The Forgotten Soldiers: Mexican-American Soldiers of WWII and the Creation of the G.I. Forum

By Niko Arredondo

I | Introduction

"My time in the military was the greatest time of my life, I am very proud and I would do it as many times necessary." Virgilio G. Roel, a Mexican-American WWII veteran stated in his interview with the Voces Oral History project.[1] The 1940s brought a time of great opportunity for Mexican-Americans with the onset of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Before the war, Mexican-Americans lived under racial tension with segregated communities, segregated schools and not many held respected professions such as lawyers and doctors. For Roel and other Mexican American soldiers this opportunity to fight for a nation that treated them as second class citizens became the beginning of a social change for Mexican-Americans. As Raul Morin, a WWII Mexican-American war veteran mentioned in his book, *Among The Valiant*, "here now was the opportunity to do something about it."[2] The integration of Mexican-American and white soldiers took effect with the Executive Order 8066 that passed in June of 1941. This posed questions like: how did the experience for Mexican-Americans with white soldiers differ from their experience in America? What postwar impacts did it have for Mexican Americans? Their experience during the war was unique, in the sense that they integrated with white soldiers unlike African-American soldiers that were placed in segregated units.

To Mexican-Americans WWII veterans, the war offered an opportunity to demonstrate their allegiance to their nation. It proved that they fought beyond the home front of America. And yet, with as much discrimination and segregation Mexican-Americans had in America before the war, WWII offered a completely different experience than they anticipated. It offered them the same opportunity as whites to gain a higher rank within the armed forces and a relationship with white soldiers that they never had prior to the war. When the war waned down to an end and more Mexican-American soldiers returned home they looked to the promising opportunity that things in America would be better, however, the same social issues that Mexican-Americans faced before they went off to war still remained upon their return from the war. War veterans grew disappointed and outraged with the way America continued to treat them as second-class citizens. As a result of second-class treatment, Mexican-American war veterans created the G.I. Forum, with the direct goal of helping War veterans and later Mexican-Americans civil rights. For the most part, Chicano historians and scholars largely ignored the topic of Mexican-American soldiers in WWII until fairly recently.

The history of Mexican-American soldiers' involvement in WWII is largely ignored. In popular culture, WWII is presented from the perspective of thousands of White and Black soldiers that fought valiantly. For historians and scholars, the discussion of Mexican-American soldiers has not been approached until fairly recently. Through the 1960s only one book, *Among The Valiant*, by Raul Morin, discussed the role and impacts

f Mexican-American soldiers during WWII and the Korean War. Morin, provides the accounts of the perspectives of Mexican-American soldiers as well as his own. He demonstrates the attitudes of Mexican-Americans as men willing to fight for the nation they call home, America. In the 1970s and 1980s, Chicano/a historians and scholars discussed the social history of Mexicans in the U.S. from earlier periods and did not produce any work under the topic. Vernon Allsup, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, in his book *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution*, he discusses the creation of the G.I. Forum and a change in Mexican-American communities in Texas with the G.I. Forum organization. It was not until the 1990s where more research began to be conducted by historians to create a memory for Mexican-American war veterans of WWII. Henry Ramos, president and CEO of the Insight Center for Community Development, in his book *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983*, he writes the history of the American G.I. Forum from its inception in 1948 through the politics of President Ronal Reagan in the early 1980s. One of the most notable authors, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, professor of Journalism the University of Texas at Austin conducted an oral history project called *Legacy Greater than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos & Latinas of the WWII Generation*. Within this project, Rivas-Rodriguez along with other professors that set out to California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and other sates to interview over 700 WWII veterans of Mexican descent.

Within the interviews, the veteran soldiers discussed about their families, social conditions in America before the war, their experience during the war, and what they did after the war. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez contribution helped keep the legacy of the forgotten soldiers that most Chicano/a historians rarely discussed in previous decades of scholarly work. Another notable book of Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez that adds to the scholarship of WWII Mexican American veterans came through *Mexican Americans & World War II*. Within the monograph, Rivas-Rodriguez takes a different approach and focuses on the social impact of WWII with Mexican Americans from the Southwest and Midwest states. She uses the war experience as a way to point out the perspective of the war in the eyes of Mexican-American soldiers. On another note, she demonstrates the social conditions of Mexican-Americans during the war years with segregated education, particularly with New Mexico, the Zoot suit riots of Los Angeles, and the impact of Mexican women in the workforce known as Rositas. The legacy and memory of Mexican-American WWII veterans is a topic that is starting to gain more attention by Chicano/a historians and one that should have more mention of the role they took during WWII. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez also wrote *Beyond The Latino World War II Hero: The Social and Political Legacy of a Generation*, she discusses the significance of Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities during the war years. She utilizes oral interviews to demonstrate the ways in which Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans contributed to the war. She takes the themes of women and the use of Spanish language radio for Latinas as a means of social economic mobility. Adding to the scholarship of Mexican-American soldiers in WWII is through the work of Richard Griswold del Castillo, professor of Chicano studies at San Diego State University, *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*. Del Castillo demonstrates the condition of Mexican-American before WWII and discusses the ways in which Mexican-Americans developed an identity in the war and in California with the zoot suit.

