

“To Be Better and More Loyal Citizens”

A Tradition of Mexican American Activism

In the opening scene of the 1945 film *A Medal for Benny*, Joe Morales, played by the Mexican-born actor Arturo de Córdova, is on his knees praying that his luck will change. Joe wants to marry the beautiful but distant Lolita Sierra (Dorothy Lamour), but like most Mexican Americans in the movie’s fictional town of Pantera, Morales is poor. Worse, Lolita is already promised to Benny Martín, a young man renowned for his fat wallet and reckless charm, although he never appears on screen. Eventually, Morales’s persistence wins Lolita’s heart, yet before the couple can announce their engagement, word comes from overseas that Benny has been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for killing “nearly 100 Japs” in the Philippines. Proclaiming Pantera the birthplace of “America’s number one hero,” city boosters crank up a massive public relations campaign.

Here, the movie, based on a short story written by John Steinbeck, adopts a more serious tone. First, Charlie Martín, Benny’s father, celebrates Benny’s achievement for only a few moments before learning that his son was awarded the medal posthumously. Second, civic leaders are concerned that exposing Benny’s impoverished origins on the Mexican side of town might undermine Pantera’s image. They temporarily move Charlie to an elegant, Spanish-style villa and fill it with borrowed furniture in advance of a visit by the state governor and army brass. Convinced that his son’s memory is being exploited more than honored, however, Charlie returns home. Finally, the media hoopla over Benny threatens the

love affair between Lolita and Joe. The public relations campaign has nearly turned Lolita, although never a war bride, into a war widow.

Yet the movie ends on a patriotic note. When Charlie Martín ignores the invitation to appear at the official awards ceremony, the event travels to him. Although city officials protest, the visiting army general dismisses their concerns. "A lot of mighty fine Americans come out of shacks," he announces. Soon, a military parade is marching down the unpaved street in front of Charlie's home and saluting a teary-eyed Charlie. Meanwhile, Joe Morales discovers a solution to his own romantic dilemma: how to outdo Benny. He will join the army and obtain *two* Congressional Medals of Honor! Promising Lolita that he will return, Morales boards a train, as a crowd of well-wishers gathers. Although most wave small American flags at the soon-to-be-soldier, two hand-carried placards are also visible in the movie's final scene. One reads "Tokyo or Bust," the other, "Kick the Jap off the Map."¹

One among hundreds of films that Hollywood produced between 1942 and 1945 in a determined effort to foster wartime unity, *A Medal for Benny* was nonetheless unique in featuring a story about Mexican Americans and in indicting the discrimination they faced.² At the same time, the movie presented a nation on the cusp of positive change regarding race relations between Anglos and this minority group. Initially assuming that the medal recipient was an Anglo—a MAR-tin versus a Mar-TEEN—by film's end Pantera's leading citizens have learned to acknowledge the presence and contributions of their Mexican-descent neighbors. Above all, the movie suggested, Mexican Americans like Benny and Joe made brave and loyal citizens despite the prejudices they confronted.

This central message of the movie was one that Mexican American civil rights activists had been articulating even before the advent of the Second World War. In the 1920s and 1930s ethnic leaders had insisted that Mexican Americans were loyal and exemplary citizens and, therefore, deserved to be treated as equals. As they made this argument, moreover, they were well aware of the racial hierarchy within the United States that privileged whiteness. *A Medal for Benny* captured that reality: Pantera's city leaders favored the descendants of "Spanish dons" over the offspring of Mexican immigrants. Nor was the use of the word "Japs" strictly a wartime phenomenon. In California and elsewhere, Asian immigrants had been systematically excluded from obtaining the rights and privileges of U.S. citizenship long before the war. In their quest for equal treatment before the Second World War, Mexican Amer-

ican civil rights activists tried to avoid racial discrimination by insisting that they were white.

Providing an unprecedented showcase for ethnic group patriotism and loyalty, the Second World War ushered in an era of significant civil rights progress. For members of a long disparaged and marginalized ethnic group, the war experience was also a tremendous source of ethnic pride. Between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexican Americans served in the military during the conflict.³ Mexican American soldiers accrued a particularly commendable record, moreover, receiving eleven Congressional Medals of Honor for battlefield valor.⁴ Although less celebrated, thousands of Mexican Americans also supported the war effort by working in defense industries. Aware of their contributions to the winning of the war abroad and at home, many people of Mexican descent gained a profound sense of themselves as legitimate and even important members of U.S. society. Consequently, in the postwar era, Mexican Americans launched an invigorated campaign to secure equal rights that included staging public protests, running for office, and suing for equal rights in court. In these endeavors, ethnic activists frequently mentioned the battlefield exploits of Mexican American soldiers as irrefutable proof that the ethnic group was deserving of first-class citizenship.

After 1945, therefore, many Mexican American activists continued to premise their struggle for equality upon the ethnic group's inherent worth. Before World War II, a primary goal of civil rights activists had been to make people of Mexican descent born north of the Rio Grande cognizant of their rights as Americans. The Second World War greatly accelerated the lesson. The result was increased political activism.⁵ Wartime service now joined earlier claims of whiteness as evidence that Mexican Americans made first-rate citizens. Ignoring the complex racial inheritance of Mexican-origin people, such a strategy also inevitably focused attention on the Mexican-origin population itself rather than on the stubborn obstacles endemic within the United States, such as low wages and lingering prejudice. Thus, while World War II brought many positive changes to communities formed by people of Mexican descent, it also confirmed traditional patterns of supplication, embraced a narrow conception of citizenship, and mitigated criticism of U.S. institutions.

CLAIMING AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

On the Fourth of July, 1941, the residents of Lockhart, Texas, were enjoying an outdoor celebration in honor of the nation's birthday. Sev-

eral city blocks had been roped off to make way for a big band and dance along the town's main street. Late that evening, the bandleader came to the microphone. "I have been asked to make this announcement," he said. "All Spanish people gathered here must leave the block." The crowd's response was overwhelming approval. Listeners who were not "Spanish" applauded and cheered. "Since this is an American celebration, it is for white people only," the bandleader explained. The crowd again broke out in cheers.⁶

Just months before U.S. participation in World War II, the incident revealed that, in the minds of many Anglo Texans, people of Mexican descent were not Americans nor capable of becoming Americans. Whether born of immigrant parents or into families that had lived in the region for generations, they remained foreigners, in this case, "Spanish." Ironically, the bandleader had used an ethnic label that was frequently adopted by Anglo Americans, as well as some Mexican Americans, who wished to "lighten" people of Mexican descent by emphasizing Mexico's European cultural inheritance versus the indigenous ancestry of most ethnic Mexicans. But the announcement on the Fourth also underscored the limits of this social convention. Throughout the Southwest, Mexican Americans faced discrimination not just because they were culturally different but because they were racially mixed. In Lockhart, in 1941, not even "Spanish" people were white enough to be considered the social peers of Anglos. Instead, the prevailing Anglo-American sentiment refused to recognize Mexican Americans as equals, on the grounds that they were both excessively foreign and insufficiently Caucasian.

At the same time, Mexican Americans who chose to attend this Fourth of July dance apparently held a different opinion. By their very presence, Lockhart's Mexican Americans had laid claim to the heritage of the United States as their own. So, too, had Mexican Americans one hundred miles away in Poteet, who, in similar fashion, had attended an Armistice Day commemoration, although they too had been asked to leave.⁷ Unfortunately, in neither case was the Mexican American reaction to their collective expulsion recorded. Nevertheless, the incidents in Lockhart and Poteet reveal that, despite Anglo-American prejudices, some Mexican Americans had begun to consider themselves integral members of U.S. society even before the Second World War. More often than not born in the United States, they increasingly saw their fortunes linked with the land of their birth rather than with the land that former generations had called home.⁸

Of course, those Mexicans who had first become Americans en masse as a result of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo had never left their “home” country. But their numbers were quite limited, probably totaling no more than 100,000.⁹ Constituting a despised and defeated enemy after the Mexican-American War, their incorporation into the United States was partial and conflict-ridden.¹⁰ Despite some immigration during the late nineteenth century, the ethnic Mexican population within the United States remained relatively small until the 1910s and 1920s, when perhaps as many as one million Mexicans entered the country.¹¹ Fleeing the violence and poverty that accompanied the Mexican Revolution and drawn by the industrial jobs generated by the First World War, these immigrants found work in fields and factories from Los Angeles to Detroit. They also transformed the Mexican population north of the Rio Grande into a largely immigrant community for at least a generation.

