeant before being discharged.

In addition to constructing a profile, Becerra and Greenblat provided an excellent analysis of issues affecting Latino veterans, such as family background, cultural identification, health care

*Since the Chart Book uses the term Hispanic, the author of this piece has decided to use it also, to preserve consistency. The editorial policy of Vietnam Generation is to use the term Latino.
Vietnam veterans had a significantly stronger sense of being discriminated against than their older peers. The Vietnam veteran was certainly much more vocal in his indignation about discriminatory practices probably because his consciousness had been raised as the result of the Chicano Movement of which he was and is a part. The older veteran was more likely to accept discriminatory treatment because by doing so he had learned to survive as a minority person in a majority culture. He was more likely to say things were fine at the VA because the organization treated him similarly to how he had been treated by other institutions in the past. The Vietnam veteran tended to feel that he deserved better.

Becerra and Greenblat noted that regardless of the type of adaptation to their environment which veterans chose, "ethnic and economic discrimination was a fact of life, whether they lived inside or outside of the barrio." The veterans they interviewed had joined the military expecting to be treated with respect as soldiers but they had experienced difficulties. They found that "ethnic tensions and racist feelings were as evident in the military as in the civilian world." One of the veterans that Becerra and Greenblat interviewed expressed this sentiment: "We were proud Mexicans. We fought in the war to prove that. But we were still Mexicans in the service, looked down upon. They always treated you as if you weren't smart enough."

One of the conclusions that Becerra and Greenblat reached is that when Hispanic veterans are faced with barriers to care at the VA, "they perceive these hindrances as a continuation of discrimination that has existed over a life-time of encounters with established institutions. Such barriers are understood as yet another example of society's devaluation of Hispanics as human beings." They state that Hispanics are insulted because they feel they are not begging for charity, but have earned the right to free medical treatment because of their service to this country.

**Methodology**

The information presented in this paper is based on a continuing study of Chicano Vietnam veterans. To date, twenty-five veterans from California, Colorado, Texas, and Arizona have been interviewed. Before the project is completed, veterans from several other states will be included. The interview instrument consists of sixty questions and the average length of the interview is three and one-half hours. The
research questions encompass a variety of areas including family background, cultural identity, political socialization and various other social and psychological issues. Some veterans have been hesitant to delve into subjects which are still emotionally charged. However, the great majority have been very cooperative, honest, and forthright. The unanimous comment by the veterans interviewed is that they are glad someone finally cares enough to ask Chicanos their opinions and feelings about Vietnam.

The average veteran interviewed was nineteen when he went to Vietnam, although three were as young as seventeen. The majority (77%) had enlisted and 23% were drafted. Less than 25% of those interviewed attended college before they entered the military. Veterans were divided equally between those who had served in the Army and those who had served in the Marine Corps. Of those that had been in the Army, the majority were infantry ("grunts"); one was a paratrooper, one a medical corpsman, and one a microwave radio equipment operator. Of those that had been in the Marine Corps, the majority were helicopter gunners or crewman. About 66% of the veterans were promoted to the rank of sergeant, and one was a first lieutenant.

Their service dates in Vietnam ranged from January 1965 to July 1971. This range of service provides an overview of the Vietnam War during its various stages, and broadens our perspective on the war. Hopefully, this study will begin to fill a gap in the general literature on Vietnam. The participation, contributions, and sacrifices of Chicanos and other Latinos have too often been ignored.

**Findings**

Few of the Chicano veterans interviewed had been aware of the history or politics of the Vietnam war when they entered the military. The majority considered themselves apolitical; only four of the veterans stated that they were very aware of the causes and progress of the Vietnam conflict, and believed they were also well-informed about other social and political issues. Three of these veterans had participated in antiwar demonstrations before they were drafted. The other veterans stated that they had been recent high school graduates, or workers in blue-collar jobs, with little knowledge of issues which lay outside the scope of their daily activities.

The majority of the veterans were conscious that race was an issue during the time they were stationed in Vietnam; both in terms of the camaraderie they felt with each other as Chicanos, and in terms of the relationships they developed with both Anglo and black soldiers. It was natural, they said, that Mexicanos would be drawn to each other by their cultural ties. Some especially looked to other Chicanos
because they had come from segregated schools and neighborhoods. These cultural alliances started even before they were shipped to Vietnam. As one veteran stated:

Chicanos, during training, in the war and when I came back and I was at Fort Bragg, that was my life line. It was a strange world out there and I was a parochial kid and it felt good to be around the guys. We used to listen to *rolas Mexicanas* when we would get together. That wasn't music that any of us grew up listening to. I mean, we heard our mothers playing it on Sunday when they were cleaning house, but it wasn't music that was at our dances, the Midnighters and that kind of rock-n-roll stuff. The guys from California, too, but I think it was the guys from Texas, by and large, that had that sense of traditional culture. I remember in North Carolina, one of the guys from Brownsville was married. He hadn't been to Vietnam yet and we used to go and have bar-b-que's because his wife could make tortillas. I mean it's a sexist, chauvinistic thing, but all of a sudden, for me at least, it symbolized home and the music symbolized home even though, like I said, it wasn't something that I would go out and buy. But this cultural awareness, I think, was because we were so far from the culture. In North Carolina they used to call us long-haired niggers. That's the first time I ever heard anything like that and so racism made me take refuge in something that was familiar. I mean I understood racism. I had experienced it here at some institutional level.... But there it was just blatant, I mean, it would be on big billboards, Ku Klux Klan country and stuff like that.27

Cultural alliances and ethnic awareness continued as soldiers went from the US to Vietnam. Many veterans reported socializing with Chicanos in their camps and throwing parties for the ones who were going home. One veteran said:

There were Mexcanos from all over the place. Being from *Tejas* [Texas] originally, you would always figure out who was from where just by the way they talked. You started talking about "huercos", hey, this guy's got to be from *Tejas*, right, and we had a way of finding each other. Like in my case, there were very few Mexicans in aviation, from what I could see. So, there were a few and we hung around together. I remember being in our base camp, Marble Mountain, and when we got there, there wasn't a whole hell of a lot out there, but we got some electricity and we all chipped in and got a little black and white TV. There wasn't hardly ever anything on TV, but I remember one time we were sitting in our hut and some
Mexican program came on that had Mexican music, I think it was Little Joe or something, and it was real exciting.  

Another veteran explained his cultural awareness and pride this way:

We talked to each other in our own language. There was even a time in our squad that we wanted to set up the radio men to all be Mexicanos because the NVA were monitoring our calls so they knew what we were going to do before we did it, so we figured okay they know English pretty good, right, so we’ll fix them, we’ll throw a snake in here so we put Mexicanos on the radios, so the Mexicanos would be talking back and forth. We had guys from Texas and we had guys from all over the United States naturally, but the Tejano and the guy from California talked a little bit different.... We used different slangs that we picked up to identify particular missions.... The other soldiers liked it because they knew were weren’t going to get monitored. They were sort of proud that we knew how to speak Spanish.

Some soldiers found that being in Vietnam strengthened their ties to their own cultural identity but, paradoxically, also provided them with their first opportunity to relate to other cultural groups. For many Chicanos, it was the first time they had ever experienced close friendships with Anglos, blacks, or other ethnic groups. Veterans speaking on this subject commonly made remarks such as: “One of my best friends wasn’t really Mexicano, he was a Puerto Rican from New York and he and I were real close;” and, “My best friend in Vietnam was a black and he and I were in Nam when Martin Luther King was assassinated.”

The importance of these new-found friendships was described by one veteran:

I think the most important thing that it did for me was my whole attitude about respecting others and also I guess my new attitude about the Anglo. Prior to that I didn’t trust them, any of them, I didn’t care. I mean, they were my enemy back home. Everybody who was white was my enemy and with my experience in Vietnam and meeting and knowing and getting very close to a lot of Anglos, close enough to say that I trust them with my life, I learned a lot more than I would have if I never got out of my neighborhood.

Despite the fact that there were often friendships across ethnic and cultural lines, racial conflicts were common among servicemen...
stationed in Vietnam. While several of the veterans stated that in their own unit there was little or no racial disharmony, the great majority testified that they witnessed many difficulties. When soldiers were out in the field, they stated there was no room for prejudice because everyone depended on each other, but racism often surfaced when the men were back in base camp:

Where you’re under fire and all, everybody was equal and there was no room for prejudice and racial attitudes. But in base camp or wherever people are socializing and really relaxing it was obvious, blacks went to blacks, Hispanics went to Hispanics and even some of the Hispanics were kind of unsure where to go because there were some Puerto Ricans that were black and they wanted to be with us and they wanted to be with the blacks. There were very strong racial lines drawn. There was racism and prejudice, yes, very much so.... Somebody would say something and then there would be blows and a couple of times it came to pointing guns at each other. The conflicts were generally between blacks and whites and usually the blacks and Chicanos were kind of together because we’re usually outnumbered, but then sometimes blacks and Chicanos would fight together, but most of the time that there was conflict it was induced by alcohol.33

Veterans repeatedly made the point that the majority of the conflicts were between Anglos and blacks, and that very few of the incidents involved Chicanos:

There was a lot of racism in Vietnam between the whites and blacks. There were a lot of fights. At the mess hall that we had, I personally witnessed locking and loading. Locking and loading means you’ve got the rifle, and it’s ready, and if you just open up, ya comengo. I saw the confrontation as me and my buddy were having dinner. Eight or ten on each side and they just started locking and loading. These were all grunts that got together at our mess hall, blacks and whites. The Mexicanos were all on one table. So, I casually nudged my buddy and I said, you know what, I think I’m going to get the hell out of here and he said, me too, let’s get out real slow because they were screaming at each other and just pointing. You know what defused the whole situation? Un Mexicano. Honest to God. Un Mexicano came out of the woodwork. I don’t know where the hell he came from y comengo, “What the hell’s going on here? Que chingados, what’s going on? What the hell’s wrong with you? Can’t you see we’re in Vietnam you assholes?” And I mean this guy was yelling “what the hell’s wrong with you?” and all of a sudden it defused the whole
situation. *Que digo yo,* Goddamn. Because when you see death in a man’s eyes, he’s going to kill you. There’s no ands, ifs or buts and that’s how bad it was with the *gringos* and the blacks.... In ’68, when I was there, the Mexicanos were not a threat to the Anglos, the blacks were. That was when the Civil Rights Movement was going on, Martin Luther King and all that. But when you’re in a war and you got a rifle in your hand, *hijola,* don’t call me a nigger, don’t call me a wetback because I’ll kill you. But not with the Mexicanos. The Mexicanos were accepted in everybody’s status because we were just there. In a group, the Mexicanos were always neutral, that I saw. That’s the way it was with us. We didn’t have a war with the *gringos* or the Blacks. We had a war with the Vietnamese.34

It was clear that in the great majority of the cases, Chicanos did see themselves as a neutral group, “sort of in the middle”:

We had our share of incidences, fights between Blacks and whites. I never really saw any between blacks and Chicanos. I didn’t see any between *gauchos* and Chicanos, other than a couple of arguments here and there but between blacks and whites there were a number of incidents there because of discrimination. I think we even had a couple of *knifings.* There was just racial bigotry.... Chicanos just kicked back and watched it. It ain’t my fight. *Que se den en la madre los dos.* We ain’t going to get involved. That’s their *pleito* [fight]. The military tried to deal with it when it happened but I don’t think they really tried to solve the problem.... It was just like well, let it go and it will stop.35

Several veterans stated that race relations worsened after the 1968 Tet Offensive. A veteran who was a sergeant and a squad leader commented:

When you first got there, for the first three or four months, there was a relatively high degree of people trying to live the ideal, like that we were one family, one unit, one Army and we’re fighting the Viet Cong. I can remember that we actually were living it for four or five months. But after about the fifth or sixth month, and survival became the only thing, it became very individual. You always had to fight the individualism of your squad members because they wanted to do as little as possible. I just want to get the hell out of here attitude. It was about one-third Latino, one-third black and about one-third white. The whites, in general, half of them were Okies from the south and the other half were ethnics, like Italians, from the East Coast cities. After about the
seventh or eighth month that I was there, one of the biggest jobs that I had as the Sergeant was trying to ameliorate the racial things. Especially the white Southerners and the blacks, it's like constantly having them go at it, everybody claiming that they're doing more than the other, and I'm constantly separating them. What I'm saying is when you first got there, there was this really conscious attitude to create a oneness, a family, a real single unit, but it broke down under the reality of the war.36

Another issue of race that was discussed in the interviews was whether Chicanos identified with the Vietnamese people on any level. The majority of Chicano veterans interviewed did not relate to the Vietnamese as being people of color like themselves. The Vietnamese were considered the enemy. Only three of the veterans stated this was an issue that bothered them, and they questioned their role as Chicanos in a war with other minorities. One veteran stated:

There are several other things that really come to mind and that really made me start thinking about the whole Vietnam experience. I remember that I had a white girlfriend in high school and she had given me her picture before I left and I remember I showed it to one of the Vietnamese kids and he pointed at it and said she's Number Ten, and then he pointed to his face and then my face and said, we're brown. Same, same. So he was telling me like why are you fighting us, you and I look the same, and he called her Number Ten, which is the worst you can be. She's Number Ten, he said, because she was white and I remember that struck me real deeply. It really impacted me that he was right. Where I'd come from, Chicanos and whites were segregated and antagonistic. I really started thinking about that. In fact, I remember writing to my parents about it. To me that's one of the few intimate moments I ever allowed myself with the Vietnamese. Since after that, for example, I never availed myself of any of the prostitutes, and I just detached myself from everything because I couldn't do both, fighting and be friendly with them. I just kind of left it alone.37