This essay will introduce three themes of how WWII impacted Mexican-Americans. First, "Organizations before WWII" will briefly mention the social organization LULAC, where I will show the political and social direction of the Mexican-Americans initially started through David G. Guitierrez' *Walls and Mirrors*: *Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. The second section, "December 7, 1941," will discuss the impact of the attack on Pearl Harbor and its influence on Mexican-Americans to enlist in the armed forces as a way to show their allegiance to America, by specifically using Raul Morin's *Among The Valiant*. I will then focus on Mexican-Americans from the states of Texas and California. In both states I will demonstrate the personal experiences of the soldiers through Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez' *A Legacy greater than words: Stories of U.S. Latinos & Latinas of the WWII Generation*. "One Ethnicity Different Identities," focuses primarily on Southwestern Mexican-Americans of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California and the ideologies they had upon entering the war. Morin's *Among The Valiant* will also help support the perspective of the differing ideologies. "Back to square one" will demonstrate the return of Mexican-American soldiers to America and the social impact of Jim Crow laws in Texas, as well how Mexican-American war opposed it with the emergence of Dr. Hector Garcia and the G.I. Forum. Richard Griswold de Castillo's. *World War II and Mexican American civil rights* will further help demonstrate the issues of race and the focus of the G.I. Forum. "Women in the Forum" primarily focuses on the rise of leadership of Mexican-American women through a male dominated movement that challenged the role of women. Henry A.J. Ramos' *The American G.I. Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream* will further introduce how women emerged as leaders in the G.I. Forum. The final section, "Education," will discuss how the G.I. Forum opposed the education policy of school districts in Texas by taking the issue to the legal system. Ramos' *The American G.I. Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream* will also help explain the issue of race in education.

II | Mexican-American Organizations before WWII

Before the WWII, Mexican Americans lived under racial tension within the Southwest. Segregated education, work, and communities influenced Mexican-Americans to create social organizations. One of the most notable organizations made in order to assist Mexican-Americans came with The League of United Latin American Citizens in the 1920s by middle class Mexican-Americans in Texas. The founders of LULAC, a Texan lawyer, Alonso S. Perales, Manuel C. Gonzales, Benjamin Garza, J.T. Canales, and Luis Lemont served to protect the rights of Mexican American citizens. The principle of LULAC demonstrated their American identity by portraying an allegiance to the United States, LULAC implemented the notion that, "The best way to advance in American society was to convince other Americans that they too were loyal, upstanding American citizens."[3] LULAC, much like the NAACP, served to protect the civil rights of Mexican-Americans, however, the organization also sought to assimilate Mexican-Americans culture into the American way of life. By doing so, LULAC made efforts to incorporate patriotism towards America in order to be seen as Americans. The implementations of "displaying the American flag in their ceremonies, singing songs such as "America," and opening their meetings with a recitation of the "George Washington Prayer" were forms

that Mexican-Americans used to prove their allegiance to America.[4] Because of this focus to Americanize Mexican-Americans, LULAC only served for American citizens and not un-naturalized Mexicans that lived in the United States. For some this proved to be an issue since not all Mexican-Americans were ingratiated within the American way of life, particularly with the lower class. Alonso S. Perales stated the best way for Mexican-Americans to earn respect comes with "enlightened Mexican-Americans to assume leadership, organize, educate, and otherwise work within the existing American political system to achieve gradual, incremental reform and thus ultimate acceptance of Mexican Americans as full-fledged American citizens."[5] By doing so, it meant that Mexican-Americans needed to change their social life by engaging in more "American" activities. One of the main objectives of LULAC was to "develop and promote the best and purest form of Americanism.[6] Through this objective, voting became one of the primary ways to demonstrate the American way for LULAC followers. The organization made some progress for Mexican-Americans; however, it did not make a great change for the majority of them. As the 1930s depression came to a close with the onset of WWII, more opportunities arose for Mexican-Americans.