The advent of the Great Depression, however, prompted the movement of people to reverse directions. According to one estimate, during the years of economic crisis between a quarter- and a half-million people of Mexican descent left the United States for Mexico.¹² Convinced that Mexicans were both a threat to labor and a social burden, local charity officials working with municipal authorities throughout the country encouraged the repatriation of legal aliens (and the expatriation of their American-born children) by paying bus and train fares to Mexico and threatening to cut off emergency cash and food supplies to impoverished families.¹³ In addition, in Los Angeles in 1931, federal agents conducted several roundups of suspected aliens. Combined, these official efforts contributed to the mass return of Mexicans south across the border.¹⁴ The emergence of a substantial native-born majority by 1940 was the result. While popular opinion continued to associate Mexican heritage with alien status, on the eve of World War II people of Mexican descent within the United States—perhaps as many as two-and-a-half million strong—were almost twice as likely to have been born north of the Rio Grande than south of it.¹⁵

Civil rights efforts among Mexican Americans began as early as the 1920s, largely among these U.S. citizens. Born, raised and, most importantly, intending to stay in the United States, ethnic activists argued that Mexican Americans were deserving of all the promises and privileges of their American birth. In the face of extensive Anglo-American prejudice, their primary strategy was to encourage Mexican Americans to assume

the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. Desiring to avoid the snare of segregation while maintaining a measure of pride in their ethnic background, Mexican American leaders sought acceptance of people of Mexican descent as equals.

The task before them was substantial. Repatriation efforts were the culmination of a severe anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican backlash that had swept the Southwest and the halls of Congress during the 1920s. But-tressing the backlash was eugenics theory, the latest attempt to place a scientific veneer on centuries-old notions of white supremacy. Eugenacists insisted that mixed races were both inherently degenerate and dangerously fertile, and they labeled Mexicans as a prime example of a dangerous "mongrelized" race. Immigration restrictionists lent a ready ear. Thus, in 1928, Congressman John Box of East Texas argued that the only way to protect "American racial stock" from Mexico's degrading "blend of low-grade Spanish, peonized Indian, and negro slave" was to bar all entries from the country.¹⁶ Only intense lobbying from Western ranchers, farmers, and railroad men—all eager users of low-paid Mexican workers—successfully prevented the federal curtailment of immigration from Mexico.

In the decades before World War II, negative assumptions about people of Mexican descent were pervasive yet often contradictory. Despite the popularity of eugenics, racial prejudice against Mexicans also stemmed from the suspicion that the ethnic group was not mixed at all. Or, as one San Antonio constituent complained to Box, also in 1928, his way of life was under assault by a group he characterized as "worthless-despicable . . . impudent, sullen and obnoxious," namely, that "horde of Aztec Indians calling themselves Mexicans."¹⁷ Employers were similarly at odds regarding Mexican labor. While some business interests regarded Mexicans as dangerously prone to labor agitation, others deemed the ethnic group remarkably submissive. In 1930 a list of California farm operators' objections to Mexican labor included that the population required "constant watching," was "untrustworthy and tricky" and tended to "strike readily." Yet, in the same report, at least one farm operator was certain that Mexican workers were "bovine and tractable individuals."¹⁸ Meanwhile, popular stereotypes about Mexicans ranged from their being "dirty, shiftless and lazy," in the opinion of one urban reformer, to their being a cruel and hyperpassionate race that was prone to knifings and sex-crimes.¹⁹

Despite the clashing viewpoints, the result of such prejudices was consistent: before 1940 Anglo Americans seldom treated people of Mexican

descent as equals before the law. Although, unlike African Americans, ethnic Mexicans did not encounter a system of segregation mandated by law, as the Lockhart Fourth of July dance revealed, the accumulation of local prejudices often resulted in similar practices. The situation was particularly oppressive in Texas, where many restaurants and barbershops routinely extended the state's southern heritage by refusing Mexican trade.²⁰ Across the Southwest, moreover, schoolchildren of Mexican descent, whether immigrant or native-born, English- or Spanish-speaking, usually attended segregated schools that were overcrowded and substandard. In addition, before World War II, labor unions, juries, and real estate covenants regularly excluded Mexican-origin people. Employers, meanwhile, not only routinely paid Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants less than Anglo Americans for the same work, they also refused to hire people of Mexican descent for advanced positions, regardless of their nationality or on-the-job experience. Skilled work, most employers insisted, was a "a white man's job."²¹

Concentrated on the lowest rungs of the employment ladder, Mexicans in the United States—citizens as well as aliens—often endured economic hardship in the decades prior to World War II. Many lived in migrant agricultural camps and ethnic neighborhoods characterized by extreme poverty, lack of running water, overcrowded quarters, and, consequently, dirt and disease. Los Angeles and San Antonio, the two urban areas with the largest concentrations of people of Mexican descent, exhibited particularly appalling conditions.²² In Los Angeles, during the 1910s and 1920s, the Mexican-origin population was congregated in a neighborhood called Sonoratown, which even Jacob Riis, the noted muckraker and photographer of urban ills, described as the "worse" slum he had ever seen.²³ Meanwhile, San Antonio in the 1930s had the nation's highest rates of tuberculosis infection and infant mortality, both of which took their heaviest toll among the city's ethnic Mexican population.²⁴ Already among the nation's poorest populations, people of Mexican descent fell into even more dire economic straits with the start of the Great Depression. One result was a decade of extraordinary strike activity among ethnic Mexican people in the United States, as pecan shellers in Texas, autoworkers in Michigan, coal miners in New Mexico, and thousands of farm workers in California all went on strike and achieved some victories.²⁵

Confronting poverty and prejudice both, most adults of Mexican descent during the 1930s concentrated on the more pressing issue, ensuring a livelihood for themselves and their children. Yet the 1930s also saw

the rapid expansion of one of the earliest and most enduring Mexican American civil rights organizations, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), founded in Corpus Christi, Texas, in 1929.²⁶ From its origin the League promoted an understanding of Mexican Americans as American citizens foremost. The founders of the League encouraged Mexican Americans to present themselves as, in the words of the organization's founding document, "the best, purest, and more perfect type of true and loyal citizen of the United States of America."²⁷ The new emphasis on obtaining civil rights by practicing good citizenship proved popular: the league soon spread from its base in South Texas to form chapters throughout the state and, by 1940, throughout the Southwest.²⁸

A first order of business was differentiating U.S. citizens of Mexican descent from more recent arrivals. League membership was restricted to American citizens. Although Mexicans and Mexican Americans shared a common culture, a common language, and, most fundamentally, a common experience of oppression, LULAC members, many of whom came from centuries-old Tejano families, quickly decided that the organization's detachment from immigrant concerns was a strategic necessity. The problem, they contended, was that not only did Anglo Americans generally consider all people of Mexican descent foreigners, many Mexican Americans also viewed themselves as a people apart from those they called "*los americanos*." The solution, according to the organization, was to encourage Mexican Americans to define and assert themselves as equals by claiming their full rights as citizens. League members also argued that once Mexican Americans did so they would be in a better position to help their immigrant cousins. Still, the decision to exclude non-citizens from membership illustrated how LULAC members negotiated the anti-immigrant backlash of the 1920s.

Determined to dispel the belief that all people of Mexican descent were foreigners, league members also hoped to counter a set of related assumptions that cast the ethnic group as a political "menace."²⁹ Acutely aware of South Texas's grand political tradition, whereby, according to one pithy phrase, "While blacks were not allowed to vote, Mexican Americans *were voted*," LULAC members vowed to pay their poll taxes and exercise the franchise responsibly.³⁰ The organization likewise sought to refute the notions—dating back centuries to the Black Legend but reinforced as a result of the violence and radicalism of the Mexican Revolution—that Latin Americans were both disloyal and subversive.³¹ In particular, LULAC members vigorously shielded themselves from any hint of labor radicalism. During the pecan shellers'

strike in San Antonio in 1938, for example, LULAC professed sympathy for the workers' desperate poverty but condemned the strike itself, citing the involvement of Communist Party members.³²

Beyond endeavoring to refute the characterization of Mexican Americans as corrupt, disloyal, and radical, league members attempted to define what ethnic group members were. Most importantly, founding members of the league argued that Mexican Americans emulated the key standards of citizenship as confirmed by the nation's political, legal, and popular culture. Traditionally, the ideal citizen had been defined as white, male, and willing to serve his country in battle. Although only the first two attributes had been enshrined in the U.S. Constitution in 1789, all three had been self-reinforcing for much of U.S. history. Declaring in 1929 their "unquestionable loyalty to the ideals, principles, and citizenship of the United States of America," LULAC members systematically portrayed Mexican Americans as model citizen-patriots.³³

At a time when "Mexican" and "American" referred as much to race as to nationality, LULAC members insisted that people of Mexican descent were white. Fully aware that first-class citizenship was reserved for white Americans, LULAC members maintained that Mexican Americans, despite their mixed indigenous and European heritage, properly fell within the favored category. Strengthening LULAC's case, the U.S. government, since the nineteenth century, had usually counted Mexican Americans as part of the country's "white population."³⁴ When the 1930 census placed people of Mexican descent into a racial category distinct from whites for the first (and only) time, which prompted local municipalities to follow suit, LULAC members strenuously—and successfully—objected.³⁵ In a 1930 court case in Del Rio, Texas, LULAC also protested the segregation of Mexican American children from "other white races."³⁶ In a similar vein, in 1939 a league member from New Mexico angrily condemned those academics who insisted that Mexicans were "non-white" or "colored." Outraged by the practice, he revealed the extent of his own racial prejudice: "Am I going to sit by and meekly allow this indignity, this insult to my blood, to my ancestors, to my very soul, go unchallenged?"³⁷ Not surprisingly, given such sentiments, LULAC members, before World War II, adamantly rejected any kind of political coalition with African American civil rights activists. Wishing to avoid the taint of foreign status as well as of radical politics, they also tried to avoid the taint of color.