One of the veterans interviewed, who now works at counseling other Vietnam veterans, provided an overall view of the issue:

I think that any Chicano or any black that grows up in this country, has an implicit understanding of the dynamic of racism as an oppressive instrument. Like when we used to refer to the Vietnamese, a lot of the guys called them gooks and zipperheads and like that, but I think a lot of us just
called them *chinos* because in every barrio there’s a *chino* that owns the market. And I think a lot of the guys, and I try to think of it retrospectively, I think because we experience racism ourselves and even though we’re saying those goddamn dinks, those slopes, it’s making something inside here, there’s this kind of understanding that we’re taco benders, greasers and wetbacks.... Last year I went to a conference in San Juan and I remember talking to some of the vets that were from the barrios of San Juan and they were telling me that when they came home, when they looked at their population, the racism that they practiced in Vietnam by calling those names came to them when they came home.... I think in Vietnam, however, because of the things I said about having to make war against these people, I think dehumanizing them was almost a psychological must, and the more you could dehumanize them the bigger the edge you had because you wouldn’t fail one split second to do what you had to do. I think that seems to be the trick. I know we dealt with racism and ethnicity in one of the groups in East LA [Los Angeles], and I noticed that terminology, like gook and zipperhead gets used less in ethnic communities than it does in dominant culture communities.38

The veterans were asked whether their recognition of racial discrimination, or any other factor, made them question their role in Vietnam or the value of their presence there. Several of the Chicano veterans interviewed felt, from the beginning, that US involvement in Vietnam was wrong, and had been involved in protests against the war before they were drafted. The majority of the veterans, however, questioned the value of American presence in Vietnam only after they had been in-country for a while, or, after they had returned to the US.

Only two of the veterans interviewed maintained that they have never questioned their involvement in Vietnam, and that they still feel it was a correct and necessary intervention on the part of the United States. These two veterans stated that they went to Vietnam to fight communism and that it was “better to fight it over there than in our own backyard.”39 Another veteran, who initially had the same idea, echoed an observation of Dr. Guzman’s, asserting that he felt pressured to prove his loyalty: “I enlisted for two years and I figured that, after two years I’m through and it was my obligation. I’ve done my duty for the government. I’ve earned my citizenship.... that’s what I accomplished by going over there.”40

The veterans all agreed that there were some soldiers “who were conservative when they left and conservative when they came back and they supported the President all the way.”41 But they felt that almost every vet they knew, sooner or later, ended up being opposed
to the war. One of these veterans, for example, stated he didn’t start questioning the value of US troops in Vietnam until he was almost at the end of his tour:

Towards the end of my tour in Vietnam, which was I think June of ’68, by then the military discipline was starting to move into our base camp. I remember when we got there, we used to run around with our shirt sleeves cut off, we didn’t shave for two or three days, and nobody really gave a damn. I remember when it got to the point in our base camp where we could no longer cut off our sleeves, and if we did we had to make sure they had a neat stitch on the sleeves. We had to shave every day, me entiendes, if we were in base camp. I remember coming back one day from a run and I think we had left at five in the morning, and we must have got back, God, at six in the evening. We’d been out twelve, thirteen hours. We were all dirty and grimy and greasy and stinky and everything else. I remember we were walking back from our chopper and we were carrying our guns because we still had to clean them, and we got written up for being out of uniform because we were dirty. And, that’s when you start saying, what the hell are we doing here? Man, what is going on? I mean here we are in a war zone, how can you go out and do this stuff and then come back and get your butt written up for being out of uniform. How can you stay clean? I was in a chopper outfit and we had 24 helicopters in our outfit. Hey! Pa que tengas 23 choppers out of 24 down and none of them flying, there’s a lot of dissatisfied people over there. I mean we actually went through a period where we had no choppers to fly.... There was something wrong with all of them. It got to the point where nobody wanted to go anymore. Toward the end of the tour, it was hey, right on. I didn’t want to go out anyway. I mean what am I going out for? Am I going to go out and take a chance of getting killed? And for what? I mean the big guys don’t give a shit. Why should I?.... We weren’t as gung ho towards the end as when we got there.42