III | December 7, 1941

The 1940s proved to be a decade of change for Mexican-Americans. On June 25th 1941, President Roosevelt enacted Executive Order 8802, which banned discriminatory employment practice by federal government agencies and war related companies for all minorities. On December 7, 1941, "a day that will live in infamy," as president Roosevelt stated in his state of the union, America joined the war against the three axis powers; Germany, Italy, and Japan. Raul Morin thought of the event as: "America as a nation was expected to undertake a big part. But we, as individuals, were at this moment more directly concerned with our own little world. We began to worry more about the part each of us would play rather than what America's part would be."[7] Within a discussion of Morin and friends some used humor to build morale. One of Raul Morin's friends Emilio Luna mentioned "*Ya estuvo*. Now we can look for the authorities to round up all the Mexicans and deport them to Mexico,"[8] while Jose Mendoza mentioned, "They don't have to deport me! I'm going on my own; you're not going to catch me fighting a war for somebody else. I belong to Mexico. *Soy Puro Mexicano*!"[9] An approximation of 2,690,000 Americans of Mexican descent lived in the United States at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Over 700,000 Mexican-Americans enlisted in the armed forces and to them "the war made them all genuine Americans."[10] Many served to get an education from the G.I. Bill, for patriotism, and peer influence. The war offered an equal opportunity for Mexicans and whites in the armed forces. Most Mexican-Americans who enlisted in the armed forces grew up during the Great Depression within segregated communities. The armed forces offered them a different experience because of the integration with white soldiers. Henrietta Lopez Rivas of San Antonio, Texas remembers her experience as "It made me feel equal, more intelligent, because what I did, very few Anglos could do."[11] Not every Mexican-American had the same war experience; however each one was just as impactful for the opportunities given to them. Mexican-American soldiers who served in the Army served as medics, soldiers, and typewriters the same positions whites were given during the war. Before the war, Mexican-Americans struggled to identify themselves as a unified identity.

IV | One Ethnicity, Different Identities: Mexican-Americans in Southwest United States

Before the war, Mexican-Americans did not see themselves as one ethnicity group that descended from Mexico. The majority of the enlisted Mexican-American soldiers came from the Southwestern states; California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, in addition to that, a smaller number of them came from the Midwestern states and some parts of the East Coast. Raul Morin provides a breakdown of the various types of Mexicans descent groups integrated in the armed forces. First, there were American born Mexican-Americans of Mexican parents, also known as Chicanos/as. These Chicanos/as practiced the Mexican traditions and cultural values and tended to speak more Spanish than English. Second, those born in Mexico and grew up in the U.S. Morin provides that these men "had a good education, very well versed, fell ill at ease in the presence of others when the conversation ran to English." [12] The largest Mexican descent group came from the Southwestern states of the Spanish-Americans from New Mexico and Colorado, Tejanos from Texas, and Pochos from California.[13] As Morin notes, those who came from the Southwestern states were more American than other Mexican-Americans since they spoke and read less Spanish.[14] Bi-racial Mexican-Americans also differed from other Mexican-Americans living throughout the Southwest. Many came from a mixture of Italian, Filipino, Black, Spanish, French, Irish, German, and English. [15] Mexican-Americans lived in different locations throughout the Southwest and even the Midwest that separated their ideologies; "Spanish," "Spanish-American," "Latin-Americans," and "Mejicanos." The Spanish saw themselves as "Spanish" because they grew up in America without ever living in Mexico and because Anglos called them that out of respect for their ethnicity.[16] The "Spanish-Americans" viewed themselves as the descendants of the Spanish because of where they originated. "Latin-Americans" viewed themselves as Mexican-Americans born in America not from Mexico; they identified themselves as "Latin-Americans" in order to differentiate themselves from Mexican immigrants. Finally "mejicanos," those that came from borderland towns of Arizona and Texas grew up in Mexican communities, as Moring notes, "it was hard to tell whether they were native or foreign born."[17] Because of the misjudgment by other Americans, the groups of Mexican descent came to call themselves "Mexican-Americans" or "Americans of Mexican descent."[18] The identity of the different Mexican-American "groups" before the onset of the war shifted in different directions, during the war their identity led to become Mexican-American.

V | Texas Soldiers

For *Tejano* Mexican-American soldiers the war experience would change the way in which they identified themselves, their relationship with whites, and the kinds of opportunities they received within the armed forces. Andrew Sidona Montoya viewed the war as a way to show patriotism, however, he questioned his role in the armed forces of why he fought for a nation that treated Mexican-Americans as second-class citizens. For Manuel Gonzales it the war offered him an opportunity to learn English from his comrades

and to associate himself as an American soldier. The war experience differs from both soldiers, but have a similarity that it became the first step for social progress within their communities.

