

Mexicans

DOUBLE VICTORY

A Multicultural History of
America in World War II

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thorities discovered that he was actually Mexican American. After leaving the internment camp, Lazo joined the U.S. Army.²

Altogether half a million Mexican Americans enlisted in the armed services — a significant proportion of this group's population of 2,690,000. They were laborers, farmers, owners of small businesses, and students; many came from the "barrios" — Mexican neighborhoods with names like "Westside" in San Antonio, "Magnolia" in Houston, "Larrimer" in Denver, "Maravilla Chiques" in Oxnard, and "East Los Angeles." Culturally they varied from English speakers to Spanish speakers, from those who were "Americanized" to those who were "Mexicanized." Many were multicultural. The "pochos" [young Mexican Americans] of California spoke little Spanish and socialized with both Anglos and Mexicans. They enjoyed Spanish songs, Latin rhythms, and Mexican mariachis as well as the latest American songs and dances.³

The war offered Mexican Americans a chance to claim the United States as their country and their right to equality. Urging Mexican Americans to join their Anglo compatriots in arms, the Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (the Spanish-Speaking Congress) declared: "We are also children of the United States. We will defend her."⁴ One of the defenders, soldier Anthony Navarro, explained: "We wanted to prove that while our cultural ties were deeply rooted in Mexico, our home was here in this country."⁵ The Mexican-American Movement pointed out that military service was serving as a path toward a brighter future. "It has shown those 'across the track' that we all share the same problems," declared this civil rights organization. "It has shown them what the Mexican American will do, what responsibility he will take and what leadership qualities he will demonstrate. After this struggle, the status of the Mexican American will be different."⁶ A democratic discontent stirred a soldier to declare: "We too, were entitled to work, play, and to live as we pleased. Weren't *all* Americans entitled to the same opportunities?"⁷

From the barrios arose the war slogan "Americans All" and the song "Soldado Razo" (Common Soldier):

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A DREAM OF EL NORTE

Crossing the Tracks

"*Americans All*": Soldiers of "La Raza"

WHEN HE HEARD THE NEWS of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Alex Romandia was stunned. As a Mexican American, he felt righteous indignation. "Our country had been attacked," he told his brother Roberto, "and we had to defend it." Twenty-seven years old, Romandia was working in Hollywood as a stunt man and had befriended many Jewish intellectuals. Feeling rejected by the larger society, Romandia and several of his Jewish friends decided to volunteer for the army. "All of us," he said, "had to prove ourselves — to show that we were more American than the Anglos."¹

Also living in Los Angeles, Ralph Lazo chose to register as Japanese and was taken to the Manzanar internment camp. "My Japanese-American friends at Belmont High were ordered to evacuate the West Coast," Lazo stated, "so I decided to go with them. Who can say I haven't got Japanese blood in me? Who knows what kind of blood runs in their veins?" Two years later, the au-

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I leave as a common soldier,
 I'm going to join the ranks.
 I will be among the Brave boys
 who leave their beloved mothers
 and sweethearts in tears,
 crying for their departure.
 I'm leaving for the war, contented.
 I'll have my rifle and gun ready.
 When the shooting is over,
 I will return as a Sergeant.
 The only one thing I regret,
 Is leaving my poor Mother alone.
 Oh brunette Virgin, please take care of her.
 Watch over her, she is a wonderful person.
 Please take care of her till I return.
 I will depart at early morn tomorrow,
 right at the break of day.
 And so . . . hereforth goes another Mexican
 who is willing to gamble his life.
 I say goodbye with this song . . .
 Long live this Country of mine.⁸

One of the young men who said good-bye was César Chávez. When the war began, he was a farm laborer, forced to do stoop labor. "I would chop out a space with the short-handle hoe in the right hand while I felt with my left to pull out all but one plant as I made the next chop," recalled Chávez. "There was a rhythm, it went very fast. It's like being nailed to a cross. You have to walk twisted, as you're stooping over, facing the row, and walking perpendicular to it." In 1944, seventeen-year-old Chávez joined the navy. At boot camp in San Diego, he discovered that discrimination was a widely shared condition. "I saw this white kid fighting, because someone had called him a Polak and I found out he was Polish and hated the word Polak. He fought every time he heard it. I began to learn something, that others suffered too."⁹

A Dream of El Norte

Mexican Americans like Chávez left behind friends and families. "All around us," Socorro Díaz Blanchard recalled, "boys were going into the service."¹⁰ Drafted in 1942, Nicolás Ortiz was sent to North Africa. In her first letter to Ortiz, migrant farm worker Mariá Louisa Hernández wrote: "About not seeing each other for a long time, I really don't know what to say or think. I had hopes of seeing you again soon, but I guess I will have to wait. . . . After all it is a privilege for a girl to have someone fighting for her. Darling, I do realize that it is a serious problem we've got and that is why I'm backing you."¹¹ Many families had several members in the armed forces. "When the Second World War started my brother, José, my brother-in-law, my cousins, and my cousins' husbands served," said Socorro Delgado. "At one time there were as many as fifteen of our immediate family who had gone to war! Every Friday Father Burns and Father Rossetti had a novena for the Sorrowful Mother. We would go and mention the names of the boys who were in the war. There was a victory candelabra with seven candles, and the candles would be lit. They lasted for a week."¹²

At home, families waited anxiously for news about husbands, sons, and brothers at the battlefront. "It was very depressing when the men went off to war because it shattered our community," recalled Juanita Vásquez. "Whenever a young man was killed in action, we all felt the same pain because we all went to school together and were close friends."¹³ Margaret Villanueva Lambert worked on an assembly line in a defense factory. "I remember a few times during the war," she said, "when I was working and all of a sudden there would be a loud scream followed by uncontrollable crying of a woman who had learned that her husband or son was dead. We all feared that moment when we, too, could be requested to go to the front office and find a representative of the military with an attache case tucked under his arm with a letter for the next of kin. The workers would always collect a fund for these women."¹⁴

