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Soldiers de Cristo: Latino Catholics and the Vietnam War

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Rocky Mountain Interdisciplinary History Conference

September 20-22, 2019

Miguel Lemus was drafted into the Army as part of the 25th Infantry and 11th Calvary in November 1967. Lemus described his circumstances and experiences in Vietnam similar to other Latinos. The extreme heat, engagement with the enemy, his experiences with his platoon, feelings about racial tension, and finally his focus to support fellow soldiers. However, one distinction that he made between himself and other Latino soldiers was that he was “religious.” In some situations, he was asked to conduct religious ceremonies by fellow soldiers. Although he was not a clergyman he stated, “Many Chicanos, Catholic religious guys, would ask me for a final blessing because there weren’t any priests out there during the battles.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Lemus’ exercise of religious authority (the Catholic last rites) was more than simply convience or the inconvenience that a Catholic priest was not available. During times of war, some soldiers would perform a religious ceremony, such as praying for other soldiers or bible studies. Soldiers’ religious experience was often a mixture of religious orthodox and non-orthodox beliefs/practices. However, there were other factors that influenced how Latinos’ formed their religious convictions and how they practiced their faith.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War touched every aspect of American society. In U.S. households, college campuses, and at the workplace, Americans discussed and debated the war. This was also true of American Latino households. Studies on Latinos and the Vietnam War has focused on the relatively limited examination of the Latino experience with the war. One aspect that is not discussed is religion. Latino culture, religion, and identity are often connected with the Roman Catholic church. Therefore, the Catholic church's influence is largely unexamined; however, the Church was also a formative influence in the lives of Latinos in the United States.

From support towards confronting “godless” communism to protests by Roman Catholic priests against the war, American Catholics debated the conflict. Also, American Catholics gave their support to confront communism. But this examination has mostly focused on views of white American Catholics. Studies on Latinos and the war have examined the place of conservative Latinos versus Chicano politics and the war. Again, with a limited examination of how religion informed their perspectives.

This study re-examines the role that the Catholic church played among Latinos in the United States during America’s longest war. It reviews the history of Latino citizenship and their views regarding the concept of the citizen-soldiers in the U.S. Also, questions about Chicana/o identity on Mexican American youth. These areas provide a new look at the interactions between Latino religion, politics, citizenship, and their understanding of the Vietnam War.

**Latino Catholic Citizenship in the U.S.**

Roman Catholicism has been considered a foreign religion for much of U.S. history. Even as American society has become more diverse, there has continued to be suspicion from portions of American Protestant society towards Catholics.[[2]](#footnote-2) The Irish, Italians, Mexicans, and other Latinos have made up a notable percentage of the Catholic population in America. These groups have also been traditionally regarded as foreigners in American Protestant culture. Part of the reason they were labled “feorign” was the connection to Roman Catholicism, but the other part was connected to immigration in America. As a result, these groups have continually had to legitimize their presence.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The largest demographic of Latinos in the United States are Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Their presence of what became the American southwest was the result of years of war. Most notably was following the annexation of Texas in 1845, then the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, in which the territories of California and large portions of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado were transferred to the U.S. after the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). Additionally, Mexican immigration increased dramatically following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican Americans leaders attempted to establish strategies to confront racial discrimination. Central to their campaign was establishing that they were “white.” They were aware of America’s racial hierarchy and therefore attempted to avoid discrimination. Primarily, Mexican Americans tried to combat discrimination and show they were “true” Americans through military service. In fact, it is estimated that roughly 250,000 to 500,000 Mexican Americans served in the military during World War II.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The second largest Latino group in the U.S. are Puerto Ricans, but their presence in the United States is unique among other Latino groups.[[6]](#footnote-6) Puerto Ricans were present in the United States since the late nineteenth-century. However, following the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898 and the Treaty of Paris the United States took possession of the island of Puerto Rico. Following the war, Puerto Rican labors migrated to the U.S. and after the Jones Act of 1917 U.S. citizenship was extended to Puerto Ricans. As a result, more migrated to the U.S. and a significant number settled mostly in New York and New York City specifically. Later, Puerto Ricans expanded into other eastern and midwestern cities. Similar to other Latinos, Puerto Ricans faced discrimination and although they are American citizens they continued to be viewed as “foreigners.”[[7]](#footnote-7) One important connection Mexican American and Puerto Ricans is the importance of military service within their communities. Both groups often elevated service as a means to show they were valuable citizens to the U.S.

Similar to immigrant groups, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans have had to legitimize their status as Americans. Part of the issue for Puerto Ricans is that most Americans did not (and still do not) understand that Puerto Ricans are Americans citizens. For Mexican Americans, the issue is more about proximity. Even for Mexican Americans who lived in the U.S. for generations they were continually identified as temporary. Part of the reason for this was the influx of other Mexican immigrants. However, another factor is that Mexico is a neighboring nation with the U.S. European immigration largely diminished at the end of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Mexican immigration increased at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued in various episodes into the Vietnam War. This left Mexican Americans marginalized and they looked for ways to show that they were Americans. One important avenue was military service.