Andrew Sidona Tamayo of San Antonio Texas enlisted in the armed forces with a sense of pride to fight for the nation he lived in. While serving for the 39th Artillery Battalion in the U.S. Army, Tamayo questioned his role in the war, he stated, "I began changing my mind about helping these gringos."[19] "Gringos," a derogatory word for whites, meaning "pure Anglo-American" was used by Mexican-Americans to describe whites. The reason for Tamayo's judgment of not fighting with whites came with the experience in Texas. His family lived under tough racial segregation where his mother could not find a job, even though she was of Italian and Spanish descent and while he worked as a paperboy to help his family financially it still was not enough. Once Tamayo encountered other Mexican-Americans, he realized he was not alone and that he was fighting for more than just "gringos," he was fighting alongside the men he called his "family."[20]

One of the most decorated army units, Company E, Texas 36th Division comprised of all Mexican-American soldiers. One soldier in particular, Manuel "El Feo" Gonzales, served as Sergeant of the division. Gonzales, from a Mexican barrio of Fort Davis, along with the other soldiers of the 36th Division spoke very little English. Since most white soldiers did not understand Spanish it became difficult for many Mexican-Americans to gain respect, however, Gonzales along with his 36th Division did not have that issue. One particular event in the European theater gained the respect of Gonzales and the 36th Division after manning down a German machine gun and taking Nazi prisoners. White soldiers in an interview described Gonzales:

> Lt. Evan J. Mac Ilraith of Evanston, Ill. Said, "Gonzales, Manuel S. Gonzales, he's from somewhere in West Texas near the Mexican border some spot where they don't speak anything but Spanish. He's a Staff or tech Sergeant now, I think, and he was a regular 'Commando Kelly' in combat. This guy was such as terrific soldier all the way that I have trouble recalling his individual exploits, even though he was in my company A. A wonderful squad leader, he'd volunteer for anything, anytime, and at Salerno, when his squad was practically wiped out, he fought a one-man battle against the Germans for 24 hours.

To white soldiers, Gonzales embodied the image of an American soldier. Before enlisting in the army, Gonzales did not know how to speak English; he learned it during his service in the army. Gonzales recalled, "Everybody speaks Spanish at Fort Davis. I just learned American language in the army. The boys in the company teach me at night. They're pretty good boys."[21] For Gonzales, the 36th Division meant family to him. With the differences among the Mexican-Americans in the Division all were able to create a family morale in which Gonzales saw the Division. He told his Lt. "I've got too much friends there. I don't want to miss this. I want to get back to company."[22] One of the most important aspects through the war experience of Gonzales is the American unity and ideology. In an interview with Graham Hovey, Gonzales stated his opinion about the German soldiers compared to American soldiers, "I think they are good but I think we are better. We don't holler 'kamerad' but they do. They give up too easy but we don't."[23] The

war provided a unique experience for Gonzalez since it offered him the chance to learn English abroad, but most importantly it helped him develop a relationship with white soldiers that respected his contribution to the war.

The experience of Andrew Sidona Tamayo gave him a sense that he fought for something more than racial differences among whites. For Gonzales' the experience offered the opportunity to learn English and develop the American identity in which he associated himself, Mexican-Americans and whites as an American citizen. Their experiences are just a small feature of how WWII helped *Tejano* Mexican-Americans develop a more unified identity with other Mexican-Americans and white Americans. California soldiers left America with a similar experience, however, it affected more of the Mexican-American youth, but the association of white sailors with the zoot suit riots affected the image of Mexican-Americans.

VI | California Soldiers

During the 1940s in Los Angeles, California, the Mexican-American youth developed their own identity through the zoot suit. At this time, young zoot-suiters, rebelled against the social norms of American and even Mexican culture. The zoot suit was an oversized suit; it had long baggy pants, a large coat, a tie, and a large brim hat. It was originally created by the African-American youth in the East Coast in the early 1940s. The Mexican-American zoot suiters rebelled the traditional Mexican norms by speaking English as opposed to Spanish and living a different lifestyle such as listening to different music. This ideology challenged the American social norm by the image of the suit and what the suit was made out of cloth.

The zoot suit riots became a hot topic nationwide for Los Angeles, where white sailors increased racial tension with Mexican-Americans. The riots created a perception that all Mexicans were like zoot suiters. This led white soldiers to view Mexican-American soldiers as such. For Alfred "Fred" Castro, Jesse Ortiz, John Rubalcava, and Trino Soto they viewed the armed forces as the experience that brought them opportunity and how they viewed themselves as Mexican Americans. All four-war veterans served in different infantry units and experienced the war differently from one another; however what they realized was that their role in the armed forces was just as important as their white comrades.