Beyond whiteness, the league promoted a particularly masculinist and militaristic view of Mexican Americans. Notably, the league's orig-

inal membership was entirely male. Women did not become voting members of LULAC until 1933. Even then, most LULAC women participated through ladies' auxiliaries that tended to undertake charitable and social work versus the political work of the male-dominated league councils.³⁸ Equally important, several founding members of the league were proud veterans of World War I, a status that both showcased their masculinity and cemented their citizenship claims.³⁹ Foreshadowing the effects of World War II, these members traced their interest in civil rights to their participation in the Great War. While, in 1917, the vast majority of people of Mexican descent in the United States were immigrants, and thus not required to serve, for the many Mexican Americans who did serve, military service set them apart as Americans.⁴⁰

For LULAC members, moreover, military service became a way to exploit the gap between American creed and practice. In 1933, J. Luz Sáenz, a Texas educator and prominent LULAC member, published a volume entitled *Los méxico-americanos en la gran guerra y su contingente en pró de la democracia, la humanidad, y la justicia*.⁴¹ Based on his personal diary, the book recounted the exploits of ethnic Mexican soldiers who had fought on behalf of "democracy, humanity and justice." The book also decried the absence of these same qualities at home. Indeed, shortly after the war's conclusion, the Anglo-American townspeople of Falfurrias, Texas, setting a precedent for the incidents at Lockhart and Poteet a generation later, had expelled Mexican American veterans from a Fourth of July dance.⁴² In the face of such obstacles, the league continued to broadcast the essential credentials Mexican Americans brought to the task of being U.S. citizens, including their status as veterans.

Accepting the "male warrior as a central tenet of patriotic culture," league members attempted to emulate that central citizenship tripod of whiteness, masculinity, and military service.⁴³ The strategy, however, came at a substantial cost. LULAC members usually placed the onus primarily for dismantling discrimination primarily upon Mexican-descent people. O. Douglas Weeks, a University of Texas political scientist, who wrote a scholarly article about the league's founding, certainly recognized the essence of LULAC's strategy. He concluded that "the greatest stumbling block" to equality was "the Mexican American himself who possesses no very clear conception of the significance of the privileges and duties of his American citizenship."⁴⁴ While harsh, Weeks's assessment mirrored LULAC's assumptions.

Inevitably, however, a strategy that targeted Mexican American "deficiencies," to borrow Weeks's term, minimized the role Anglo Americans

played in maintaining the Southwest's system of political and social inequality. The strategy also ignored the fundamental problem of racial bias. After all, signs that read "No Mexicans" hardly meant that acculturated Mexican Americans were welcome. Although the organization sometimes pursued boycotts of local businesses, LULAC's primary hope was that, gradually, through ethnic uplift and assimilation, such signs might become less prevalent. Before World War II, the organization's philosophy was based on two interrelated assumptions—one, that if only Americans knew better, discrimination might disappear, and, two, that if only Mexicans knew better how to be Americans, then Americans might know better.

While circumscribed, LULAC's approach was not unique. To the contrary, in California, a student organization called the Mexican American Movement, founded in 1934, echoed many LULAC themes. Within a population that was making the transition from an immigrant majority to a native-born majority, both organizations struggled to define and defend the role of Mexican Americans as Americans first. Thus, in 1938 Felix Gutiérrez, the editor of MAM's newspaper, the *Mexican Voice*, expressed his sharp disagreement with the contention of the Mexican consul in Los Angeles that people of Mexican descent owed their first loyalty to Mexico. Acknowledging that Mexican immigrants had depended upon the consulate in times of trouble, Gutiérrez gave notice that times had changed. He invited the consul to witness how young people of Mexican descent "go around with American friends, taken for one, treated as one and feeling as one."⁴⁵

Like LULAC, MAM also embraced an American identity and advocated ethnic self-improvement as the first step toward improved race relations. While both organizations emphasized citizenship, as a student group, MAM stressed scholastic achievement as well. Only through higher education, MAM members asserted, could Mexican Americans triumph against "prejudice, segregation, discrimination, social inequality," and, notably, what members labeled an ethnic-group "inferiority complex."⁴⁶ Although MAM members repeatedly professed faith in the ability of Mexican Americans to progress, their faith was matched by a concern about the ethnic group's "backward conditions."⁴⁷ As a result, MAM, again, like LULAC, placed the principal responsibility for dismantling race prejudice upon Mexican American shoulders. For both groups, the strategy reflected both the limited space in which these early organizations had to maneuver as well as a complicated mix of ethnic group pride and internalized race prejudice among members.

An alternative vision of inclusion that neither made a distinction between immigrant and citizen nor placed the problem of discrimination wholly at the feet of the Mexican-origin population did emerge. Launched in 1939 in Los Angeles, El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española (the Congress of Spanish-Speaking People) was unique in stressing a pan-Latino unity rooted in the overwhelmingly working-class character of Spanish-speaking people in the United States. The organization also differed from LULAC and MAM because it officially endorsed women's equality and many of its key members were women.⁴⁸ Founded by labor activists with some support from the Communist Party, El Congreso thus sought equal rights for Mexicans from both sides of the border, men and women alike. According to congress members, Mexican-descent workers, whether native- or foreign-born, were vital contributors to the U.S. economy and society. Therefore, instead of asking ethnic Mexicans to showcase their loyalty and social value, the organization demanded that Anglo Americans prove they were good citizens by living up to the nation's democratic ideals. Standing somewhat apart from the Mexican American civil rights mainstream, El Congreso also favored direct action versus gradual acculturation. When the California assembly in 1939 threatened to exclude immigrants from relief rolls, for example, congress members engaged in protest tactics that foreshadowed the emergence of the Chicano movement a generation later: they participated in a hunger march, conducted a letter-writing campaign, and held a massive rally in Sacramento.⁴⁹ Although El Congreso did not survive the World War II era, its more aggressive attitude did, as the war spurred among Mexican-descent people within the United States not only an increased identification with the United States but also a growing impatience with the status quo.

A MINORITY AT WAR

In June 1942, one E. H. Johnson, an Albuquerque resident, dashed off a letter to U.S. Senator Dennis Chavez, accusing the New Deal Democrat of harping on "the non-existent subject of 'racial intolerance'" for political gain. In a characteristically direct response, Chavez affirmed his determination to see that President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms would "embrace everybody." He blasted the injustice of segregation by highlighting the sacrifices that had been made by men in battle, including, most recently, in the Philippines: "When New Mexico boys, relatives of those who died at Bataan, are denied the privilege of going into a

[Roswell, N.M.] swimming pool—a pool for which I tried to appropriate the money . . . because their names happened to be similar to mine, I am not going to stand by idly, regardless of what your opinion or anybody else's might be." No doubt counting the constituent's vote irretrievably lost, Chavez closed with this parting shot: "If you don't like the way I am doing things, well and good. As far as I am concerned, you can still have the privilege of burning another cross."⁵⁰

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1936 (and reelected every six years until his death in 1962), Chavez was the only Mexican American political actor on the national stage during the 1940s. His snappy response to Mr. Johnson reflected the impatience of a politician who, throughout his career, had encountered the insinuation, often intermixed with references to his ethnic background, that he was acting divisively if not disloyally by championing civil rights.⁵¹ A descendant of a seventeenth-century New Mexican family, Chavez often countered such criticism by saying that he was "American before Plymouth Rock." More importantly, Chavez's reference to the Mexican American contribution to the war effort captured a major theme of the era. Repeatedly, Mexican American ethnic leaders argued that the fair reward for military service abroad was the dismantling of discriminatory practices at home. Like African Americans, they sought a "double victory."⁵² During the war, masculinist and militaristic claims on citizenship proliferated, as Mexican American soldiers amply demonstrated the ultimate proof of patriotism: the willingness to give their lives for their country. Some ethnic activists, like Chavez, also drew explicit linkages between the domestic struggle for equality and U.S. wartime objectives. In both cases, Mexican American leaders challenged the United States to make real the ideals that the country proclaimed at home and abroad.

At the same time, federal and local governments, seeking to foster national unity during wartime, took unprecedented, if tentative, steps toward addressing minority concerns. Even before the fighting started, President Roosevelt, under considerable pressure from black civil rights leaders, ordered defense industry work open to racial and ethnic minorities and set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate workplace inequality. In addition, Mexican Americans were the unique beneficiaries of Washington's 1942 decision to establish a Spanish-speaking People's Division within the wartime Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (CIAA). While the CIAA's prime responsibility was to maintain friendly relations within the hemisphere, the Spanish-speaking People's Division attempted to further that task by

ameliorating tensions within the United States between ethnic Mexicans and Anglos.⁵³ Combined, these government programs aimed to promote the acceptance of Mexican Americans as integral and valuable members of U.S. society.