Soldiers who began to question the efficacy or legitimacy of American presence in Vietnam in the early years of US involvement did so frequently because of their own experiences with the manner in which Americans conducted the war. Many soldiers were gradually disillusioned by the apparently purposeless orders which they were given, and resented risking their own lives, and the lives of friends, for no apparent gain. In the later years of the war, many of the newer soldiers brought with them a different attitude about Vietnam, the result of a changing political ideology. These new men were arriving with a stronger sense of ethnic and racial identity, and a new political
The new wave, the second and third waves really were bringing the Chicano Movement. Black Power was very evident and the Puerto Ricans were also very nationalistic. So, the Chicanos kind of had our own tents and the blacks would have their tents and the whites. The whites were divided between the Southerners and the others. So, they even had their own splits. We came from segregated communities. In the late 60s, Texas still was segregated, not by law but in practice, so we knew, that we were different than everybody else, we didn't belong.43

Another veteran said:

Towards the end of my tour there, I started getting mail from my friends about the antiwar movement and Chicano movement and all that. I started thinking about it, but because I was really ignorant politically, I didn't have any way to verbalize it. I just kept reading about it. The music was starting to get to us because the new Marines that were coming in every day were bringing in the music with them and so we used to listen to it and we'd be hearing the antiwar slogans and we'd hear about the demonstrations at home and by late '66, the soldiers were wearing peace buttons and beads. They were bringing in the antiwar language and the sentiment of what was going on and really, in a sense, they were bringing a very different attitude than we had and I didn't really understand. It was making me mad that they were coming in sort of really questioning the whole process and to me, because I was so rigid and so disciplined, I was thinking this won't do because you won't be able to control these kids. So, it was that structure in me that was rejecting them. You know, it's funny because in a lot of ways we understood what they were telling us because we saw the changing policies. We were always having to change to the needs of a general or somebody, so we kind of knew that there was chaos and there were problems. After a year, we knew that we didn't really know what our mission was. I remember a lot of us talking about, Why are we here? Why are we doing this? We fight for a village for three days and then when we get there we give the sucker up or we take this mountain and we lose all these men and then after a day or two of staying on the mountain we leave. So, we had those questions and when we talked to the younger soldiers, coming in, not younger in age but younger in time of in-country, we'd argue with them. Our arguments were more at a personal level, that we disagreed with their attitude or we, meaning the first
young guys there, we really didn’t understand all of the change that was happening.44

There were Chicanos, however, who not only understood the reason that the attitudes of soldiers were changing, but also took part in initiating the shift. One individual, for example, had long felt US involvement in Vietnam was morally wrong, and he was granted conscientious objector status, serving as a medical corpsman. He expressed the following sentiment:

I didn’t want to be drafted. I’m a conscientious objector and I’m opposed to carrying a weapon, but once drafted I felt it was an opportunity for me to serve my country.... But I was pretty angry when I returned. I felt like being politically aware before I went and having a lot of things confirmed for me, recognizing that people were telling me, go home GI we don’t want you here, that resulted in a lot of resentment. I couldn’t get out of my uniform fast enough when I got home and I went back to school immediately and I hid in school. I recognized that we didn’t belong there. That we had no reason to be there and now I really appreciate the fact that I was a conscientious objector because I don’t think I carry one-fourth the baggage that a lot of guys carry.45

The veterans who seemed to have had the most difficult time reconciling their current beliefs about the war with their past action were those who did not question their roles in Vietnam until after they returned to the US:

While I was in basic training and when I went to Vietnam, and all the time I was there, I really thought we were doing something for our country. I really believed we were stopping communism, preventing the spread of communism to different parts of the world.... I wasn’t aware until after I got out how I was used and how we all were used and what a lost cause it was.... It was really devastating to come back and find out the truth about Vietnam. My first term paper in college, when I came back, was titled “Manipulation”. I don’t know why I chose the term but it was how I was manipulated by the US government to thinking what I was doing in Vietnam was right. It took, I would say, four months after I was out to really understand what was happening. It was in that period of time I joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War and I was in every protest that was ever had on Vietnam while I was in college. Knowing now what I know about Vietnam, I think I’d go to jail if that’s what they decided for me. I wouldn’t serve, because it was unjust. It was wrong. It was a civil war and
we had no business there. The more I looked into it, the more I saw how we're imperialist and that's the side of our country and our government that I'm really ashamed of and if there's anything I can do to change that, I'm going to do it. There's not a whole lot that you can do directly, but you're voting and participating against whatever is happening in Central America and South Africa, all these things that we're, if not directly, indirectly involved in where we're disrupting the government and the people of the country I'm totally against. I think if I had it to do over again, I'd go to jail and my brothers would go to jail. We wouldn't do it, no way.46