One Mexican-American soldier, Anthony Acevedo, experienced the war as a P.O.W. Over 300 American soldiers were P.O.W. at Berga an del Elster, a satellite camp of the German Nazi Buchenwald concentration camp. Before the war, Acevedo's experiences in America, particularly in Southern California, was much of the same as a Mexican-American in Texas. He attended segregated schools like many Mexican-Americans, and by 1937 his family was deported back to Mexico. At the age of 17, Acevedo enlisted into the U.S. army and received training to become a medic in the 275th Infantry Regiment of the 70th Division Infantry Unit. During one of the biggest battles in the European side of WWII, the Battle of the Bulge, Acevedo was captured by the Nazis after countless days of defense. He recalls witnessing another captured medic gunned down, Murray Pruzan. "I saw him stretched out there in the snow, frozen...just massacred by a machine gun with his Red Cross band."[24] While Acevedo experienced the war as a

P.O.W. he also encountered Jewish-American soldiers. He recalled one day, a Nazi commander put American soldiers and Jewish Europeans together and the commander ordered them to "take a step forward."[25] Soldiers who wore the Star of David deemed as undesirable, and for Acevedo, who is not Jewish, became seen as undesirable by the Nazi commander because he "looked like a Jew."[26] For Acevedo, this meant Nazis viewed Mexican-Americans just as inferior as Jews. Acevedo's experience eating bread, sleeping nude, and writing in his diary of the events that took place within the camp brings an important perspective. One of the biggest ideologies that changed Mexican-American soldier's identity came through the relationship with white soldiers. Acevedo along with 350 other American soldiers endured one of the most grueling experiences of the war in Europe, putting racial tension behind them and working to stay alive. One of the most significant moments of his experience at the camp came through the death of President Roosevelt in 1945. He recalled the day "bad news for us. President Roosevelt's death. We all felt bad about it. We held a prayer service for the repose of his soul."[27] The commodore of Mexican-American and Anglo soldiers proves to be very close. In the case of Acevedo, a Mexican-American P.O.W., he developed a close relationship with other Anglo soldiers. When American P.O.W. Soldiers returned to their homes, many were forced to sign a liability waiver stating that they will never discuss or give any information about the events and experiences of the Nazi concentration camps to anyone. One soldier from central California experienced the war in a different way than Acevedo.

Jesse Ortiz of Fresno California served for the 84th Infantry Division for the armed forces. His experience in the war made him realize that Anglos are like Mexicans. He recalls, "it was a source of education for all of us in the sense that we could look in the eye of each other […] It brought us to understand that we are all human beings."[28] The relationship between white and Mexican-American soldiers built a respect for each other in the sense that based on their differences of race and ethnicity they both fought for the same country. In 1942 he became a combat engineer and fought in the Netherlands and into Germany by 1944. During his experience in Germany he fought against English speaking Nazis who disguised themselves as American soldiers. His combat unit took the city of Gelsenkirchen, which was the second largest town in Germany taken over by the American troops and allies.

John Rubalcava of San Diego, California served in the 95th Infantry Division. His recollection of the war brought him a sense of both Mexican and American identity. He recalls, "Maybe we were poor and didn't have the money, but everyone wanted to go."[29] Unlike racial discrimination in America, Rubalcava experienced a positive relationship between his white comrades. "I was treated really good...Their lives depend on you, and yours depends on them. You take care of each other."[30] Rubacalva was part of the infantry unit that named the Victory division in which many American soldiers called them the "bravest of the brave." Another soldier from central California considered the war comodoew as something as close to family.

Trino Soto of Fresno, California served for the USS Haggard for the U.S. Navy. Trino's experience within the USS Haggard gave him what he calls "a brotherhood."[31] He enlisted after getting news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Soto became part of one of the ships that went into battle more than most ships in the invasion of Okinawa. During the expedition of Okinawa, Soto experienced intense combat battle with Kamikaze attacks. After the war Soto returned to America and recalled "the war created new avenues for

advancement in the lives of Latinos."[32] The opportunity that brought Mexican-American soldiers to have a positive relationship with white soldiers led them to look forward to going back to America with the vision of attaining social progress. The reality of American society soon sunk in with Mexican-American soldiers.

VII | Back to Square One: Mexican-American Soldiers Return To America with Unresolved Social Issues