Filling the pages of the Los Angeles Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión*, articles told the story of Mexican-American mili-

tary service and sacrifice. "The Navarez family has seven sons in the U.S. Armed Forces and Navy. They were sent a letter of congratulation by James Forrestal of the U.S. Navy. The family is from Los Angeles." "Four brothers are in the military: Ray, Manuel, and Ignacio have been in France, and Joe in the Pacific. Their mother, Mrs. Villalobos, lives in Los Angeles."¹⁵

This community newspaper also announced the enlistments of women: "Faustina Merino has been sworn in in the local recruiting station. Miss Merino graduated last year from Roosevelt High School and left her job to fulfill her desires as she expressed: 'I want to do more for victory than just buy war bonds, and to replace my cousin who died in combat.'" "Three Mexican Women Enlisted as WAVES: They are Mariá Moreno, Luisa Chávez, Herlinda Lillian Campos. They showed interest in nursing courses so it is likely that they will learn to attend to the wounded soldiers."¹⁶

The Spanish-language newspaper proudly published news of military awards: "Sergeant José López was awarded the highest honor in the military — the Congressional Medal of Honor — after killing 100 Germans. He is from Mission, Texas, and is referred to as a 'one-man army.'" "Sergeant Francisco Navarro of the Army Air Force is currently enjoying a well-earned rest after flying 295 missions (800 hours of flight) aboard a C-47 in India-Burma. He has earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, two Oak Leaves." "The Congressional Medal of Honor was awarded to Macario García from Camp Hood, Texas, for bravery in combat. García, a Mexican national, became a U.S. citizen. He lived in Sugarland, Texas, growing and picking cotton."¹⁷

Casualties were also reported in *La Opinión*: "Gustavo Romero, Sgt., was killed in action in Luzon. He has three brothers: Epifanio, Marines, Enrique, Navy, and Jess, Army, who is in Germany." "Raymundo Cervantes died in combat in Iwo Jima. He graduated from Fremont High School and was the oldest of six." "Roberto Rincon died at Okinawa. PFC Rincon had been honorably discharged, but he re-enlisted after the attack on Pearl Harbor."¹⁸

In an autobiographical statement written in 1994, José D. Car-

rasco gave an eye-level account of the war. After the D-Day Invasion, he had joined the U.S. forces in Normandy, where he experienced his first day of combat. "I remember it was very dark and raining," he said. "We attacked, we had to cross some open space and the earth was muddy everywhere we took a step. Our feet would go down in the mud." When enemy artillery fire began exploding around him, Carrasco fell face down. Shrapnel hit a 60 mm mortar he was carrying. "If it hadn't been for the mortar, it would have hit me on the right side of my head. So I believe that the mortar saved me."

Then, in December came the Battle of the Bulge. Carrasco vividly described the fighting at Bastogne. "The trees were covered with snow. Visibility was poor. I somehow noticed an enemy machine gun, three enemy soldiers were ready and waiting for us to go by. They were camouflaged very good." Carrasco surprised the would-be ambushers from behind and captured them. "We were still in the Battle of the Bulge and one day, it was getting late so it was getting dark and another soldier and I saw about four or five enemy soldiers going into a broken down house, and my friend said, 'Let's go and get them!' I said, 'Let's wait until tomorrow morning. They are looking for a place to spend the night, just like us.' So we waited until the next morning and went slowly to the place where they were. When we got there, much to our surprise they were sitting down. They froze to death during the night."

While guarding captured German soldiers, Carrasco and his fellow soldiers were having a conversation in Spanish. A German officer approached them and gave them a snappy salute. "He spoke to us in Spanish! Boy, were we surprised. I guess he was surprised to hear us speaking in Spanish too!" The POW explained that he had spent time in Central America; Carrasco said the war was over. "So we saluted and said our good-byes."¹⁹

Like Carrasco, Raul Morín was also on the European battlefield. He had enlisted in March 1944 when the draft reached into the older age bracket for recruits and reclassified married men. Although Morín had a wife and three small children, he welcomed

the call to arms. "Most of us," he wrote in his autobiography, "were more than glad to be given the opportunity to serve in the war. It did not matter whether we were looked upon as Mexicans; the war soon made us all *genuine* Americans, eligible and available immediately to fight and to defend our country, the United States of America."

At Camp Roberts, where he did basic training, Morín found army buddies of "la raza" — mixed-race Latinos of Indian, Spanish, and African ancestries. They were from the Los Angeles barrios of Maravilla, Flats, Dog Town, Boyle Heights, Vernon, and Watts. "Every evening," Morín wrote in his autobiography, "after getting back to camp from the long hikes and hard field problems, you could always see them jostling around. Young '*pachuquitos*' [Mexican-American teenagers dressed in flashy clothes], who often bragged of being veterans of the *Pachuco-Zoot-Suit war* [the 1943 Los Angeles race riot], would be wrestling, fighting, cursing, and yelling."

Camp Roberts also gave them a chance to make friends with Anglos. Mexican Americans "ganged around together," Morín recalled, "and in addition, we had picked up a lot of '*gabacho*' (Anglo) buddies. For instance there was Tony Despagne, born and raised in Texas, who could understand *chicano* [working-class Mexican Spanish] talk better than English . . . Leonard Muschinsky, a young Polish kid . . . and Robert Smargean, an Armenian, who got indoctrinated with *pachuco-ism* in East Los Angeles." They got "a bang out of hanging around with the Mexican-American *plebe* [ordinary people]."

After basic training, Morín boarded a ship bound for Europe. "Now here I was on my way over, and with the possibility of never returning," he wrote. "What if I were killed? . . . What would happen to my wife, my three children? My mother? . . . All the horrible thoughts imaginable would grip me, and before I could find the answers, other thoughts would begin to swirl in. I remembered about us, the Mexican Americans . . . how the Anglo had pushed and held back our people in the Southwest. . . . Why fight for

America when you have not been treated as an American?" But he was overwhelmed by feelings he had for his American homeland, the country of his birth. "All we wanted," he decided, "was a chance to prove how loyal and American we were."

