

Questions to think about

1. In what ways did World War II mark a turning point in the history of Mexican Americans?
2. In what sense were Mexican Americans the nation's "step-children"?
3. What obstacles did Mexican Americans face in struggling for equality and what were the major achievements of this struggle?

1 *Delgado v. Bastrop*, LULAC and the American GI Forum Challenge School Segregation, 1948

In an interview, Pete Tijerina, who organized the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund in 1968, explained what had motivated him to press for full legal equality, good schools, and access to good jobs. His answer was World War II. "Basically," he said, "I learned in the military that I was a citizen, you understand? Not a hyphenated citizen."

The war had a profound impact on the lives of Mexican Americans, both on the battlefield and the home front. Between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexican Americans served in the military during World War II, and Latinos earned 13 of the 301 Medals of Honor awarded for valor. Although military service proved to be a source of pride – and even though Mexican Americans, unlike African Americans, did not serve in segregated units – many Mexican Americans experienced discrimination within the military itself and in its aftermath. Shortly after the war, two Texas medal recipients were denied service in restaurants, and many other veterans returned to the United States only to encounter segregated housing and schools.

World War II proved to be a life-changing experience for many Mexican Americans: Many found new employment opportunities and experienced their first opportunity to work alongside non-Hispanic whites. Many migrated from the Southwest and rural areas, raising expectation and broadening horizons. But the war also underscored the realities of prejudice and discrimination in ways that peacetime had not. The war produced severe social tensions and domestic unrest, like the 1943 Zoot Suit riots, during which sailors beat up young Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. Many Mexican American veterans responded by founding new civil rights organizations, like the American GI Forum, and challenging segregation.

As early as 1930, Mexican Americans had mounted legal challenges to segregated schools in Texas. In that year, parents in Del Rio, Texas, convinced a district court judge that segregated schools violated their children's constitutional rights, but a few months later the decision was overturned by an appeals court. In subsequent years, legal challenges to school segregation

*largely disappeared, until a new activist spirit arose immediately after World War II. In 1948, in a case that was an important precursor to the landmark 1954 school desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, two organizations promoting equal rights for Mexican Americans – LULAC and a new organization made up of Mexican American veterans, the American GI Forum – mounted a new challenge and succeeded in convincing a US District court that schools that segregated Mexican American children violated the 14th Amendment.*

... [The boards of education are] permanently restrained and enjoined from segregating pupils of Mexican or other Latin American descent in separate schools or classes within the respective school districts of said defendants and each of them, and from denying said pupils use of the same facilities and services enjoyed by other children of the same ages or grades.

Source: Appendix I, No. 338 Civil District Court of the US., Western District of Texas, *Minerva Delgado et al. v. Bastrop ISD of Bastrop Court et al.* Final Judgment, June 15, 1948.

2 Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth, *The Sleepy Lagoon Case*, 1942

Sleepy Lagoon was an eastside Los Angeles reservoir. It was also a swimming hole and recreation center for Mexican Americans forbidden from swimming at segregated public pools. In 1942, it became a synonym for injustice and racial hatred and a starting point in the Mexican American struggle for equal justice.

On August 1, 1942, a party at Sleepy Lagoon turned violent. Fighting broke out and 21-year-old José Díaz was beaten to death. The local press launched a campaign against Mexican American youth.

The early 1940s in Los Angeles was the era of the pachuco, Latino men who favored the long coats, wide pants, and long watch chains of the zoot suit. The press did a series of articles on pachuco gangs. As public outrage about the pachucos grew, sheriff's officials conducted a sweep through the city's barrios, arresting more than 600 young men in the Sleepy Lagoon case. A grand jury eventually indicted 24 for murder, making the court proceedings one of the largest mass trials in American history. The defendants were referred to in the press as "The Sleepy Lagooners," and then simply as "goons." In the courtroom they were demonized as bloodthirsty hoodlums.