That message certainly got through to many Mexican Americans as a result of their wartime experience. Ethnic leaders rejoiced in what they saw as a central accomplishment of the war: a shift in self-perception among members of their ethnic group, from "Mexican" to "American." During the conflict, thousands of ordinary Mexican Americans—men and women alike—donned hard hats and trousers to work in critical defense industries centered out West. These workers expressed new confidence in their contribution to American society and their rightful place within it.⁵⁴ An even more important symbol of inclusion was the military uniform that was donned by nearly an entire generation of young Mexican American men. As one Mexican American Movement leader enthused, military service provided Mexican Americans with "a chance to fit into the scheme of things, a chance to belong."⁵⁵ Unlike African Americans, who were shunted into segregated, and usually service, units for most of the war, and who had to, in the words of one advocate, "fight for the right to fight for democracy," Mexican Americans participated in combat as equals.⁵⁶ In addition, a small number of Mexican American women enlisted without restriction as Army WACS, Navy WAVES, and members of the Marine Corps' Women Reserve.⁵⁷ The upshot, for many, was a burgeoning recognition of themselves as Americans.

Military life, in particular, often proved a personal revelation. The war took thousands of Mexican Americans away from the Southwest and its complicated pattern of social difference, and exposed them to the rough equality of the armed forces. While incidents of discrimination occurred, Mexican Americans also met people from different parts of the country who accepted them as just another group of ethnic Americans instead of the specific targets of segregation they had been at home.⁵⁸ "The rest of the world isn't like Descanso," noted one California-born soldier, who thought about moving back East, where his girlfriend's family lived.⁵⁹ Similarly, another young Californian declared that his military experience had renewed his faith in his country and himself. Angry about the racism that had blighted his life before the war, he had flirted with *sinarquismo*, the Mexican fascist movement (with a small American following) that anticipated the return of the American Southwest to Mexico once the Nazis triumphed. But his politics changed after he got drafted

because “the Army has treated me swell. I feel like I amount to something now.”⁶⁰

Military service also offered more concrete benefits to a disadvantaged ethnic group. For the most impoverished and unschooled Mexican Americans, the armed services provided a measure of nutritional as well as educational luxury: three full meals a day plus on-the-job training. Moreover, many Mexican Americans hoped that the knowledge they gained in the fields of mechanics, electronics, and aeronautics might serve to jump-start their careers once they were back home.⁶¹ According to the Office of Inter-American Affairs, in 1943, the U.S. Army also arranged bilingual basic training—that is, a chance to learn some English—for at least fifty-four U.S.-born, Spanish-speaking soldiers of Mexican descent. Representative of this group was one Ricardo Noyola, a Texas native who at the age of twenty-six had spent half his life harvesting wheat and cotton and had never attended school. In a revealing boast about the era’s newfound impulse toward social reform and inclusion, a government publication noted, “It took war to bring about a change for Noyola and his people, to give him a chance.”⁶² Of course, the cost of belonging was high: soldiers risked death, the most equalizing experience of all.

Yet, in a strange way, combat was also an opportunity. In the words of one writer: “The war gave much to the Mexican American soldier. Here he was judged as a man and a fighter.”⁶³ With good reason, Mexican American soldiers—indeed, the entire Mexican American population—took extraordinary pride in their wartime sacrifices and accomplishments. Early in the war, for example, Mexican Americans endured some of the most brutal fighting when artillerymen from two former National Guard units from New Mexico participated in the battles for Bataan and Corregidor. These units had been sent to the Pacific theater specifically because so many of their soldiers were Spanish-speakers who could communicate with their Filipino allies. During the fighting and the subsequent Bataan Death March, one official source noted, “New Mexico gave the fullest measure of devotion—one quarter of the 9,000 men from the mainland lost.”⁶⁴ Also celebrated was the bravery of the men of Company E, another former National Guard unit compromised entirely of Mexican Americans from the same El Paso, Texas, neighborhood. They were the first U.S. troops to land on Italian soil. As one veteran recalled: “The Germans thought they had the Mexican Army fighting because we all spoke Spanish.” Company E led the army’s

costly and ultimately futile attempt in January 1944 to reach Rome by crossing the swollen Rapido River despite heavy Nazi defenses.⁶⁵ The most impressive testament to Mexican American heroism and sacrifice was, of course, the bestowal of the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military commendation. Of the eleven medals given to Mexican Americans for their World War II exploits, six were awarded posthumously.⁶⁶

During World War II, the frequent appearance of Spanish-surnamed soldiers on casualty and awards lists soon attracted attention beyond the ethnic group. Beatrice Griffith, a sociologist who investigated Mexican American life in Los Angeles, concluded in her 1948 book *American Me* that this ethnic group had made a disproportionate sacrifice in the war effort. Knowing that Mexican Americans accounted for roughly 10 percent of the Los Angeles population, Griffith had looked randomly at ten casualty lists published in city newspapers. She discovered that about 20 percent of the casualties had Spanish surnames, as well as about 20 percent of those who were listed for awards.⁶⁷ Other writers noted that Mexican Americans were also probably disproportionately represented among the casualties in the Philippines, given the great number of New Mexicans involved in the fighting, and, within that group, the great number of Mexican Americans.⁶⁸ Nearly ten years after the war, an Anglo observer describing “Spanish American” life in New Mexico shared what had become the conventional wisdom concerning the patriotism of the state's Spanish-surnamed inhabitants during World War II: “In many villages,” the draft board had nothing to do, because “each boy volunteered as soon as he was acceptable.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, given the lack of army documentation, obtaining precise information about Mexican Americans who served and died in World War II is difficult.⁷⁰ Such oft-repeated assertions that Mexican Americans served, died—and even received military commendations—in disproportionate numbers were more important for their implication of Mexican American valor than for their numerical specificity, however.

For many Mexican Americans, here was a story of the underdog coming out on top. One of the most compelling figures in Mexican popular culture is the underdog. Plays and stories about the altar boy who knows more than the priest, the Indian who outwits the Spaniard, the country yokel who proves to be more sophisticated than the urban dweller are profuse.⁷¹ In the case of World War II, many Mexican American soldiers considered their modest backgrounds an advantage. As one Tejano veteran contended, years of hard labor at menial jobs had sud-

denly proved useful, once the shooting started: “When we were told to dig a trench or fox hole there was no question about who was superior behind the business end of the shovel.”⁷² More importantly, humble men often turned out to be dedicated warriors. For example, in 1943 a Colorado sugar-beet worker, a mere private, found himself on the snow-covered Aleutian island of Attu, leading the charge that would eventually capture an important mountain pass. For his bravery in the face of massive enemy fire, Joe P. Martinez—at the cost of his life—became the first draftee to be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.⁷³ In a similar topsy-turvy fashion, an unpresuming lane, unpaved and less than two blocks long, in the town of Silvis, Illinois, earned the sobriquet “Hero Street” during World War II because of the extraordinarily high participation rate of its residents in the armed forces. Settled during the 1930s by Mexican immigrant families who had migrated north to work on the railroad, the street’s twenty-five houses sent an amazing forty-five young men off to the war, six of whom never returned. One family sent six sons, another seven, as younger siblings resolutely followed their older brothers to war.⁷⁴

Yet another Mexican cultural tradition, in George Mariscal’s phrase, “warrior patriotism,” considers the willingness to risk one’s life for one’s country a commendable and even essential male attribute.⁷⁵ Certainly, many Mexican American veterans saw their service in that light. For example, Silvestre Herrera, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor (see Fig. 1), justified his decision to enter a minefield and single-handedly attack an enemy stronghold in France as the product of his cultural upbringing. As he explained to a journalist fifty years after his feet were blown off, “I am a Mexican-American and we have a tradition. We’re supposed to be men, not sissies.”⁷⁶ Likewise, Mexican American paratroopers boasted that their ethnic group was especially well represented within that branch of the service because members were drawn to such hazardous missions as jumping out of airplanes. As one young enlistee explained, “When they told us at the induction centers that the Paratroopers was the toughest of all to get in and stay in—we decided that was for us.”⁷⁷ Three decades after the war, a Mexican American who became a career army man remained convinced that Mexican American fighting men had demonstrated a unique talent in combat: “Every platoon, every rifle [squad] had a Rodriguez or Martinez [who] was an outstanding soldier. . . . There was something about this fighting business that we ate up! Perhaps we welcomed the chance to show this nation that we were loyal, faithful and could be depended



Figure 1. President Harry S. Truman awards the Congressional Medal of Honor to Silvestre Herrera. Herrera's valor on the battlefield during World War II, like the courage of the ten other Mexican American recipients of the award during that conflict, became both a source of ethnic pride and a way for such groups as LULAC and the American G.I. Forum to argue for equality for all Mexican Americans. Source: National Archives.

upon given the opportunity.”⁷⁸ Invariably, such un-muted expressions of ethnic pride carried a political charge: Mexican-flavored patriotism became all-American patriotism as ethnic group members rested their hopes of being recognized as equals upon their military contributions to the war.