Assigned to Company I of the Third Battalion, Morín had his first combat experience at Forêt de Parroy in France. His unit had been ordered to charge German positions in the woods. In notes written on the battlefield, Morín recorded his fear: "Things are happening too fast for me. . . . I'm just a green replacement and I feel inadequate. . . . Smoke shells explode near the woods, and the whole area is clouded with smoke." Morín and his fellow soldiers attacked. "We go down the hill into a gully and the Jerries open up, they throw everything at us . . . murderous artillery, machine guns. . . ." Morín jumped into a trench. "As I turn to my right, I am startled and surprised, all of a sudden, I see him — my first dead German! how frightening and grotesque he looks! And I can't keep my eyes off him. His eyes are wide open. He has a bullet hole in his left temple where the blood still trickles out. His face is turning blue, his mouth is wide open. He is still standing behind his machine gun."

In his field notes, Morín described the death of another soldier — an Italian American from San Francisco. At a small village close to the German border on December 14, his platoon head, Lieutenant Marty Bachiero, was preparing to lead an assault. "Behind a tree," wrote Morín, "I am surprised to find Lt. Bachi with a very frightened look on his face. 'What's the matter, Bachi? You're not scared?' I only meant it as a joke, but he has taken it as an insult. He comes out from behind, stands erect and orders, with a twist of anger in his voice, 'Let's go!'" At a small creek, Morín and Bachi knelt behind a fence. "Lt. Bachi starts to rise to get a better view. 'Bachi!' I yell, 'Stay down!' Too late." Bachi was hit, his body falling on Morín. "He has been hit right above and between his eyes. The top of his head is torn off, his brains spill out. There is still a quiver in his membrane."

Crossing into Germany shortly afterward, Morín was almost

killed. In a night assault, he suddenly stumbled onto a German foxhole and heard a voice, "*Achtung! Wer is dort!*" He jumped back quickly, but a flare went up and bullets were flying everywhere around him. Hit in both legs, he lay in the snow. The medic treating him, said: "Well, Morín, you got your million dollar wound!"

With casts on both legs, Morín was sent to De Witt General hospital near Auburn, California. "Among the patients there from Los Angeles I met 'Memo' Terrazas, who was slowly recovering from a brain injury, partially paralyzed, and loss of speech. I also met Frank Carrillo, and Florencio Rodríguez, both veterans of the North African campaign; Vincent Gonzáles, Ernie Ochoa, Larry Vásquez, George Yorba. . . . There must have been over one thousand Mexican Americans in that hospital."²⁰

Indeed, Mexican-American soldiers had given their lives and limbs for their country. Expressing gratitude, California Congressman Jerry Voorhis pointed out the debt America owed to the people of the barrio: "As I read the casualty lists from my state, I find anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of those names are names such as Gonzáles or Sánchez, names indicating that the very lifeblood of our citizens of Latin-American descent in the uniform of the armed forces of the United States is being poured out to win victory in the war. We ought not to forget that. We ought to resolve that in the future every single one of these citizens shall have the fullest and freest opportunity which this country is capable of giving him, to advance to such positions of influence and eminence as their own personal capacities make possible."²¹

An Army of Workers: The Bracero and Rosa the Riveter

Mexican Americans also served on the home front, in a country many of them still regarded as "occupied Mexico." Once a part of Mexico, the Southwest had been annexed at the end of the Mexican-American War. During the early twentieth century, large numbers of immigrants crossed the border into a country they affectionately called "El Norte." A song conveyed their dreams:

If only you could see how nice
the United States is;
that is why the Mexicans
are crazy about it.

Your watch is on its chain
and your scarf-pin in your tie
and your pockets always filled
with plenty of silver.²²

In California, a Mexican recounted the immigration fever that had swept through entire villages. People wrote to friends and relatives back home: "Come! come! come over it is good here." The news set off a chain reaction that brought "others and others." In this way, just one person had led to the migration of twenty-eight families from his village. A land of promise in the north was beckoning. "Since I was very small I had the idea of going out to know the world, to go about a lot in every direction," Jesús Garza recalled. "As I had heard a lot about the United States it was my dream to come here."²³

Mexicans were pulled here by the labor needs of agriculture. In California, farmers turned increasingly to Mexican labor as immigration laws excluded Chinese and Japanese laborers. By the 1920s, at least three-fourths of California's 200,000 farm laborers were Mexicans.²⁴ Between 1900 and 1930, the Mexican population in the Southwest grew from 375,000 to 1,160,000.

Although farmers were eager to employ Mexican laborers, they did not intend them to stay permanently. "While the Mexicans are not easily assimilated," an immigration commission stated, "this is not of very great importance as long as most of them return to their native land after a short time." The strategy was to bring Mexicans here so long as their labor was needed and then return them to Mexico when the demand diminished.²⁵

The Great Depression drastically reduced the need for labor. Already on the edge of survival, Mexicans were pushed into jobless-

ness and deepening poverty. Rendered superfluous as laborers and blamed for white unemployment, they became the targets of repatriation programs. "If we were rid of the aliens who have entered this country illegally since 1931," a Los Angeles county supervisor declared, "our present unemployment problem would shrink to the proportions of a relatively unimportant flat spot in business."²⁶ By the tens of thousands, Mexicans were placed in box cars and shipped across the border. Many of them had been born in the United States. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce estimated that 60 percent of the "repatriated" children were American citizens "without very much hope of ever coming back into the United States."²⁷ Altogether about 400,000 Mexicans were "repatriated." Forced to leave El Norte, Mexicans crossed the border, with a bitter song on their lips:

And so I take my leave,
may you be happy.
Here ends the song,
but the depression goes on forever.²⁸

However, employers viewed repatriation as a temporary program; the border existed only when Mexican labor was not needed. "The Los Angeles industrialists," observed Carey McWilliams, "confidently predict that the Mexican can be lured back, whenever we need him."²⁹

The border disappeared again when the war began. To meet new demands for agricultural production, the federal government initiated the "bracero" program (from the Spanish word "bravos," or arms).³⁰ Recruited in Mexico, these guest laborers would work here under contract and then be returned at the end of their term. Their labor agreement specified several conditions:

Discrimination against braceros is forbidden.
They shall be guaranteed transportation, food, hospitalization and repatriation.

They shall not be used to displace other workers nor to lower wages.