Despite the fact that they questioned their role in Vietnam, and that they often received poor treatment from both the government and members of the public when they returned home, Chicano veterans frequently emphasize the point that they had been good soldiers. Many still feel pride that they and other Mexicanos acted bravely in Vietnam. They say that some soldiers would do the minimum to get by; even refusing to go on patrol, but they and the other Chicanos they knew in Vietnam could always be depended on to do their job. Many of the Chicano veterans interviewed proudly reported that they volunteered for dangerous assignments. These men also frequently mentioned that they never saw a Chicano fail to carry out his duties or "run scared". Many stated that, "If you were going to get hit, you knew that the Mexicano was going to be there, even if it meant his life. He wouldn't run."47 They felt Chicanos had a strong sense of loyalty to their comrades and were very patriotic. This patriotism was steadfast, even though they were aware that discrimination based on race and socio-economic class was prevalent in the US. Their patriotism was based not only on national loyalty, but was linked to a cultural mandate that if they were going to join in a fight, they should fight well and with honor. One of the individuals interviewed—a veterans' counselor—explained:

When I was a little kid, I remember guys were getting out of the army from Korea. I can remember this one guy.... He had his duffle bag over his back and he walked right down the middle of the barrio just as proud as he could be, just covered with medals. I must have been around seven years old, and that was where I got my first message, this is what men do. And then by the time Vietnam came, we were knocking down the induction center doors. All I wanted to be was a goddamn paratrooper.... This made me some man, you know, and there was no restriction from it. It's "Could I run five miles in the morning?" and "Could I jump out of a goddamn airplane?" and it was the first time that there was equal
opportunity to compete and for once in my life I felt like I was a man. It didn’t matter what color I was. There is an implicit recognition on our part that this is as high as we can go in society. The message is from the dominant community about what our worth is and when we get a chance to compete to prove who we were, not just to society, war is a kind of way for us to measure our own worth. But if you look at the futility of that because you don’t come back a hero, you don’t come back anything. When you come back, you come back somebody who is broken of spirit, who is robbed of humanity, and it’s a cruel hoax about the way Vietnam veterans got treated. I think there are studies that would suggest that veterans’ status, especially for men of color, doesn’t increase one’s ability to earn in the workplace. I think it’s a popular myth that says if you go into the military, you’ll learn a skill and you’ll come out and you’ll be more marketable.

I think that in the Chicano community there is a positive value placed on being a warrior. The substantive message to us, before we went to Vietnam, is this is how men behave and we got that growing up. That is what America is about, at least from our oppressed perspective, because it was an oppressed existence and it continues to be and to say anything less than that is to lie. We were aware of the racism, we were farmworkers, we were campesinos, we followed the crops. You go to any small town where they’re picking grapes during the harvest and you’re aware of it. But we were told this is the country that we are part of, and to a great extent I think the implicit message is to prove that you are worthy to be a citizen. I’ve always, in my own heart, been proud of the warrior aspect of myself, maybe not so proud of Vietnam, but that’s one of the contradictions between who I am and what the war was, something that I deal with on a personal level.48

Another veteran who exemplified the views many of the Chicanos held about their performance in Vietnam stated:

Maybe, it’s my own chauvinism, I see things through my own perspective, but I feel really good about us in that situation. I don’t feel bad about our performance in Vietnam, as a group or individually. I thought we did very well. We were very good soldiers. I could always count on the Chicano. They might complain to me but I always knew that I could trust them.... All the Chicanos that I had come through seemed to me to be different forms of myself. When I went there I was a very good soldier, they could count on me. There was work that every squad had to do and there was lots of drudgery, and I would
always be willing to do my share and more. I made an extra effort and it seemed to me all the Chicanos who came had this general tendency. They came from different places, but they were different forms of the same thing. There was something that was driving us. We wanted it to be a good thing and we wanted to be part of a good thing and even if it wasn’t, we were going to try to make it be if we could. And I think we probably tried too hard and too long. I mean, there’s reasons why more of us got killed proportionally than others, and it wasn’t because we were stupid or bad soldiers or dumb or even like John Wayne types or things like that. I think we were trying harder than the whites and the blacks to try to actually be something like we were supposed to be there, even if it wasn’t turning out to be that way.49

The strong feeling that they had performed well in Vietnam became the root of their anger about the discrimination that some of the veterans faced when they returned to the US. One veteran stated that he was treated like a “welfare recipient” when he started collecting unemployment insurance because he could not find a job. He felt veterans were considered “basically an embarrassment to the government.”50 Another veteran said:

No way, there was no equality. When I came back I couldn’t get a job. They asked do you have a high school diploma? No. What do you want to do? Hey, I know how to set ambushes, I know how to kill people. Well, there’s no job like this. I’m sorry. Get yourself in school. If a Mexican was to say I want to join the service and I want to do this and do that for my country, or if he goes to prove that he belongs, those are all the wrong reasons to join. I think if he’s going to join, he really should look and try to get himself educated before he goes in. I never saw one college [educated soldier] in the bush so, if that’s any indication to somebody that’s going to join the military, he better get some kind of education before he goes in.51