After some struggle, supporting evidence could be found on the home front. When the war began, defense industry employers often flatly rejected Mexican Americans on the grounds that they were physically weaker, less intelligent, and less responsible than Anglo workers. Mexican and Mexican American alike were also dismissed as foreigners.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, wartime labor shortages not only spurred the importation of temporary contract workers from Mexico, under what popularly became known as the Bracero Program, but the labor crunch also opened new jobs for many groups that historically had faced workplace discrimination, including Mexican Americans. In 1943, Carlos Castañeda, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin and, during World War II, a regional director of the Fair Employment Practices Division, noted that Mexican Americans were finding work in “the shipyard, the airship factories, the oil industry, the mines, [and] the munitions factories.” Still, he reported, most employers continued to relegate Mexican Americans to less skilled positions.⁸⁰ The limited effectiveness of the FEPC was not surprising: endowed with only investigative authority, it could expose discrimination but not punish it.⁸¹

Despite (or perhaps because of) persistent obstacles to full equality, many Mexican American workers valued their contribution to the war effort and were proud of their accomplishments. While still likely to hold unskilled positions, these workers nevertheless usually enjoyed better-paying jobs than they had held before the war. On the factory floor and in special training schools established during the conflict, they also gained specialized skills.⁸² Certainly, complaints registered with the FEPC and the Spanish-speaking People’s Division of the CIAA during the war revealed the deeply entrenched nature of discrimination against Mexican Americans. They also suggested, however, an increased expectation of fair treatment among some Mexican American workers. As one Mexican American woman later explained, four years of defense work had granted her and her colleagues “new job skills, self-confidence, and a sense of self-worth.”⁸³ In the words of another worker, after having worked so hard to win the war, discrimination now struck her as “totally unfair.”⁸⁴ Imbued with a new sense of belonging, these Mexican American workers demanded to be treated as equals.

Given a measure of progress on the employment front and notable achievements on the battlefield, many Mexican Americans were disappointed to see that it was the zoot-suiters, and not soldiers or workers, who were grabbing national headlines during the summer of 1943. The longish coat and pegged pants of the zoot suit had become a popular style among many young Mexican Americans, a minority of whom wore the outfit as a distinct symbol of rebellion and gang membership. Although not every zooter was criminally inclined, nor was every zoot-suiter a Mexican American, by the summer of 1943, thanks to critical press reports and mass arrests such as those that occurred in the infamous Sleepy Lagoon Case, an image of Mexican American youth as "forming roving gangs of blood-thirsty, marijuana-crazed young men [and] committing arson, rape and robbery" had been well set in the public's mind.⁸⁵ Long-simmering racial tensions erupted that June after newspapers reported that a gang of zoot-suiters had assaulted some Navy soldiers. For the next five days, sailors, joined by soldiers and marines, took the law into their own hands by conducting massive sweeps of Mexican neighborhoods and beating up Mexican-descent youths. The local police response was to arrest the instigators of the violence. Fortunately for the Mexican American community, the State Department, after receiving a request from the Mexican ambassador to investigate the riots, placed pressure upon the respective branches of the military to control their men. Military officials then forbade servicemen from entering what had become a virtual battleground in Los Angeles. The riots stopped.⁸⁶

While the riots prompted the Los Angeles Mexican American community to organize defense committees, many individuals nonetheless expressed frustration at the young people involved. Dependent upon newspapers from the states, for example, Raul Morin, a World War II veteran, related how other Mexican American soldiers "felt uncomfortable" when they heard about the riots, especially when they were asked by Anglo servicemen, "What kind of citizens are those Mexican Zoot-Zooters that would beat up our own Navy Men?"⁸⁷ Closer to home, the Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión* also pointed the finger of blame at Mexican American youth. Although some innocent youths had been beaten and therefore "the just [had] paid for the sinners" (*pagaron justos por pecadores*), one editorial stated, the zoot-suiters had invited the wrath of U.S. servicemen upon the entire Mexican American community.⁸⁸ Even a Mexican American who served on a youth advocacy board suggested that all juveniles "between sixteen and

eighteen years of age should be summarily placed into military reserve organizations.”⁸⁹ Presumably, he meant juveniles of Mexican descent. In the wake of the riots, the central concern of Los Angeles’s Mexican Americans was rehabilitating the image of their youth. Significantly, as part of this endeavor and in an echo of a pre-war civil rights strategy, local activists spent much of their time insisting that Mexican Americans were white and therefore not the legitimate targets of discrimination.⁹⁰

In the effort to convey that members of their ethnic group were excellent citizenship material, the Mexican American soldier was, of course, a more helpful image than that of the Mexican American zoot-suiter. Indeed, LULAC members strongly suggested that, by serving their country, Mexican Americans had proved themselves to be both real men and real Americans. Although the organization experienced declining membership during the war years, a core group of members in South Texas that monitored instances of discrimination embraced that argument. Reporting how a planned 1943 farewell celebration for departing soldiers had been thrown into disarray when they and their companions had been denied entrance to not one but two public swimming pools in Welasco, for example, one Hector Valdez praised Mexican American soldiers as “proud young fighters [on behalf] of Democracy and Liberty.”⁹¹ That same year, Leocardio Duran, of Fort Bend, appealed to the Texas governor for anti-discrimination legislation, “in the names of our sons, brothers, and other dear ones who are at present in the battle field (and from this County there are so many) so that Democracy . . . may exist.”⁹² For his part, John J. Herrera, an early leader of LULAC whose own patriotism prompted him to christen his son Douglas MacArthur, claimed an all-American identity for boys of Mexican descent that rested upon military service and sports.⁹³ In a letter lamenting widespread discrimination in the small towns of New Gulf and Boling, Herrera complained that Mexican Americans at the local high school were generally not allowed to play on the football team, even though football was “a game which I love and every American boy loves.” For a while, he wrote, the rule apparently had been bent for a talented player named Albino Campos, a Mexican citizen, who had been Boling High’s star football player until he had been kicked off the team for protesting the exclusion of other ethnic Mexicans. Herrera explained that he had advised Campos, who had decided to join the Marines, to focus on his military future, not the discriminatory past: “You are leaving next week to fight with the Marines, the proudest branch of our armed forces, but you will be fighting for the real Americans, not the people [who] call

themselves Americans and live in this community; remember, Albino, you are fighting for the typical American which you don't find in New Gulf or Boling."⁹⁴ In Herrera's opinion, a Mexican boy who played the all-American game of football and opted to serve his adopted country made a better American than the U.S.-born purveyors of prejudice.

The circumstances of the war buttressed the argument. Whereas the United States at least had been founded upon the ideal that "all men were created equal," Nazi Germany promoted the concept of a master Aryan race. Like other minorities, Mexican Americans therefore contended that clinging to notions of racial superiority during the war was tantamount to siding with the enemy. According to LULAC members, for example, segregationists were "Anglo American saboteurs" and "bad citizens" who were "using the weapon of race prejudice to bring about disunity and dismay."⁹⁵ Still another LULAC member labeled discrimination "the underhand[ed] work of some persons, who are masquerating [*sic*] [as] loyal American citizens, but who, in fact are either spies or traitors to our Country."⁹⁶ Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Manuel Ruiz Jr., an attorney who represented many young people during the riots, suggested that interethnic intolerance dangerously undermined the war effort by providing fodder for propaganda-makers in "Rome, Tokyo and Berlin."⁹⁷ Ruiz's comment made clear the enduring connections between the struggle for Mexican American civil rights at home and the goals and implications of American foreign policy.

So too did the Bracero Program. Even at a time of war-induced hyper-Americanization, Mexican Americans often found their plight indivisible from that of Mexican immigrants, especially in Texas. In June 1943, Mexico decided against sending contract workers to Texas, given the pervasiveness of anti-Mexican discrimination and segregation in the state. In an attempt to mollify the Mexican government, Governor Coke Stevenson set up a Good Neighbor Commission, a state agency that took its title directly from the Roosevelt administration's foreign policy goal of being a "good neighbor" to Latin America. Thus, the Good Neighbor Commission was dedicated both to promoting "friendship, understanding, and respect between Anglo American and Latin American citizens of the community" and to ensuring "cordial relations between Texas and Mexico." Immediately, Tejanos bombarded the commission with complaints of second-class treatment. Like their Fair Employment Practices Commission counterparts on the federal level, however, state commissioners lacked any authority beyond the power to investigate. And even in this task, they were hamstrung by a dearth of money and staff.⁹⁸ Not

surprisingly, the Mexican government remained unmoved. Again seeking to persuade Mexico to reverse its decision, the state legislature then passed the Caucasian Race Resolution, which explicitly forbade the segregation of white people. The resolution's tacit inclusion of ethnic Mexicans within the privileged category was made clear by its stated intent of fostering hemispheric cooperation during wartime. Thus, the resolution solemnly pronounced the segregation of Caucasians to be a violation of the Good Neighbor Policy, even as it implicitly endorsed the continued segregation of African Americans. Although the resolution echoed the insistence of many Mexican Americans civil rights leaders that their ethnic group was racially white, at a time when few Anglo Texans agreed, the resolution amounted to no more than a public relations ploy, and an unsuccessful one at that.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the theme of hemispheric solidarity was one that Mexican Americans activists across the Southwest frequently adopted as they diligently pursued equality during wartime. At the beginning of the war, for example, Tucson activist Vicente Alfaro pleaded with the governor of that state for integration of training schools, based upon the country's promise to be a "good neighbor."¹⁰⁰ Similarly, in 1943 LULAC executive secretary Manuel C. Gonzales warned that incidents of discrimination against Mexican Americans "were surely perturbing the good relations between the residents of Mexico and the United States."¹⁰¹ Yet, even Mexican Americans also seemed to recognize that placing their appeal within an international context had limits. Thus, another LULAC member, outraged that he and his companions had been barred from a public swimming pool in Fort Stockton, could only ask rhetorically, "What of the Good Neighbor Policy then?" Notably, the barred man, one M. R. González, recited a theme that Chicano movement participants were to adopt a generation later in regard to Viet Nam: "I told the Sheriff that I would prefer to fight and die . . . here in my own hometown than have to go and die in Guadalcanal or in North Africa, because here was where we [Mexican Americans] had the worst enemies."¹⁰² González put an unusual twist on the standard formula by indicating that both his patriotism and patience were finite. More commonly, during World War II, Mexican Americans emphasized their unwavering adherence to the American cause, in contrast to the racists who were undermining the twin goals of national unity and inter-American solidarity.