Braceros will be allowed to form associations and elect a leader to represent them.³¹

On September 29, 1942, the first 1,500 braceros were brought to California by train. During the war years, the federal government spent \$100 million on this labor importation program and recruited workers by the thousands: 4,000 in 1942, 52,000 in 1943, 62,000 in 1944, and 120,000 a year later. By 1947, 200,000 of them had worked in the U.S.³²

Agriculture was a "war industry": it contributed a vital military need — food. The braceros worked in twenty-one states, where in 1944 alone they harvested crops worth \$432 million.³³ "They're all right, good workers," a Washington farmer commented. "I only hope I can get them again." Other farmers agreed: "These Mexicans are as good as any help I ever had." "We wouldn't trade one of these Mexicans for ten of the kind of help we have had on this job before."³⁴

In their oral histories and in their songs, the braceros told stories of what life was like in El Norte. They understood the importance of their work in the fight against fascism:

If this war carries on
We're all damned!
We'll have to punch
Hirohito out. . . .

We'll have to give our help
To the United States.
If we do that, no doubt
We'll never be beaten.

Long live the stars and stripes
And also the tricolor flag

And the eagle with its claws
Shall tear apart the traitor.³⁵

But what spurred the migrant farm workers even more than patriotism was poverty in Mexico:

Braceros cross and cross
During summer and spring. . .
I go and come, come and go
Looking for bread for my children. . .
Braceros cross and cross.³⁶

El Norte offered them opportunities to earn money:

From Morelia I came as a bracero,
To earn dollars was my illusion.
I bought shoes, I bought a sombrero,
And even put on new pants.

However, reality shattered this illusion. "I remember the first time I went to the United States of America," said the spoken part of a song. "I did not go on a pleasure trip there, I went to pick cotton!" I wrote my mother, 'Mom, I have a new *saco*.' And my mother went around town making a big fuss, telling everybody, 'My son is well-dressed. He has a new *saco*!' Heck, a new cotton-picking sack!"³⁷

Paid low wages, the laborers were sometimes cheated by their employers. "Many times, we worked twelve hours a day," a bracero protested, "but we never got paid for more than eight." Another worker said: "The boss I worked for . . . robbed us of our pay, because he used crooked scales for weighing the cotton we picked. I came up here to try to support my family, but I have had a hard time with what I make."³⁸

Exploited as "arms," the migrant workers were forced to do stoop labor with short-handle hoes:

And now I find myself
Breathless,
I'm a shoemaker by profession
But here they say I'm a camel
And I work just with a shovel and a hoe.

"We come here like *animales rentados* (rented animals), not like men," complained a farm laborer.³⁹

They work us like slaves
They treat us like dogs.
All we need is for them to ride us
And to put the bridle on us.⁴⁰

"We are not animals," declared a bracero. "We are human beings who have suffered much to come to the United States and work. . . . I think we should not come to the U.S. where we are treated badly, abused, and looked down upon."⁴¹

The migrant farm laborers lived in squalid and dangerous labor camps. "The only thing that the owner of the ranch provided was a tent," said Gonzalo B. García. "And everybody brought their own utensils, own food. We'd have to go out and scrounge around for an old oil can and cut a hole in it and make a stove."⁴² These kerosene stoves were fire hazards. "Our barracks burned down, destroying all our clothes and money we had saved," a bracero said. "We were never paid back for what we lost."⁴³ The pesticides and unsafe drinking water frequently made workers ill. "There was much diarrhea in the camp because of bad food," a worker reported.⁴⁴

During the weekends, the braceros often went into the nearby towns, only to be turned away from restaurants and other businesses. Sometimes they were attacked by young white men. In a letter to Mrs. Roosevelt, a woman protested incidents of racialized rowdiness in Idaho. She wanted the President to do "something about the Nazi minded element, by that I mean the people who are

persecuting these boys [braceros]." Such behavior was "pure sabotage," argued the writer, because it jeopardized Idaho's labor supply. "So long as these boys are here, helping on the home front (and they are doing a good job of it), it seems to me that they should enjoy the same rights and privileges as a United States citizen, and so long as they are not drunk and disorderly they should be able to go in any place that a white man can go, and be waited on in a like manner. Does not our Constitution demand liberty and justice for all?"⁴⁵

This was the question the braceros themselves were also asking. In May 1944, migrant farm workers in Idaho struck for higher wages. The growers forced them to return to work by threatening to jail them for breaking their contracts. However, strikes continued to erupt and spread to Washington as well as Oregon. As the producers of food for "Las Democracies," the braceros were demanding justice for all regardless of race.⁴⁶

Already living in the U.S. when Pearl Harbor was attacked, Mexican Americans were also struggling for equality. Initially, they found themselves excluded from the defense industries. In an August 18, 1942, report marked "Confidential," the Office of War Information reported: "The airplane industry of Southern California has been consistent in asserting that it does not discriminate, but payrolls show almost no Mexicans employed. One plant personnel man stated that his company would employ them if they were not 'too racial' — 'too dark.' American-born girls of Mexican ancestry in San Diego have taken training courses, have come out at the top of their class, only to find that employers have passed them up to take less competent white girls."⁴⁷

However, the rapidly inclining demand for labor in the defense industries forced employers to turn to Mexican labor. In 1941, the number of Mexicans employed in the Los Angeles shipyards was zero; by 1944, it had jumped to 17,000. Employment opportunities for them expanded throughout the defense industries — steel, armaments, and aircraft. However, they found themselves relegated to the low-wage jobs. At San Antonio's Kelly Field, where

10,000 of the 35,000 employees were Mexicans, none of them held a position above that of laborer or mechanic's helper.