A veteran whose job was processing the discharge papers for Marines explained that the reaction of those getting out of the service after Vietnam was mixed. However, many of them were disillusioned with their experience in Vietnam, and disappointed at what faced them when they returned to the States:

Some of them were very politicized. Especially the blacks and the Chicanos were very politicized and they were very angry. In fact, when I was in Camp Pendleton, 19 Marines were dishonorably discharged because they had signed a petition condemning the US war in Vietnam and these were mostly
blacks and Chicanos. I remember them asking me to sign it and I was going, God, I can't sign that. I was too freaked out and they were way ahead of me in thinking and in their commitment and politics and they all got caught and discharged. They were Vietnam vets and they were getting ready to get out but they got Dishonorable Discharges and they lost their pay, their benefits, everything. They were just very angry because of what had happened to them as individuals and then because they knew, now that they were home, nothing had changed, the poverty and the discrimination. So, they were angry that they had been used and by the time they were home, they had a total disdain for authority. I mean, they didn't salute anymore, they didn't get up in the morning if they didn't want to and they cussed at their officers. This is '67, '68 by then and it was a total breakdown, so that the Vietnam vets that were coming back were kept on a totally opposite part of the base from the new recruits. They didn't even let them anywhere close to them. In fact, all the trainers of the new recruits were lifers, guys that were non-Vietnam career officers. They didn't want Vietnam vets training the new recruits because they knew they had a bad attitude.52

Feelings of disillusionment and anger were not the sole property of Chicano veterans. Like most veterans, those interviewed felt they had faced some difficult physical and psychological problems. Some felt they had lost their humanity in Vietnam. One of the veterans expressed this feeling in the following way:

I remember the first time we went to pick up American casualties, being very careful about how we picked them up and how we put them in the helicopter. After awhile, you go pick them up and it's like loading up sacks of potatoes. You just take them and throw them up in the back of a helicopter to get them out of there.53

Another veteran stated:

I think one of the things that really sticks out in my mind is riding through the small towns and the Vietnamese people were very poor. I remember riding through at one time and at the end of one of these little towns, there was a dead VC right in the middle of the road and all of the vehicles would have to go around it. I remember seeing the body was already getting all swollen. It was like black and blue. I almost got sick and it scared me because I thought that could be me, that could be anybody. By the time I left Vietnam, a dead
body didn't bother me at all. It was no big deal, it was just another one. It didn't have the same effect. I came home thinking that life meant absolutely nothing, that it wasn't worth anything. It was so easy to see somebody dead.54

The psychic numbing described by this veteran is a common effect of exposure to war, or other trauma. The veteran must deal with this problem, and overcome it, before he can enjoy a normal social pattern of love and friendship relationships. A veteran and counselor explains:

One of the big problems was learning how to feel again because you bottle up that emotion and you get the feeling, like if you ever start crying, you don't know if you'll ever be able to stop. So as a Vietnam veteran, I recognize that that's one of their problems. I really focus on that because they're bound and determined to repress that. They're really afraid that if they let go they won't be able to regain control again and that's not true. We have a lot of strength. We've been able to control it for ten, fifteen, twenty years, so there's a way to relearn how to feel again and when we do that, then life changes, it becomes enjoyable again.55

This counselor believed that most Vietnam veterans did manage to cope with their troubles, and that many of them were doing very well. He also felt, however, that Chicano veterans face specific problems which are often overlooked or misunderstood, and therefore, they are not provided with adequate services or outreach efforts. As another veteran explains, expectations about Chicano veterans are still rooted in majority perceptions of race and class:

I think the reason you see the differential in the assessment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is because, not only do Anglos have higher expectations of life because, after all, this is their society, but I think the people who assess them also have greater expectations of those veterans and when they don't meet them it must be PTSD. But if the Chicanos didn't meet them, well, they weren't going to meet them anyway, que no? They don't question it. So that when the Chicanos fail to make it, so to speak, after Vietnam, there are plenty of real normative explanations for why they don't make it. They're lazy, etc.56

The expectation that Chicano veterans are naturally going to maintain a lower socio-economic class status than white veterans impacts on the treatment Chicano veterans receive. As evidenced by the interviews, most of these veterans have never received any type of formal
Many feel that they would have benefitted from some help in dealing with the emotions which they have kept bottled up for so many years. Instead, unable to forget, they must deal with intrusive memories on their own:

There's no choice for me about whether I'd rather remember or forget Vietnam. I'll never forget....You can't look at your future without learning from your past and I wouldn't want to forget. I'd like to forget some of the specific incidents but those are probably the ones I'll never forget. They'll always haunt me. Every now and then, when I see my kinds, I can see dead kids. I see my kid laying down, I close my eyes and I can see somebody's head almost blowing out, and it hurts. But that's part of the price of being involved. I don't think anyone can wipe it from their minds, there's no forgetting. It's accepting it happened and forgiving yourself. Every individual has to have a different way of dealing with the memory of Vietnam.