By the time WWII ended in 1945 most Mexican-American soldiers returned to America with the confidence that social progress would be made. While many utilized the G.I. Bill for educational purposes, many Mexican-American war veterans still experienced discrimination in the United States from Anglo Americans. While they had access to education and veteran's health care, the daily discrimination had not changed. Alfred "Fred" Castro served for Company B, 333rd Infantry Regiment, 84th Infantry Division. He recalls one experience he had when Castro and 10 other soldiers were not served in a restaurant because they were Mexican. He remembers "they said as long as we have the uniform on, we're American citizens."[33] In a letter to the co-founder of LULAC, Alonso S. Perales, a lawyer of south Texas, Jose G. Cruz informed him of the discrimination in San Antonio, Texas about his experience in a café. Cruz mentioned, "I was really enjoying my coffee" when one of the girl waitresses said, "do not speak Spanish or I'll be fired."[34] He then recalled, "I still don't like the way they treated us in such a small town, I am a veteran of World War II, and I should like to see all of us treated like human beings."[35] Perales used letters of Mexican-American war veterans in Texas to demonstrate the Texas government of the racial discrimination that still occurred after the war. In another letter written to Alonso Perales, Jose Herrera wrote a letter regarding an incident in a beer parlor where the owner denied him service. Herrera wrote, "I served 14 months in the United States Army in World War no. 2. I went into a beer parlor. As soon as I went in the owner of the beer parlor told me that Mexicans were not allowed there." [36] Much of the discrimination of Mexican-American WWII war veterans came mostly in Texas. The disappointment of Mexican American war veterans with racial discrimination after returning from the war created a small organization made to fulfill the rights and services of Mexican-American WWII veterans. The G.I. forum slowly arose in Texas with the leadership of Dr. Hector Garcia.

The G.I. Forum grew out of the outrage of war veterans who did not receive medical care from hospitals, educational opportunities, and not receiving the G.I. Bill after their military service. A doctor from Texas named Hector Garcia, served for the U.S. army as an officer in the infantry, engineer Corps and Medical Corps. He received a Bronze Star and six Battle starts for his military service. Just as most Mexican-American war veterans experienced the same discrimination before they left for the war, Dr. Garcia set out to invite veterans to discuss the issues of segregation in Texas. As veterans discussed the issues of segregation in Texas, most voted for Dr. Garcia to lead the organization and named it the G.I. Forum. At first, the G.I. Forum was made to "improve veteran benefits and enhance medical attention"[37], but more issues of housing, education, voting rights, employment, and hospitalization arose. The G.I. Forum set out goal and objectives in order to

- Aid the needy and disable veterans
- Develop leadership by creating interest in the Spanish speaking population to participate intelligently and wholeheartedly in community, civic, and political affairs
- Advance understanding between citizens of various national origins and religious beliefs to develop a more enlightened citizenry and a greater America
- Preserve and advance the basic principle of democracy, the religious and political freedoms of the individual, and equal social and economic opportunities for all citizens
- Secure and protect for all veterans and their families, regardless of race, color, or creed, the privileges vested in them by the Constitution and laws of our country;
- Combat juvenile delinquency through a Junior GI Forum program which teaches respect for law and order, discipline, good sportsmanship, and the value of teamwork;
- Uphold and maintain loyalty to the Constitution and flag of the United States;
- Award scholarships to deserving students
- Preserve and defend the United States of America from all enemies.[38]

Much like LULAC, the GI Forum created a patriotic imagery to prove that their union members have an American identity. The objective brought a clear understanding of what the Forum wanted; social progress for Mexican-America. It brought more than Chicano communities closer, it created an ideology that made communities take a different approach to the movement even if it meant working with others who were not Mexican-American. The leftist approach of the constitution led the members to engage in national politics to support the politics of John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert F. Kennedy and even Lyndon B. Johnson. What really helped this movement was taking issues of race, employment, housing, etc. to not a national level that further brought awareness of the social problems of Mexican Americans that struggled to achieve justice through the legal system.

One of the major turning points of the G.I. Forum came with the Felix Longoria incident. Longoria, a private first class in the U.S. army, earned a Bronze Service Star, a Purple Heart, a Good Conduct Medal, and a Combat Infantryman's badge for his military service in the Philippines. On June 16th 1945, Longoria went on a patrol during a rainy day. Shots of gunfire broke out and Longoria's patrol unit shot back at the supposed enemy. By the time the gunfire ended, Longoria was found dead. By 1948, four years after his death, the army sent Longoria's body to his family in Texas. Longoria's wife received notice from the armed forces that her husband died in combat. Beatrice Longoria set out to arrange a burial service for her deceased husband, and met two men, Manon Rice and Tom Kennedy, who managed funeral services. Beatrice was denied a burial service as Kennedy stated, "The white would not like it."[39] Dr. Garcia received notice from Sara Moreno, a member of the GI Forum sponsored girls club, the incident and set out to help the widow of private Longoria to receive burial services. When Dr. Garcia spoke with the mortician, Mr. Kennedy stated, "I am the only funeral home here, and I have to do what the white people want. The white people just don't like it."[40] The argument of Dr. Garcia and the Longoria's came with the point that Private Longoria was a war hero and a veteran. As a response to the Longoria's argument, Mr. Kennedy rebutted, "You know how Latin people get drunk

and lay around all the time. The last time we let them use the chapel, they got all drunk and we just can't control them so the white people object to it, and we just can't let them use it."[41] This sparked an outrage for the Mexican American community in Texas as well as G.I. Forum leaders. This event became important because it created a lot of national attention through the media and government. The Longoria incident became important to the Forum leaders and the Mexican-American community because after their service in the war they were still denied. The Forum and other organizations strived to demonstrate their Americanization. The reason why war veterans grew outraged was because they received the same opportunities as whites in the war, and upon returning home they have had limited opportunities.