Mexican Americans turned to the Fair Employment Practices Committee to help them fight discrimination. But federal authorities in Washington frustrated the FEPC's efforts. In a memo, June 20, 1942, Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles advised President Roosevelt that the State Department was "strongly opposed" to the public hearings that the FEPC was planning to hold in the Southwest. Welles explained that he was concerned that America's enemies would exploit public disclosures of discrimination. "Axis agents and others seeking to discredit this country in Mexico and the other American republics," Welles wrote, "have been and are making effective use of racial discrimination in this country." He then warned: "It would be most unfortunate, if through the record of public hearings conducted by an agency of this Government, we should afford them further material which because of its official character could be used even more effectively against us." Referring to Welles's memo, Roosevelt instructed aide Marvin McIntyre on June 23: "Take this letter up today with [FEPC Chairman Malcolm] MacLean and tell him really for international reasons public hearings should be stopped. And tell Sumner Welles that you are doing so and that he also may do it." Subsequently, the hearings were canceled.⁴⁸

Roosevelt undermined the work of the FEPC further when he transferred this committee to the War Manpower Commission. Critics charged that the motive for this bureaucratic relocation was to appease "white Southern political pressure" by maintaining "discrimination as usual." When A. Philip Randolph learned about this administrative reorganization, he angrily asserted that the White House was pursuing a policy that was completely "emasculating" the usefulness of the committee. The reduction of the FEPC into "a small Federal bureau without power," FEPC Chairman MacLean noted, was bound to make minorities feel that "the Boss [had] deserted them."⁴⁹

However, wartime labor shortages were opening doors to

skilled jobs. *La Opinión* carried advertisements in Spanish: "Mar-tin Ship Service Company needs Mexican Workers for repair and maintenance work. You don't need to speak English. We have Mexican supervisors. You only need a birth certificate. You don't need to be a U.S. citizen." "No Experience Necessary: We need men, 16-50 years old, for war production industries. We speak Spanish. Come by between 10 and 4 p.m." ⁵⁰ On January 23, 1944, *La Opinión* reported that twelve thousand Mexicans were employed by Douglas Aircraft in southern California. ⁵¹

Many of these new workers were women. On April 2, 1942, *La Opinión* announced: "Roosevelt High School will open an aviation class for national defense, especially for women, on Tuesday and Thursday nights. This class will teach mounting, perforation, etc., as is taught by the various aircraft production companies." ⁵²

For the first time in their lives, Mexican-American women were no longer forced to be farm laborers, maids, and garment workers. "Prior to the war," recalled Natalie Martínez Sterling, "the only jobs available to young Mexican women were non-skilled types of occupations such as making cardboard boxes and sewing clothes. The war allowed us job opportunities as sales clerks and defense workers. The government was actually training us with job skills that would help us after the war." ⁵³ Felicia Ruiz welcomed the chance to work in the defense industry. "During the depression," she said, "the only jobs available to young Mexican American women were limited primarily to sewing and laundry work, hotel maids, and as domestics. These jobs were both physically demanding and paid very little. When the war broke out, defense jobs were all of a sudden open to us because of the labor shortage with the men off to war. Many of us left these menial jobs into highly skilled occupations with good to excellent pay with overtime." ⁵⁴

During the tremendous employment expansion, thousands of Mexican-American women became riveters. One of them was Margarita Salazar. In 1942, she was twenty-five years old, working in Molly's Beauty Shop, where customers were telling fantastic stories about women assembling airplanes. "I quit Molly's and went

to work for defense," Salazar recalled. "I could make more money. I could see that I wasn't going to make that much money working as an operator and the money was in defense. Everybody would talk about the overtime and how much money it was. And it was exciting. Being involved in that era you figured you were doing something for your country — and at the same time making money." She applied for a job at a Lockheed assembly plant and was hired immediately. An Italian worker taught Salazar how to drill: "Jeanette broke me in," she said. ⁵⁵

On the assembly lines of aircraft production, women were required to wear factory clothes. "Many of our mothers and aunts who worked in the defense plants never really adjusted to wearing what they considered to be men's clothing," said a worker. "Here were women who had worn only dresses all their lives, and were now required to wear pants and shirts." ⁵⁶

Sexual harassment was a problem in the factories. "Male workers told us that we should be home taking care of our children and that defense work was not for women," recalled one woman. "We often complained to our male supervisors regarding our problems with some of the men but nothing was ever done. Sometimes when we were working, one of the men would come by and grab us in a sexual way which made us very angry concerning this ugly treatment of women in the plant. Many women didn't formally complain, however, in fear of possibly losing their jobs." ⁵⁷

Working on the assembly lines, Mexican-American women learned not only how to rivet but also how to get along with workers of other races. "Aircraft work generally required a team of two women for riveting — one person working outside the plane and the other person inside," recalled Carmen Caudillo. "At one particular plant, there were many white women from Missouri who refused to have anything to do with the Black workers. One supervisor decided to pair several Black and Mexican women together. At first, there was some prejudice on both sides, but as time passed, we became good friends both in and out of the plant."

Women of different ethnicities also became friends in the factory

cafeterias. "There were other Mexican women," said Margarita Salazar, "but I don't recall too many colored girls, not in our little section. But when we'd go to lunch, I'd see a lot of them. We all blended in — men, women, Mexican, Italian."⁵⁸ At another plant, Antonia Molina also had affirming experiences. "I remember one day when some new Black workers came to our factory. From the start, some white workers absolutely refused to even say hello. The next day, some of us Mexican women invited the Black women over to our table for lunch. We did so because we knew what it was like to be discriminated against. By the end of the week, several white workers also joined us for lunch. We soon realized that we had to set aside our differences in order to win the war."⁵⁹

Working in the defense industry was particularly difficult for mothers. "I knew women who hated coming to work because of the daily pain of leaving their children at someone's house as they worked in the factory," said Esther Beard. "They couldn't wait for the war to be over so they could return to a normal family life."⁶⁰ Daily schedules became frenetic. Assigned to the night shift at an assembly plant, Esperanza Montoya Padilla had a punishing schedule: "I used to drill and buck — make holes for rivets on the planes. I'd [then] come home and clean the house and wash and take care of the kids and fix everything up, and then do the laundry. I went from one job to the other."⁶¹

Married women often found that their husbands did not like their working. When Beatrice Morales Clifton was told that the aircraft factories in Pasadena were hiring women, she decided to apply. "So I took the forms and when I got home and told my husband, oh! he hit the roof. He was one of those men that didn't believe the wife ever working; they want to be the supporter. I said, 'Well, I've made up my mind. I'm going to work regardless of whether you like it or not.'" Clifton went to work as a riveter for Lockheed. She found the work challenging but also exhausting, returning home each day very tired. "My husband, he didn't have much to say, 'cause he didn't approve from the beginning. As time went on, his attitude changed a little, but I don't think he ever

really, really got used to the idea of me working." Having a paying job was important to her. "I was just a mother of four kids, that's all. But I felt proud of myself and felt good being that I had never done anything like that. I felt good that I could do something, and being that it was war, I felt that I was doing my part."⁶²