Among Mexican Americans, no one promoted these twin goals more, or saw them as intertwined, as Senator Chavez of New Mexico. Yet the proposition was always a tricky one. At the same time that Mexican

American activists insisted upon their status as American citizens, quite a few of them also claimed a role as informal representatives of Latin America within the United States. The second claim seemed to contradict the first, or at least contribute to the still lingering notion that all people of Mexican descent were foreigners. Yet Chavez powerfully reconciled the two positions by linking the domestic problem of discrimination to the integrity and credibility of U.S. leadership abroad. As the war drew to a close in 1945, Chavez warned that unless a remedy were found for the domestic problem of racial injustice, not only did "national disaster loom," but also, because racism undermined the U.S. reputation abroad, "world peace" was at stake. During the war, Chavez had held a series of Senate hearings to keep the spotlight focused on workplace discrimination. This alternative forum was necessary because administration officials often blocked regular meetings of the Fair Employment Practice Committee as detrimental to the war effort.¹⁰³ In contrast, Chavez upheld fair employment practice as "a cornerstone of foreign policy." In a 1945 speech with that title, he pressed for a permanent FEPC by reminding his Senate colleagues that among the flag-raisers at Iwo Jima there had been a soldier of "Latin ancestry" as well as a "full-blooded Pima Indian from Arizona."¹⁰⁴

While the connection between battlefield sacrifice and home front equality was a common one, Chavez stood apart from many of his contemporaries by insisting that prejudice was not an aberrant phenomenon but one at the core of the American experience:

I have heard it said a hundred times . . . that it is unfair, indecent, and un-American to deprive a man of his job because of his racial, religious, or political origins or persuasion. On the contrary, my fellow Americans, racial and ethnic prejudice are common among us, they are even characteristic of us. They most certainly are unfair and indecent, but they are not un-American . . . when examined in the light of everyday American practice. . . . Intolerance, prejudice, bigotry and discrimination are as American as a hot-dog.

Indicative of the heightened sense of urgency felt by Mexican Americans, Chavez contended that condemning discrimination as "un-American" was no longer sufficient. Instead, federal legislation was necessary.¹⁰⁵

THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Arturo Músquiz came home to West Texas adorned with five medals on his chest and scars above. In Germany, shrapnel had shattered part of

his cheekbone and left him blind in one eye and deaf in one ear. To Pauline R. Kibbe, chair of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, the soldier's multiple injuries "offered mute testimony" to his status as an "American hero." Many locals, however, disagreed. Restaurants and barbershops refused his business, and the only theater in town continued to seat "Mexicans" in the balcony. Although speech was still a struggle for him, Músquiz haltingly recalled for Kibbe that in the army a greater goal had prevailed: "All of us were against the Nazis, but good." So, he asked in a sudden burst of effort, "What's the matter with Texas?"¹⁰⁶

Músquiz's evident battlefield service and his deep dismay regarding race prejudice at home illuminate the ways in which the Second World War energized the struggle for civil rights among people of Mexican descent. Cognizant of their contributions to the war effort, returning veterans and others reinvigorated and broadened the civil rights crusade. They demanded an end to discrimination, based upon the status of Mexican Americans as citizens who, moreover, had just served their country in war. As the *LULAC News* declared in 1946, World War II had achieved the "primary and general objective of the league, to teach Americans of Latin origin to be better and more loyal citizens. They have met the test with flying colors."¹⁰⁷ Through public protest and litigation, Mexican American activists in the decade after World War II successfully dismantled much of the segregation that the veteran Músquiz had encountered. Emphasizing Mexican American patriotism and military service, they achieved notable successes, despite the constraints imposed upon all activism by the domestic Red Scare. Indeed, ethnic leaders often presented Mexican Americans as committed Cold Warriors ready to serve their country again.

After the Second World War, Mexican American civil rights efforts more than ever hinged upon the demonstrated fealty of Mexican American soldiers. A prominent example was the 1948 book *Are We Good Neighbors?* Written by Alonso S. Perales, a founding member of LULAC, the book collected affidavits by Mexican Americans who had experienced discrimination in employment, housing, and at public establishments over the previous seven years. As Perales explained in the book's introduction, Mexican Americans had been "trying to make progress . . . ever since the end of the last World War [World War I] by means of cooperation and education," to no avail. Now they were insisting upon state and federal legislation to outlaw discrimination.¹⁰⁸ The affidavits demonstrated a clear pattern. If the person who had suf-

ferred discrimination was a soldier or a veteran, he invariably mentioned in which branch of the military he had served, the injuries he had received, and the medals he had been awarded. Those who were not soldiers offered similar information about their husbands, brothers, or sons who had gone to war. The message was clear: military service should merit peacetime equality.

As Perales knew, the irony of wartime heroes suffering second-class treatment was hard to ignore. That Governor Sidney Preston Osborne of Arizona should declare a Silvestre Herrera Day to honor the Congressional Medal Honoree was a point of pride. That the governor was forced to order Phoenix businesses to take down signs that read "No Mexican Trade Wanted" in advance of that day was a powerful commentary on the racism that remained embedded in American society.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, within a year after he returned home, Sgt. Marcario García, another Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, was refused service in the Oasis Cafe in Richmond, Texas. The fighting spirit of García, and, more broadly, the growing unwillingness of Mexican Americans to tolerate such abuse, was soon evident: García got into a scuffle with the cafe owner.¹¹⁰ A national audience then heard about the injustice when Walter Winchell, the well-known radio personality, broadcast a story about it. Although peeved Richmond authorities later arrested the war hero on charges of "aggravated assault," Mexican Americans had won a public relations victory.¹¹¹

After the war, Mexican American women also protested in the names of their loved ones who had gone off to war. In 1947, for instance, Mexican American men and women alike angrily responded to a Mrs. Charles Keller, the wife of an "American war veteran." Keller had written to her local newspaper in Edinburg, Texas, to complain that after a two-year absence during the war she had returned to find that the town had "become completely Mexican." Upset about a housing crunch, Keller suggested that the Mexicans should "go back over where they were before the war" in order to "give the American boys and their families a chance; [as] they gave their best to us." Of the dozen replies to Keller that appeared in the newspaper, Mexican American women wrote half. Mary L. Martínez, who had several relatives who were veterans, pointed out that "there were no restricted areas . . . in the battlefields. Everybody was the same, used the same weapons, and fought for the same cause." With more vehemence, Bertha Villareal, "a sister of a boy who lost his life fighting for this country," was glad to hear the Kellers were having difficulty finding a place to live. "It's a good thing,"

she wrote. "I am afraid there will never be a place in this part of the country for people like you, Mrs. Keller."¹¹²

No doubt the most well-publicized event that fused the battlefield sacrifices of Mexican American men with the protests of Mexican American women was the case of Pvt. Felix Longoria. Nearly four years after his combat death in 1945 in the Philippines, his remains were finally found. His body was shipped to Three Rivers, Texas, where the local funeral home denied his family the use of the funeral home's chapel and prepared to bury him in a segregated Mexican cemetery. The manager of the Rice Funeral Home explained to a curious news reporter that such segregation was no more than tradition: "We just never made it a practice to let them [Mexican Americans] use the chapel and we don't want to start now."¹¹³

Yet, what had been common practice before the war was no longer acceptable to many Mexican Americans, including Longoria's widow, Beatrice. Upon her sister's suggestion, she contacted Dr. Hector P. Garcia, the founder of a veterans group called the American G.I. Forum, in nearby Corpus Christi. Within twenty-four hours, Garcia had arranged a protest meeting and alerted local newspapers of the incident. He had also telegraphed a complaint to Texas Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, pointing out that the funeral home's action was "a direct contradiction of those principles for which this American soldier made the supreme sacrifice."¹¹⁴ For her part, Beatrice Longoria disregarded the funeral home's feeble and belated excuse that a simple misunderstanding had occurred. Instead, she accepted Johnson's prompt offer that her husband be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.¹¹⁵ The Longoria case underscored the aversion of Mexican Americans to second-class treatment after the war, the group's greater willingness to resort to public protest, and the overall effectiveness of emphasizing the military contributions of Mexican Americans in order to obtain redress.