The disappointing Longoria incident led the G.I. Forum to take the cause from a local level to a national level. Dr. Garcia informed George Groh, a reporter of the Corpus Christi Caller Times, who discussed with Mr. Kennedy of the situation. In response to the pressure by the G.I. Forum, Kennedy stated, "We never have made a practice of letting Mexicans use the chapel and we don't want to start now."[42] The Forum took the denied service to the state level by informing state legislature and the delegation in Washington, D.C. A protest of 1,000 people took place within the dispute of the Longoria incident. During the protest, Dr. Garcia received a telegram from Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. Within the telegram senator Johnson stated, "I have no authority over civilian funeral home. Nor does the federal government. However, I have today made arrangements to have Felix Longoria buried with full military honors in Arlington National cemetery."[43] The response from senator Johnson it suggests that the G.I. Forum received some support from the Texas government, this angered Anglos of Three Rivers, Texas (the location of the incident), was presented by the media. Kennedy believed that his judgment for the denied funeral service for Mrs. Longoria came with the disapproval of private Longoria's father. The uproar of the conflict grew to the attention of Texas state representative J.F. Gray to conduct an investigation. Within the case, the statement of Longoria's father, Guadalupe Longoria, proved to show that Kennedy's judgment did not prove sufficient evidence of the denied funeral service. Within Longoria's testimony, he testified that he requested assistance from the G.I. Forum, president of the Three Rivers Chamber of Commerce, the mayor, and the city secretary was unnecessary and undesirable. As a result, the committee concluded that "there was no discrimination on the part of the undertaker of Three Rivers relative to the proposed burial of the deceased Felix Longoria" and "Mr. Kennedy acted in the belief that strained relations existed in the Longoria family, and denying the family's equal use of the facilities had only concerned him for the widow's best interests."[44] The Longoria incident sparked national attention that influenced other Mexican-Americans to take a role. The incident lead to Mexican-Americans to seek assistance from the G.I. Forum, which included Mexican-American women taking political roles. This really challenged the social norms of Mexican-American women in the G.I. Forum. The role of these women went far and beyond for the success of the Forum. It added doubt and pressure from men within the Forum who did not agree with the woman's role becoming a leader.

VIII | Women in the Forum

The Forum at its initial stages of its creation became a male dominated organization, however, with the need of finance to back up the organization, barbecues, dances, and beauty contests became the source of revenue.[45] The Forum's community events attracted thousands of people and even women that took political roles within the G.I. Forum. One of the first Forum stateswomen, Isabelle Téllez, recalled "women played central roles in developing new G.I. Forum chapters and initiatives.[46] Women took the roles of voting registration drives, served as lobbyists for legislation. At the same time, women of the Forum such as Molly Faid Galván, Nellie Navarro, Dominga Coronado and Margarita Simón created their own Forum group known as the national Forum women's group that created the first national GI Forum convention in 1956.[47] One of the primary focuses for social progress for the G.I Forum came with the issue of education for Mexican-Americans.

VIX | Education: The Issue of Segregation

According to Jim Crow Law, Mexican-Americans are considered as white; however, throughout the Southwest school districts still practiced segregation. The argument that Anglos proposed in defense for segregated schools to "facilitate their acculturation to mainstream society."[48] Most Mexican-American youths that attended integrated schools struggled with English, considering their first language was Spanish. Anglo school officials felt that having Mexican-Americans integrated with whites in schools would only slow down whites from progress. As Joan W. Moore mentions,

> The physically segregated school was a natural reflection of the prevailing belief in Mexican racial inferiority. Separate schools were built and maintained, in theory, simply because of residential segregation or to benefit the Mexican child. He has a "language handicap" and needed to be "Americanized" before mixing with Anglo children. His presence in an integrated school would hinder the progress of white American children. [49]