Work in the war industries was a transforming experience. "I wasn't doing very well in high school," wrote Socorro Díaz Blanchard in her autobiography. "Seems like I had lost interest." In April 1943, she became a shipping clerk at Shelly Air Force Base, where she learned that the job offered certain privileges. "There was a PX in the base for the civilian employees. I could buy cigarettes which were very scarce. I was very popular on our block because everybody knew I could get cigarettes." She also had enough money to buy a car. "I wasn't eighteen yet so it had to be in my dad's name. I paid for it myself. It was a 1938 Dodge, four-door, creamy white. To me it was a Cadillac."⁶³

For Mexican-American women, the car symbolized self-reliance. "Through earning our own wages," Carmen Chávez said, "we had a taste of independence we hadn't known before the war. The women of my neighborhood had changed as much as the men who went to war. We developed a feeling of self-confidence and a sense of worth." Alicia Mendeola Shelit experienced a similar feeling. With her earnings as a worker at Douglas Aircraft, this single parent purchased her first home. Shelit was proud that she was bringing "the money in to feed [her] kids, like a man."⁶⁴

For Mexican Americans in the defense industry, the war represented a convergence of patriotism and personal growth. "We didn't understand the international politics that led to the war," said a woman who had worked in a factory. "We did know, however, that the Japanese had cowardly bombed Pearl Harbor and had killed hundreds of young American boys — boys who were my brothers' ages. The Japanese had attacked our country. I say our country because I was born here. My generation went proudly to war because this country, despite the discrimination, had provided my family with a better life than my relatives had in Mexico."⁶⁵ A

better life meant a different one. "All of us were definitely changed by the four years of defense work," observed Victoria Morales. "Prior to the war, we were young women with few social and job skills. But the war altered these conditions very quickly. By the end of the war, we had been transformed into young, mature women with new job skills, self-confidence, and a sense of worth as a result of our wartime contributions."⁶⁶

The "Poison Gas" of Nazi Doctrine in California

During the war, however, this sense of worth was assaulted when "ugly prejudices" stirred fear and hatred against Mexican-American teenagers. Viewed as outrageously dressed juvenile delinquents and gang members, they found themselves swept into the storm of the Sleepy Lagoon murder and the zoot-suit riot of 1943.

In *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, published in 1950, Octavio Paz offered an explanation for the behavior and dress of these alienated barrio youths. What distinguished them from other teenagers, he wrote, was their "furtive, restless air." Their sensibilities were like a "pendulum," swinging violently back and forth. Their "lack of a spirit" had given "birth to a type known as the *pachuco*." Belonging to a gang, the *pachuco* was an "instinctive" rebel: he displayed a "grotesque dandyism and anarchic behavior," a demonstration of his determination to remain "different." According to Paz, the *pachuco* was hiding insecurities beneath the flashy attire of the "zoot suit" with its exaggerated draped pants and ostentatious presentation.⁶⁷

Actually, Paz's portrayal of the *pachuco* was a stereotype: it fit his thesis of the Mexican "solitude" enmeshed in a "labyrinth." Teaching at the University of California during the 1940s, Emory S. Bogardus studied the Mexican-American youth of Los Angeles and urged caution in generalizing about them. "Not all zoot suiters are members of gangs, only a small percentage," he wrote in 1943. "Not all gangsters are Mexican-Americans, only a small fraction. . . . Out of about 36,000 youth of Mexican parentage in

the County of Los Angeles who are of school age. . . . no one has seriously claimed that more than from 750 to 1,000 are involved in 'gangs' of various types."⁶⁸

Mexican-American teenagers themselves also thought that the presence of zoot suiters and gang members was exaggerated. "We actually started seeing the drape pants around that time," Margarita Salazar McSweyn recalled, "but we didn't approve of it and we didn't dress that way. I've got pictures galore of my brothers and none of them have anything like that." The zoot suiters, she added, were gang members and dropouts. "We kept away from them and they never tried to go to our dances and to our parties. We figured it's an exaggerated style of dress that's going to come and go away."⁶⁹

Moreover, *pachucos* were not "instinctive" rebels: their defiance was forged within an economic and cultural crucible that denied Mexican-American youth educational and employment opportunities. They belonged to impoverished families: in 1941, the median income of Mexicans in Los Angeles was only \$792 a year, far below the \$1,312 that the government recommended as a minimum for a family of five.⁷⁰ Mexican Americans were forced to attend inferior segregated schools. Section 8003 of the California Education Code stated: "The governing board of any school district may establish separate schools for Indian children . . . and for children of Chinese, Japanese, or Mongolian parentage."⁷¹ Mexican-American students were considered part Indian. With little education, these young people were then relegated to dead-end jobs.

In a report on "Spanish-Americans in the Southwest and the War Effort," dated August 18, 1942, and classified "confidential," the Office of War Information bluntly described the harsh conditions of discrimination and poverty: "These people do not live, they exist. Malnutrition, sickness and disease are prevalent among them. Their housing, both in and out of cities, is the worst in the nation. . . . Their younger generation is confronted with insurmountable obstacles in education. . . . The schools they attend are frequently segregated and generally inferior, their curricula and

programs are unequipped to cope with their needs. . . . The culture of the cities for them has been the slum, which has taken a heavy toll in personal disorganization, juvenile delinquency and crime."⁷²

The problems identified in this government report had already begun to tear apart society in Los Angeles. In the slum of the East Side barrio, on August 2, 1942, the body of José Díaz was found at a local swimming hole known as the "Sleepy Lagoon." In her autobiography, Socorro Díaz Blanchard recalled the moment she learned about her brother's death: "A gang of pachucos had tried to crash a baptismal party at our neighbor's house. They were told to leave, that it was a private party. Joe and his friends were at the party. The pachucos returned with all their gang and crashed the party, destroying everything in sight, beating up two women. Everybody ran, but they caught up with my brother Joe and beat him to death. . . . Joe was supposed to have reported to the Army on the following morning."⁷³