The incident also provided the American G.I. Forum with a mission. Founded as small veterans group in 1947 to secure benefits for its members, after the Longoria affair the organization emerged as one of the foremost Mexican American advocacy groups of the postwar era, with nearly twenty-five thousand members in thirteen states by the mid-1950s.¹¹⁶ As they tackled the problem of discrimination, Forum members naturally referred to their status as former military men. A 1949 Forum report on school segregation in Texas, for instance, flatly pronounced that Mexican Americans "did not fight a system like the Nazi Socialist system in order to come back . . . and tolerate such humiliation

and suffering of our own children."¹¹⁷ The centrality of military service to the Forum's civil right strategy was apparent in Hector P. Garcia's prompt refutation of a draft board clerk's suggestion, shortly before the Korean War, that young men of Mexican descent were shirking their duty by pretending to be illiterate. Not only was the heroic record of Mexican Americans well known, Garcia said, but also the "vicious system of segregation" in Texas promoted illiteracy by offering Mexican-origin children an inferior education. If only state officials would end segregation, he maintained, "we would have more enlightened citizens ready and willing to serve and die for our Country—The United States of America."¹¹⁸

Like LULAC, therefore, the Forum advocated—both through its reform efforts and its organizational framework—a particularly male-dominated and militaristic form of American citizenship. As a veterans' organization, the Forum readily broadcast the patriotism of Mexican American men. Although individual Mexican American women sometimes linked their civil rights fortunes to Mexican American servicemen, within the organization, Forum women—like lady LULACers—mainly participated via ladies auxiliaries. The auxiliaries concentrated on organizing social events, including picnics and bake sales, versus pursuing political work.¹¹⁹ As evidenced in the organization's newsletters and other publications, another popular, but ancillary, role for many young women was to be crowned as festival queens.¹²⁰ What diminished slightly in the postwar era was an automatic emphasis on whiteness.

To be sure, some racial attitudes and strategies stayed the same. During the 1940s and 1950s, activists continued to protest whenever local police, health department officials, or prison administrators classified Mexican Americans as anything other than "white."¹²¹ Moreover, individual Mexican Americans, like Pedro Ochoa of Dallas, might hold virulent anti-black attitudes. A publisher of a small weekly Spanish-language newspaper called the *Dallas Americano* during the 1950s, Ochoa advocated an American identity for all Mexican Americans that rested upon a powerful sense of white supremacy. Tellingly, however, Ochoa also condemned LULAC and the American G.I. Forum as "nigger groups" (*agrupaciones niggeranias*). Not only had leaders of both organizations repeatedly call for an end to segregation, including against black people, but, as Ochoa noted and criticized, Mexican American activists had allied themselves with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to seek redress in court.¹²²

By doing so, Mexican Americans issued a sweeping and precedent-setting challenge to segregation. Civil rights activists before World

War II had contended—mostly in the court of public opinion—that Mexican Americans were racially white and therefore rightfully excluded from segregation's grasp. In the postwar era, however, Mexican American activists made the more fundamental legal case that segregation constituted a violation of the Constitution's equal protection clause. For example, in California's 1946 *Mendez vs. Westminster*, Orange County, School District Mexican American parents petitioned the court that the Fourteenth Amendment be applied to their children's education and received a landmark favorable ruling banning school segregation. A similar victory for Mexican Americans followed two years later in Texas. Although other hurdles remained, together these cases narrowed the pedagogical justifications that had been used by school systems to keep Mexican-descent children segregated.¹²³ Furthermore, in 1954 the same Mexican American lawyer who had sued the courts in Texas regarding school segregation argued before the U.S. Supreme Court that his client had not received a fair trial as provided by the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. Attorney Gus García showed that, despite a large local Mexican American population, no Spanish-surnamed person had served on a jury in Jackson County, Texas, during the past 20 years. Pete Hernández, sentenced to life imprisonment on a murder conviction, therefore had been denied a trial by a jury of his peers, García argued. Texas officials countered that, as "whites," Mexican Americans had been fairly represented by Anglo American jurors. The Supreme Court, however, sided with García and ordered a new trial.¹²⁴

Along with court victories, another visible achievement of the postwar era was the election of Mexican Americans to office. Gus García, for example, a member of both LULAC and the American G.I. Forum, won a seat on the San Antonio School Board in 1948. Some veterans were expressly moved by their wartime experience to seek elective office. As one California veteran explained: "I'm glad I'm going to have one of those little [service] buttons to wear in my coat. And a flock of foliage to put on my uniform for Armistice Day parades. I'm going into politics. There's seven or eight of us, all from Southern California, who've talked it over. Things are going to happen in these colonies [Mexican neighborhoods] and we're going to see that they do."¹²⁵ In the twenty years following the war, dozens of Mexican Americans won positions on local school boards and a few gained positions on city councils.¹²⁶ Successful candidates, moreover, were often backed by new organizations, including most notably the Community Service Organization, whose founding helped elect Edward Roybal, a liberal Democrat

and another World War II veteran, to the Los Angeles City Council in 1948.¹²⁷ In Texas, Henry B. Gonzalez, a member of the American G.I. Forum (although he had worked stateside during the war) and also a liberal Democrat, won election to the San Antonio city council in 1953, and the Texas senate in 1956, where he conducted a record-breaking twenty-two-hour filibuster against a school segregation bill. Both Royal and Gonzalez, moreover, won election to Congress in the early 1960s. These electoral victories, combined with litigation and public protest, as in the Longoria affair, were all part of a multifaceted campaign for equality that Mexican Americans waged in the postwar era.

Aiding that campaign was a more favorable racial climate within the United States. After the war, the horrors of Nazism combined with persistent demands for equality from their fellow citizens convinced more Americans than ever before to consider the harm done by race prejudice within their own country. The newfound willingness of Mexican American civil rights groups to cooperate with their African American counterparts no doubt reflected this shift. In Southern California, for example, the post-World War II period saw the emergence of Unity Leagues—interracial coalitions whose members worked together to fight segregation and increase minority political representation.¹²⁸ Change was also evident in the highest branches of government. In late 1946 President Harry S. Truman appointed a federal civil rights committee to investigate the problem of prejudice. Its report the following year, *To Secure These Rights*, outlined the need for civil rights legislation. In 1948 Truman ordered the gradual end to segregation in the armed services. Also in 1948 the Democratic Party platform included a strong plank in support of civil rights. Resistance, of course, remained. Southerners in Congress blocked the recommendations that had been made by the authors of *To Secure These Rights*, while delegates from Mississippi and Alabama bolted from the 1948 Democratic convention in protest. Still, candidate Truman continued to position himself as a liberal on civil rights. In the final week of the campaign, he declared his support for the "goal of equal rights and equal opportunities" for every American.¹²⁹ Truman was speaking to a Harlem audience, but the growing opposition to race prejudice benefited Mexican Americans, too. Indeed, in the Southwest, Mexican Americans generally made faster inroads than did African Americans.

Skin color helped account for the difference. As Governor Coke Stevenson commented in 1943 when he established the Good Neighbor Commission in Texas, "Meskins is pretty good folk. If it were niggers,

it'd be different."¹³⁰ With more precision, in 1954, John H. Burma, a sociologist and the author of *Spanish-Speaking Groups in the United States*, argued that discrimination against people of Mexican descent was a function of "both color and acculturation." Whereas the lightest and most acculturated "are accepted almost without discrimination," he contended, "the darkest and least acculturated are treated but a little better than the Negro."¹³¹ As Burma's schema indicated, prejudice against dark-skinned Spanish-speaking Mexicans was similar to that experienced by African Americans, yet overall, the group's experience was not as severe. Certainly, segregation aimed at Mexican Americans was dismantled sooner. A comparison illustrates the point. In 1954 in Winslow, Arizona, Mexican Americans were allowed to use the city swimming pool only one day of the week. That day was Wednesday, the day before the water was drained and the pool was refilled with fresh water. Still, when local activists filed suit, city officials quickly agreed to integrate the pool before the case went to court. The Winslow pool, moreover, was one of the last city facilities in the Southwest to maintain a segregationist policy against Mexican Americans.¹³² In contrast, the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, begun by African American activists in 1955, encountered intense resistance and reprisals from local segregationists lasting an entire year. The buses were integrated only after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling.¹³³

Beyond a narrow form of skin privilege, Mexican Americans benefited, as did many Americans, from government programs aimed at veterans and from the affluence of the postwar era. The G.I. Bill, in the words of one veteran, "was the Emancipation Proclamation: for Mexican Americans, thousands of whom used it to attend college for the first time."¹³⁴ Educational achievement, in turn, triggered economic mobility. Helpful, too, were Veterans Administration loans that made homeownership easier. In addition, Mexican Americans, concentrated mostly in Texas and California, the two states awarded the greatest number of defense industry contracts, were well positioned to find better-paying jobs within the military-industrial complex. These jobs continued to draw Mexican Americans from rural areas to cities, which offered comparatively more economic and educational opportunities. For all these reasons, Mexican Americans saw their incomes rise between 1945 and 1960, less dramatically than those of Anglo Americans, but faster than those of African Americans.¹³⁵ As one Texas official boasted in 1952, "The Mexican American is more prosperous than he has been ever before. Even the poorest elements have radios, automobiles, washing

machines, refrigerators—and you guessed it, television.” Yet, even this state booster noted a singular exception: “Wetbacks live . . . without civil protection” and earn “a much lower wage than any United States citizen.”¹³⁶