The G.I. Forum took action by assisting Mexican-Americans who went to court against school districts. The issue of education to challenge school districts did not begin with the G.I. Forum. Since the 1930s, Mexican-American lawyers and LULAC assisted Mexican-American families with court cases against school districts. In 1930, one significant case in Del Rio, Texas, *Independent School District v Salvatierra*, in which the plaintiffs argued they were segregated based on Mexican ancestry.[50] Attorneys of the Salvatierra family used the "separate but equal" doctrine to argue that school officials illegally segregated Mexican-Americans students from facilities to "other white races."[51] Independent school districts argued that language deficiency was the purpose in which they segregated Mexican-Americans. The Texas court ruled in favor of the Independent school district due to "absence of intent to discriminate."[52] During the 1940s Mexican American students were segregated solely from ethnic backgrounds. Dr. García documented school districts in Texas that used standardized testing as a means of only applying Mexican Americans as inferior students and as a reason for the practice of segregation. One form in which school

districts practiced segregation came with "zones," in which Spanish-speaking children were sent to one school zone, while Anglo children sent to another.[53] By 1947, Garcia took lawsuits of 20 families for wrongful discrimination of the Independent school districts of South Texas. Garcia argued "Mexican-American students were segregated in the respective districts without objective testing for skill deficiencies, they were being treated as a class apart from mainstream white community."[54] The presiding judge, Ben H. Rice, Jr. went in favor of Garcia's argument in which the school districts illegally discriminated Mexican-Americans. The pressure from Dr. Garcia and the G.I. Forum led to some changes within school districts. From 1955 to 1957, attorneys of the Forum "led a series of suits that substantially undermined continuing efforts by Texas educators to disregard state and federal prohibitions against the segregation of Mexican-Americans students in public schools."[55] To the G.I. Forum education became the first and most important step towards social progress, something they successfully challenged in the late 1950s that helped promote their cause to Civil Rights and equal opportunity.

X | A Legacy to Remember

World War II offered Mexican-Americans more than an opportunity to fight alongside white soldiers. The war helped develop the American ideology for Mexican-Americans within the relationships they had with white soldiers and each other. The experience taught them that if they can have the same opportunities as whites within the military abroad, then that could also happen in America. The postwar impact of WWII brought disappointed Mexican-American war veterans from Texas to create an organization built to protect the Civil Rights of American citizens. The legacy that the G.I. Forum left its pride in America and the opportunities it built for others to take in order to create social progress for education, employment, and Civil Rights. For Mexican-American war veterans, the Forum became the first step to make things better in America with Civil Rights activism and the service of the Mexican-American soldiers as the bricks of progress. It built a united front that started in Texas and slowly spread throughout the nation to assist others in need. As Raul Morin eloquently puts it, "After World War II a wave of social development unfolded. The Mexican-American became more aware of the growing need for self-improvement. He has become better informed on the changing complexities of the state and Nation. Responsibility and participation has developed greater Race and ethnic consciousness."[56] The forgotten soldiers led by example within WWII and became recognized by their efforts of their activism through the G.I. Forum. It is a history that changed the lives of thousands of American citizens and one that should be remembered as the soldiers of opportunity. It became more than a movement, it became a revolution for the Mexican-American identity that influenced future generations that embarked on the same issues of Civil Rights in the 1960s.

Notes

[1] Virgilio G. Roel, interview by Nicole Cruz, July 2, 2013, VOCES Oral History Project, University of Texas School of Journalism, Austin, TX.

[2] Raul Morin, *Among The Valiant Mexican-Americans in WWII and Korea* (Borden Publishing Company, 1963), 278.

[3] David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (University of California Press 1995), 76.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 84.

[7] Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 77.

[8] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 14.

[9] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 15.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 24.

[12] Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, *A Legacy Greater Than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos & Latinas of the WWII Generation* (Austin: U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project, 2006), xxix.

[13] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 30.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 31.

[18] Ibid., 2.

[19] Ibid., 33.

[20] Rivas-Rodriguez, *A Legacy*, 21.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 6.

[23] Ibid., 64.

[24] Ibid., 66.

[25] "World War II Vet Held in Nazi Camp Breaks Silence: 'Let It Be Known,'" Wayne Drash and Thelma Gutierrez and Sara Weisfeldt, aired November 11, 2008, on CNN.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Rivas-Rodriguez, *A Legacy*, 66.

[30] Ibid., 82.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., 141.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid., 61.

[35] Richard Griswold del Castillo. *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, (University of Texas Press Austin. 2008), 175.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 190.

[38] Rebecca Saavedra, "Dr. Hector P. Garcia: A Legacy of Activism and Service," The University of Texas Medical Branch, accessed November, 2013, http://www.utmb.edu/drgarcia/legacy.htm.

[39] Henry A.J Ramos. *The American G.I. Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1983* (Arte Público Press,1998), 5-6.

[40] Patrick Carroll. *Felix Longoria's Wake: Bereavement, Racism, and the Rise of Mexican American Activism* (University of Texas Press Austin, 2003), 56.

[41] Ibid., 62.

[42] Ibid., 63.

[43] Ramos, *The American G.I. Forum*, 11.

[44] Ibid., 16.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 28.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 29.

[49] Ibid., 52.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 53.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 55.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., 60.

[57] Morin, *Among The Valiant*, 280.