After receiving reports that members of the 38th Street gang had been in the vicinity of Sleepy Lagoon, the police arrested twenty-two gang members on the charge of conspiracy to commit murder. At the trial, Los Angeles police captain Edward Duran Ayres presented testimony saturated with stereotypes. "While Anglos fought with the fists," he stated, "Mexicans generally preferred to kill, or at least let blood."⁷⁴ This propensity for violence, he insisted, could be traced to the predominance of "Indian blood" in their racial composition, for Indians had "utter disregard for the value of life."⁷⁵

The chief probation officer of Los Angeles County condemned Mexican-American gang members as disloyal to the country. "Those who are unemployed should be at work," he told the press. "Those who are employed and engage in this sort of activities (social disturbances) are no better. In this time of war they are all saboteurs because we need to conserve every dollar and every man for the war effort and not waste our time upon kid gangsters. If these kids want to fight so much, why don't they join the armed forces? Why

waste their energy fighting each other when the very life of the nation is at stake?"⁷⁶ Judge Edward R. Brand gave the trial a patriotic framework. "In times like these," he declared, "the behavior of some few members of the fine Mexican-American colony is a disgrace to America, and he who shames America in wartime is a traitor to the democracy that shelters him."⁷⁷

Three of the defendants were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to prison at San Quentin. Nine were found guilty of second-degree murder, five were convicted for lesser offenses, and five were acquitted. But all of them had already been convicted in the press. For its story on the "Sleepy Lagoon" murder, the *Los Angeles Times* blazed the front-page headline: "Jury Delves into Boy Gang Terror Wave."⁷⁸ Repeatedly the *Times* gave descriptions of pachucos with their defiant dress and demeanor.

One of the supporters of the convicted young men was Anthony Quinn. As a child, he had traveled to El Norte with his mother on a coal car of a train. When they arrived in Juarez at night, they were tired, hungry, and dirty from the coal. A stranger let them stay in her home and fed them a breakfast of eggs. Years later, a woman came to Quinn's mother, asking for his help. "She remembered our name, and tracked my accomplishments. Her grandson, a boy named Levas, was one of the twenty-two kids charged with first-degree murder in a famous Los Angeles gang killing. . . . I was under contract to 20th Century-Fox at the time, and my mother looked to me for help. 'Mama,' I said, 'what the hell do you want me to do?' 'The eggs, Tony,' she said. 'Remember the eggs.' I remembered the eggs, so I agreed to raise money for the boy's defense."⁷⁹

During the trial, the Los Angeles police arrested hundreds of young Mexicans, singling out those dressed in zoot suits. One of them, Alfred Barela, protested this police harassment. In a letter to Judge Arthur S. Guerin, May 21, 1943, he wrote:

Ever since I can remember I've been pushed around and called names because I'm a Mexican. I was born in this

country. Like you said I have the same rights and privileges of other Americans. . . .

Pretty soon I guess I'll be in the army and I'll be glad to go. But I want to be treated like everybody else. We're tired of being pushed around. We're tired of being told we can't go to this show or that dance hall because we're Mexican or that we better not be seen on the beach front, or that we can't wear draped pants or have our hair cut the way we want to. . . . I don't want any more trouble and I don't want anyone saying my people are in disgrace. My people work hard, fight hard in the army and navy of the United States. They're good Americans and they should have justice.⁸⁰

Reflecting on the pachuco gangs in the *New Republic*, January 18, 1943, Carey McWilliams explained that juvenile delinquency among barrio youth was rooted in poverty and racism. "It takes a war apparently to reveal the 'sore spots' in our society," he wrote. "For at least twenty-five years, social investigators have repeatedly warned the County of Los Angeles about the thoroughly disadvantaged position of its large resident Mexican population; but the community saw fit to ignore these warnings until with the war, it became impossible to pretend that no problem existed." McWilliams refused to blame the victims. "It is no secret," he argued, "that this second generation group has faced discrimination in the schools, in the community generally, and that, like most second generation groups (particularly when a degree of color difference exists), these youngsters show evidence of social and cultural maladjustment." In his conclusion, McWilliams cautioned: "For the time being, the issue has simmered down, but it has by no means died out."⁸¹

Six months later, on June 3, 1943, after some fights between young Mexican Americans and servicemen in downtown Los Angeles, hundreds of soldiers and sailors went on a rampage. Riding in taxis, they chased young Mexicans dressed in zoot suits, con-

demning their victims as draft dodgers. In their hunt for zoot suiters, mobs of sailors invaded movie theaters — the Orpheum, the Rialto, Loews, the Roxy. Cruising up and down the aisles, they shouted for pachucos to stand up and then stripped them naked on the stage. At one theater, the rioters found two young men dressed in zoot suits watching a movie; they dragged them to the front of the theater, stripped them, and then, as a final insult, urinated on their zoot suits.⁸² On the streets, the attacks were indiscriminate. All young Mexican Americans, in zoot suits or not, became targets of mob violence; blacks and Filipinos were also victims of this fury.

"It was like the sailors and Marines were taking over the whole city," a Mexican-American teenager recalled angrily. "They had bottles and belts, clubs and iron pipes in their hands. They were waving them over their heads. . . . Some sailors near us called, 'Come on you pachucos, you yellow bastards, we'll get you, all of you.' The crowd laughed and moved, pushing every way and everybody. Then we heard a roar and somebody yelled, 'They got 'em, they got 'em. They got those goddamned zoot suiters.'⁸³ Hospitalized with a broken jaw, a twelve-year-old boy protested: "So our guys wear tight bottoms on their pants and those bums wear wide bottoms. Who the hell they fighting, Japs or us?"⁸⁴ A young Mexican American named Mingo angrily exclaimed: "Hell, man, this is a street in Germany tonight. This isn't Los Angeles." "They're going in the houses looking everywhere for us guys," teenager Freddie said. "They beat up old Jesus Santiago when they saw him sitting on his porch cause they said maybe he was the father of a zoot suiter. They knocked him out cold, him with Felix [his son] in the South Pacific."⁸⁵