The nation’s unprecedented postwar prosperity acted as a magnet for a renewed burst of immigration from Mexico. Not only was the Bracero Program renewed after 1947, but illegal immigration also flourished. In 1946, for example, the Border Patrol had apprehended 91,000 Mexicans attempting to enter the country illegally. In 1953 the number was 865,000.¹³⁷ The inevitable backlash within the United States mixed old fears about Mexicanization of the country with Cold War concerns that the southern border was open to communists. Responding to a perceived communist threat, in 1952 Congress passed the McCarran-Walter Act, which greatly facilitated the deportation of aliens and made permissible the denaturalization of immigrants who had become Americans. In an attempt to curb illegal Mexican immigration specifically, the Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1954 launched Operation Wetback, a massive deportation campaign that included dragnet operations in factories, fields, and neighborhoods.¹³⁸

In response, most Mexican American groups, committed to presenting Mexican Americans as idealized American citizens, tried to maintain their distance from immigrants. The division was sometimes artificial. Even as activists upheld Mexican American recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor as the ultimate American patriots, for example, at least two, Marcario García and Silvestre Herrera, were proud Americans born in Mexico.¹³⁹ More importantly, Mexican Americans were often the children of Mexican immigrants. According to 1950 census data, the combined population of “resident Mexican aliens and Mexican Americans with at least one parent who had been born in Mexico” amounted to an estimated 55 percent of the total ethnic Mexican population in the United States.¹⁴⁰ Still, only the Community Service Organization championed naturalization. LULAC and the American G.I. Forum, in contrast, strongly endorsed Operation Wetback. Opposition to the Bracero Program after the war, moreover, was universal. Members of LULAC, the Forum, and the CSO, as well as most Mexican American unionists, opposed the program, on the grounds that *braceros* lowered wages and took jobs away from U.S. citizens. Nor did ethnic organizations immediately criticize the McCarran-Walter Act, although the legislation would soon create havoc for a mixed Mexican-origin population of citizens and immigrants. When LULAC finally did speak

out, it was forced to acknowledge the situation's complexity. As league members noted in a 1953 resolution condemning the act, "There are thousands [of Mexican nationals] who have intermarried with Americans citizens [and] are now parents of members of the United States Armed forces." Significantly, the league chose to emphasize the outstanding citizenship qualities that, at the very least, the children of Mexican immigrants had demonstrated. By virtue of their children's military service, LULAC argued, many Mexican immigrants merited protection from summary deportation.¹⁴¹

Not surprisingly, a civil rights strategy that repeatedly touted military service also influenced how most Mexican American civil rights activists viewed the Korean War. The anticommunist stance of the American G.I. Forum was evident from its founding: it barred communists or members of any "conspiracy that advocates the overthrow of the United States" from joining.¹⁴² While the organization therefore backed the conflict, it also demanded Mexican American representation on draft boards, contending that young men of Mexican descent were once again serving in disproportionate numbers.¹⁴³ Honoring those that served was also a priority for the organization. In October 1953, for example, the Forum joined the League of Latin American Citizens to host a welcoming reception for Cpl. Abel Garcia, who had been held a prisoner of war by "North Korean and Chinese Communist forces." Several thousand people in Fort Stockton, Texas, attended the homecoming.¹⁴⁴ Mexican American women, meanwhile, saw the conflict as another opportunity to mark the sacrifices of their sons. In 1951, on May 10, the date Mother's Day is celebrated in Mexico, California's Society of Mexican Mothers erected a nearly life-sized statue of a Mexican American soldier in the state's Capitol. According to the dedication, the monument was meant to honor all the young men who had given their lives "on the altar of liberty."¹⁴⁵ Korea increased that tally. Mexican American leaders were proud that Mexican American soldiers once again served with valor. "Hero Street" in Silvis, Illinois, sent a dozen men to Korea, two of whom died, one of whom was a World War II veteran. Mexican American soldiers, furthermore, received six Congressional Medals of Honor in the conflict.¹⁴⁶

Once again, a less celebratory perspective existed, but it was short-lived. The *Asociación Nacional México-Americana*, founded in 1949 to be the political arm of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers, a largely Mexican American union, had been red-baited out of existence by 1954. Best understood as the ideological heir

of El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Española, ANMA at its height had attracted several thousand members. The organization presented an important counterpoint to LULAC and especially to the American G.I. Forum. First, ANMA refused to draw a sharp divide between immigrants and citizens. Second, women played essential leadership roles within the organization, which also formally endorsed equality for women. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, ANMA members dared to be critical of U.S. military intervention in Korea, labeling it “unjust and unnecessary.” Like Chicano movement participants twenty years later protesting the Viet Nam War, ANMA members complained that Mexican Americans were being used as “cannon fodder.” At a time when the Federal Bureau of Investigation was spying even on LULAC and the American G.I. Forum, ANMA’s leftist politics made it an easy target.¹⁴⁷ In 1954 the U.S. Attorney General deemed ANMA a subversive organization. By then, the persistent harassment of members by the Immigration and Naturalization Service—including the deportation of some leaders—had already fatally weakened the organization.¹⁴⁸

Both before and after World War II, most ethnic activists sought “the perfection of our American democracy,” in the words of one American G.I. Forum member.¹⁴⁹ In essence, ethnic activists had to resolve the central contradiction between the ideals of American society and the abrogation of those ideals experienced by many people of Mexican descent. Beginning in the 1930s, a central ethnic response was the insistence that Mexican Americans were legitimate—and even ideal—U.S. citizens and thus deserving of equality, liberty, and freedom. World War II cemented that strategy. While the alienation and violence of the so-called zoot-suit riots, as well as workplace discrimination, pointed to deeper problems, this strategy did achieve some remarkable court victories in the two decades after the end of World War Two. Indeed, by 1960, some leaders of LULAC were prepared to disband the organization, convinced that the combination of court victories, the dismantling of formal segregation, and economic improvement meant their job was done.¹⁵⁰

The award-winning film *Giant*, released in 1956, captured that confidence. The film is both a saga of a Texas family, headed by Jordan “Bick” Benedict (Rock Hudson), and a portrait of improving race relations between Anglos and Mexicans. Based on a novel by Edna Ferber, who had spent three weeks accompanied by Hector P. Garcia, the Forum’s founder, as she traveled the state and learned about race relations in Texas, the film begins in the 1920s, when Mexicans on Benedict’s ranch lived in desperate poverty and beneath the rancher’s con-

tempt. The longest scene that features Mexican Americans in the movie marks the beginning of a shift in Benedict's racist attitudes, when he attends the burial of young Angel Obregón, a ranch hand who had gone off to fight in World War II. Obregon's funeral is attended both by his family and by a number of Anglo servicemen: his death in combat thus serves as a powerful and familiar turning point of improved race relations. The movie closes with a scene of interethnic harmony. The aging Benedict and his wife look down upon their two grandchildren, who are sharing the same playpen. One is blond and blue-eyed, and the other resembles his mother, a dark-skinned Mexican American woman. Although "Bick" Benedict expresses his amazement that one of his grandchildren looks like a "wetback," he is willing to accept the situation.¹⁵¹ While the movie sought a happy conclusion, as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones in his careful analysis observed, the use of the term "wetback" suggests that, in the movie, people of Mexican descent had obtained only a "conditional citizenship" at best.¹⁵²

A minor incident in Golden, Colorado, a year after the movie's release underscored that exact point about the place of Mexican Americans during the 1950s. A local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution objected when a boy of Mexican descent was designated to carry the American flag in a local school's celebration of President Lincoln's Day. Although acknowledging that the student was probably American-born, the local DAR chair insisted that he was nevertheless "really a Mexican" because he was probably the child of Mexican immigrants. "I wouldn't want a Mexican to carry Old Glory," she stated. "Would you?" While her remarks proved to be an acute embarrassment to the DAR national office, they nonetheless made clear that, despite real progress on the civil rights front after World War II, the Mexican American claim to citizenship remained contested at mid-century.¹⁵³ Although generally optimistic about race relations, Mexican American activists stood primed to defend themselves against Anglo Americans who issued such discriminatory challenges.¹⁵⁴

They were ill prepared, however, to contend with fellow ethnic group members who similarly doubted the legitimacy of Mexican-origin people asserting an American identity. Within a decade, and to the great surprise of an earlier generation of activists, many young Mexican Americans would offer a stiff challenge to a civil rights strategy that emphasized Americanization. Influenced by a different war, these young people began to abandon the political tactics that World War II had made popular, to object to the sense of victory that existed among older,

more established ethnic group leaders, and even to dispute wartime sacrifice as a source of ethnic group pride. Calling themselves Chicanos and Chicanas, they were no longer convinced that the route to equality, liberty, and freedom in the United States should rest on military service, unquestioning patriotism, and devotion to the nation. Indeed, they began to argue the opposite.