I'm still struggling with it. I wake up at night thinking about it. When I first came, I felt somewhat guilty that I was able to come back. When I was on the plane, there were people without arms and legs and I had all mine. I felt a little guilty that I wasn't wounded or incapacitated in some kind of way. Then I got into my new life and started going to school and when I was really down, when I was not doing well in school or when I was having trouble with my relationships, I felt really guilty. I said what am I doing here? Why didn't I die in Vietnam? It was kind of a suicidal thought, that I didn't need to come back to all this. So it doesn't necessarily have to be a guilt about killing someone but a guilt, like I'm expressing right now, a guilt about me surviving and the next guy not, or me coming back with all my limbs and the next guy not. I feel really lucky when I stand next to a vet who's in a wheelchair or one that can't see anymore or one that doesn't have any arms. I feel fortunate, but yet under all that fortunate feeling, I feel guilty that it was him and not me. It's a dichotomy, fortunate and glad but guilty and sad. I'll always have that feeling when I see disabled vets or when I was at the "Moving Wall" [a travelling exhibit depicting the Washington, DC Vietnam Veterans Memorial]. I saw the mothers crying in front of the names of their sons. My mother doesn't have to cry in front of my name, you know, and I feel guilty for her, but happy. It's really a confused emotion that I've never been able to deal with. I just accept it as a confused emotion.
Another veteran expressed his feeling of guilt in this way:

My guilt was part of my joining the Civil Rights Movement and Chicano Movement and being really involved in a lot of issues and trying to do good. I worked for the Farmworkers for a long time and was always doing something for somebody else. Part of that was trying to feel you were compensating for what you had done.... That was part of not only the fear of coming back, and feeling bad for what you went through and did, but also that feeling of guilt that you had really done something horrible and you needed to pay something back.58

Many veterans didn't want to forget. They felt it was important to remember their wartime experience and to remember their fallen comrades:

I'd rather remember. You know why? Because there's a wall in Washington, DC that reminds me that I have to remember. I can never forget. All those guys that I saw in the mortuary in Da Nang, all the guys that I saw at the USS Sanctuary, all those guys that I saw come in and out of my life, I owe them something and that's for me to survive as long as I can because a lot of them didn't. I've got to go on for them.... I owe them.59

**Conclusion**

There were a number of reasons why Chicanos served in the military during the Vietnam war. As Dr. Guzman pointed out, they had little opportunity to take advantage of the college deferments that were available to the predominantly white middle and upper classes. Few minority youths had the time, money, or resources to make a successful attempt at gaining Conscientious Objector status. Many Chicanos were drafted, but more enlisted because of their own beliefs and community expectations, serving because of their faith in duty and patriotism. For the majority, this patriotism remains unshaken, even though they are not blind to the problems of race and class in American foreign and domestic policy, and even though many of them came to disagree with American policy in Vietnam. They were disillusioned with the politics and the reality of the war.

This disillusionment at what happened in Vietnam and the war's aftermath only served to underscore the sense of tragedy that so many conveyed in their stories: comrades were lost, and acts of violence committed which can never be undone. It darkens their memories of having been good soldiers and brave men. In the end, they
are left questioning the value of what they did in Vietnam and what it all meant:

Did the war accomplish anything? No. It just destroyed a lot of lives. There would probably be a lot of doctors, a lot of good things that might have been invented, just that might have been. Probably ten thousand Chicanos who are dead today might be alive, they'd have kids and families and they're not here anymore. They're just not around.60

The veterans who participated in this study shared their views with honesty and with courage. My sincere appreciation to all of them. Their insights will help us to better understand the complexities of the Vietnam war.

3 Ibid.: 141.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ybarra & Genera: 3-4.
8 Ibid.: 6.
10 Ibid.: 25.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.: 27-32.
13 Ibid.: 34.
16 Ibid.: 42.
17 Ibid.: 30.

Ibid.: 104.

Ibid.: 115.

Ibid.

Ibid.: 140.

Ibid.

Interview: TY, Marines, Vietnam 1967-68.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.: 140.

Interview: TG, Army, Vietnam 1967-68.

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RC, Army, Vietnam 1966-68.


Ibid.

LA.


TG.

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