**Latinos and Military Service in the Twentieth Century**

An important note should be made about the historiography of U.S. religion and war in the twentieth century. Jonathan H. Ebel in his book *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (2010) argues that the study of religion and war is fairly limited. That is, scholars who study American religion tend to ignore war and military historians have ignored religion. When American religious historians have ventured into discussing war the focus is normally on clergy and denominational responses to war.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, the religious views of soldiers largely go ignored. An important war to consider this historiographical gap is the Vietnam War, especially due to the fact that the war was framed as a conflict to “contain” communism. Of course, for many Americans the threat of communism was a challenged to democray and Christianity. Therefore, “godless” communism was a threat to Americans, especially those that identified as Christian. Important works that analyze American Christians’ views of communism are Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (2011), Anne C. Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993* (1996), David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars* (2011).[[9]](#footnote-9) Again, the focus of these studies surrounds the rhetoric about fighting communism and some focus on the relationship between the U.S. government and religious institutions. The perspectives of soldiers are less known. Additionally, works that focus on Latino Catholics do not discuss religion and the war.

After World War II, Latinos believed that their service in the military would provide greater recognition of their civil rights. There was recognition by the U.S. military (desegregation of the armed forces) for Latinos’ service but veteran Latinos returned to a country still segregated. Even the efforts of thousands of Latinos who worked in the defense industries did not mean greater equality in America. However, the postwar era did invigorate more efforts by Latinos to demand greater equality. Especially, among Mexican American veterans and civil organizations that highlighted the service of Latinos in the war as proof of their right to equality in society.[[10]](#footnote-10)

One reason why Latinos joined the military was because of the opportunities available to minorities. Compared to the lack of opportunities in society. However, access to these opportunities also meant that they could be killed in service. Due to discrimination in higher education and in the military draft, Latinos considered military service as an opportunity to advance their potential careers in technical jobs such as electricians or mechanics.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**The Vietnam War, Chicano Identity, and Latino Catholicism**

Latinos held various opinions about the Vietnam War. Their views were the by-product of numerous factors. An important aspect was their faith. The legacy of military service from those Latinos that served or supported the war effort in World War II or the Korean War were generally supportive of Latinos servicing in the Vietnam War. Generally, these Latinos reciprocated popular notions that the war in Vietnam was to combat communism. Family members and friends, churches, and the likelihood of being drafted left many Latinos with an understanding that they would serve. To legitimize this position it was not uncommon to hear some advocacy using just war theory in churches and among Catholic soldiers themselves. Interestingly these notions had a long history in Roman Catholic thought.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Another factor that influenced mainly Mexican Americans during the war was the Chicano movement, also known as *El Movimeiento*. There is a debate about the origin of the term “Chicano,” but the word is most often associated with the activities of young Mexican Americans during the 1960s and 1970s. Young Mexican Americans began to organize in predominantly Mexican American barrios (neighborhoods) and on college campuses across the American southwest.The movement was similar to other social movements at the time, most notably the civil rights movement. The Chicano movement combined political activism and cultural pride in an endeavor to address important social injustices for minorities, especially for Mexican Americans. Areas that they focused on were voting and political rights, education equality, poverty, and racial discrimination.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Chicano movement and the Vietnam War occupied roughly the same time period. Therefore, they were immediately linked by Mexican Americans. Chicano activists’ critique of the Vietnam War focused on three points. First, the destruction and increased number of casualties by U.S. bombings upon Vietnam. Second, Chicanos believed that the U.S. foreign policy was imperialistic. Activists connected America’s involvement in Vietnamese affairs as similar to America’s involvement in other nations during the nineteenth-century. Particularly, U.S. acquisition of Mexican territory. Third, Chicanos believed that the treatment of minorities in the U.S. with Americans treatment of the Vietnamese during war. Therefore, Chicano activism stressed the fact that Latinos and the Vietnamese people were both victims of U.S. interests.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The movement would also impact Mexican American Catholics. One group was called Católicos por La Raza. This Los Angeles based organization worked to make the Roman Catholic church more receptive to the poor. Also, they were critical that the church did not speak out against the war. Of course, some notable Catholics (including priests) did. The organization elevated the church needed to be more concerned about the number of Mexican Americans soldiers that died in the war. To that end, the church needed to use its’ influence to end the war.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Historical analysis of American Catholics and the Vietnam War have focused on white American Catholics. However, important is also Latino Catholics. An important reason is because of their significant size among the U.S. population, American Catholics, and within the U.S. military. Latino Catholics’ understanding of their place in America was intertwined with the Vietnam War. Of course, discussions about citizenship and military service has been around since World War II. However, the rise of the Chican movement highlighted diverse opinions that Latinos, particularily Mexican Americans held. These intersections of religion, politics, and identity provide a new and exciting area of study.

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2. William R. Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 48-51; 206-207. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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8. Jonathna H. Ebel in his book *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Solider in the Great War* (2010), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011; Anne C. Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1996; David E. Settje, *Faith and War: How Christians Debated the Cold and Vietnam Wars*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Oropeza, *!Raza Si! !Guerra No!*, 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Oropeza, *!Raza Si! !Guerra No!*, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 92-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)