During this melee, the police merely watched, refusing to intervene; then they arrested young Mexican Americans for "vagrancy" and "rioting."⁸⁶ A police captain praised the aggressive sailors for teaching those "gaming dandies" a moral lesson by "unfrocking" the "garish" costumes that had become "a hallmark of juvenile delinquency."⁸⁷

The news media also cheered on the sailors. The front-page

headline story of the June 7 *Los Angeles Times* announced: ZOOTSUITERS LEARN LESSON IN FIGHTS WITH SERVICEMEN.⁸⁸ Imagery of the war infused press reports of the assaults and beatings. "Sailors made it a landing party, sought out the zoot suiters in their hangouts, and then proceeded with mopping up operations," a newspaper reported. The *Los Angeles Examiner* described the sailors' attack as a "blitz," and the *Herald Examiner* informed readers that the "Zoot Forces" were "QUIET ON EASTERN FRONT." The *Daily News* declared: "They [zoot suiters] are the type of exuberant youth that Hitler found useful. He gave them brown shirts and guns and made their violence legal."⁸⁹

News of the Los Angeles riot rippled across the Pacific: the Japanese media gleefully reported the violence as another example of racism in America. On June 11, the United Press reported: "Radio Tokyo yesterday seized upon the Los Angeles disorders."⁹⁰ That very day, military authorities ended the rioting by placing the downtown section and the barrio off-limits to servicemen.

The City Council blamed the young men dressed in zoot suits for the rioting and passed a resolution: "Now, therefore, be it resolved, that the City Council by Resolution find that the wearing of Zoot Suits constitutes a public nuisance and does hereby instruct the City Attorney to prepare an ordinance declaring same a nuisance and prohibit the wearing of Zoot Suits . . . within the city limits of Los Angeles."⁹¹

At a grand jury inquiry held shortly after the riot, young men insisted on their right to wear a zoot suit. One of them was John B. Thomas, a young black who appeared in court wearing "a bright green zoot suit." Exhibiting his Army enlistment papers, Thomas asserted he was entitled to wear this outfit until he donned the military khaki, which he was scheduled to do that very day. "I'm not a gangster," he said. "I just like this style." Similarly, awaiting a call after enlisting in the U.S. Marines, Raymond Serma told the grand jury: "I'm not a bad guy; I'm not a rowdy. I like this style, which is easier to dance in."⁹²

At a press conference on June 16, Eleanor Roosevelt expressed

concern about the growing race problem. "For a long time, I've worried about the attitude toward Mexicans in California, and the States along the border."⁹³ Three days later, C.I.O. leader Philip Murray appealed to President Roosevelt to use his personal influence to remedy the "extremely dangerous situation" in Los Angeles. Denouncing the "lynch spirit" of the military mobs, Murray wrote in a letter to the White House: "I urge you to order the War and Navy Departments to undertake an educational campaign among the armed forces . . . to eradicate the misconceptions and prejudices that contributed to these attacks on their fellow-citizens."⁹⁴

The zoot-suit riot was more than a border problem, however, and the solution to the "lynch spirit" required more than education to eradicate stereotypes. Castigating the rioting sailors as the "spearheads of the hooliganism," the *Chicago Defender* traced the source of the hate crimes to the "Jim Crow policies" of the U.S. Army.⁹⁵ In an article published in the *Crisis*, Chester B. Hines related the zoot-suit riot to the Detroit race riot. "What could make the white people more happy," he asked, "than to see their uniformed sons slapping up some dark-skinned people? It proved beyond all doubt the bravery of white servicemen, their gallantry. Los Angeles was at last being made safe for white people — to do as they damned well pleased."⁹⁶

For Mexican Americans and concerned citizens, the "Sleepy Lagoon" murder trial and the zoot-suit riot underscored the need to fight for "double victory." A Spanish-language newspaper in Los Angeles, *El Espectador*, denounced the racism of the police and the mainstream media as similar to Nazism:

Not all of the police can be blamed for the sadistic methods employed by some members of the force in the handling of offenders; but we can expect very little understanding from the men in the law enforcement ranks, when the heads of the department make such reports as the one presented by a Captain of the Los Angeles County

Sheriff's department to the Grand Jury in regards to the Sleepy Lagoon murder case. In that report it was charged that "all Mexicans are inherently vicious." And there is the assertion of the Lieutenant of the Hollywood police force that said: "A Mexican is always a good suspect." The metropolitan press and radio must also bear the brunt of the responsibility for our ten days of terror [the zoot-suit riot]. Both have raved very much like the loud-mouth Goebbels in directing his diatribes against the Semites.⁹⁷

On October 4, 1944, the District Court of Appeals found that the trial judge in the Sleepy Lagoon case was biased against the defendants and overturned the convictions. Leading the appeal struggle was a defense committee whose membership included Bert Corona, Rita Hayworth, Anthony Quinn, Orson Welles, Henry Fonda, and Carey McWilliams. "It wasn't only seventeen boys who were on trial," the committee declared. "It was the whole of the Mexican people, and their children and grandchildren." In their conclusion, they issued a call to arms against the ideology of white superiority on the home front: "Nazi logic guided the judge and jury and dictated the verdict and sentence. We are at war not only with the armies of the Axis powers, but with the poison gas of their doctrine, with the 'biological basis' of Hitler and with his theories of race supremacy."⁹⁸

DIVERSITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Who Is an American?

How the Chinese Became "Friends"

TWO WEEKS after the attack on Pearl Harbor, *Time* magazine explained how to distinguish the Chinese "friend" from the Japanese "enemy":

HOW TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS FROM THE JAPS: Virtually all Japanese are short. Japanese are likely to be stockier and broader-hipped than short Chinese. Japanese are seldom fat; they often dry up and grow lean as they age. Although both have the typical epicanthic fold of the upper eyelid, Japanese eyes are usually set closer together. The Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant. Japanese are hesitant, nervous in conversation, laugh loudly at the wrong time. Japanese walk stiffly erect, hard heeled. Chinese, more relaxed, have an easy gait, sometimes shuffle.