Access to justice was a central issue in the Sleepy Lagoon case. Only two of the defendants had attorneys and the defendants were placed in a separate "prisoners' box." Openly biased testimony was admitted into the trial record.

One sheriff's department expert testified that "total disregard for human life has always been universal throughout the Americas among the Indian population. And this Mexican element feels... a desire... to kill, or at least draw blood." At the trial, none of the witnesses ever testified that they saw anyone strike the victim. Some of the defendants could not be placed at the murder scene.

An appeals court later overturned all the convictions and severely reprimanded Judge Charles W. Fricke for displaying prejudice and hostility toward the defendants. After two years in jail and prison, the Sleepy Lagoon defendants were set free.

Strong support for the defendants came from the Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth. Excerpts from its report on the case follow.

On the night of August 2nd, 1942, one José Diaz left a... party at the Sleepy Lagoon ranch near Los Angeles, and sometime... that night he died. It seems clear that Diaz was drinking heavily and fell into a roadway and was run over by a car. Whether or not he was also in a brawl before he was run over is not clear.

On January 13th, fifteen American-born boys of Mexican descent and two boys born in Mexico stood up to hear the verdict of a Los Angeles court. Twelve of them were found guilty of having conspired to murder Diaz, five were convicted of assault. Their sentences ranged from a few months to life imprisonment.

The lawyers say there is good reason to believe the seventeen boys were innocent, and no evidence at all to show even that they were present at the time that Diaz was involved in a brawl, assuming that he actually was in a brawl, let alone that they "conspired" to murder José Diaz. Two other boys whose lawyers demanded a separate trial after the seventeen had been convicted, were acquitted on the same evidence....

What was the basis for this mass "prosecution"? Was it a necessary measure against a sudden, terrifying wave of juvenile delinquency? No. A report by Karl Holton of the Los Angeles Probation Department conclusively proves that "there is no wave of lawlessness among Mexican children."... Says Mr. Holton, we must not "lose our sense of proportion. The great majority of Mexican children are not involved in these delinquent activities."... He points out with factual clarity, the small war-time increase in delinquency among Mexican boys was much less than the increase in the total for all racial groups....

"Seventeen for one!" thundered the Los Angeles District Attorney and the Los Angeles press.... It became clear that... the... boys were not standing alone at the bar of "justice."

It wasn't only seventeen boys who were on trial.

It was the whole Mexican people, and their children and their grandchildren....

The weak evidence upon which the conviction was obtained consisted largely of statements given by these boys after they had been manhandled and threatened with beatings or been actually beaten... to give any statement desired by the police, in order to avoid further beating. The judge and the prosecuting attorneys worked as a... team to bring about the convictions. The newspapers continued to blast their stories about the "zoot suit gangsters" and with a jury with no Mexican member....

It began to be that kind of a trial.... The Los Angeles papers started it by building for a "crime wave" even before there was a crime. "MEXICAN GOON SQUADS." "ZOOT SUIT GANGS." "PACHUCO KILLERS." "JUVENILE GANG WAR LAID TO YOUTHS' DESIRE TO THRILL." Those were... the headlines building for August 3rd.

On August 3rd the death of José Diaz was scarehead news. And the stories were of Mexican boys "prowling in wolf-packs," armed with clubs and knives and automobile tools and tire irons, invading peaceful homes..

On August 3rd every Mexican kid in Los Angeles was under suspicion as a "zoot-suit" killer. Cops lined up outside of dance halls, armed with pokers to which sharp razor blades were attached, and they ripped the peg-top trousers and "zoot suits" of the boys as they came out.

Mexican boys were beaten, jailed. "Zoot-suits" and "Pachuco" hair cuts were crimes. It was a crime to be born in the U.S.A. of a Spanish-speaking father or mother....

After the grand jury... returned an indictment and before the trial... began, Mr. Ed. Duran Ayres... of the Sheriff's Office, filed a statement.

That statement is the key to the Sleepy Lagoon case.

It isn't nice reading, but you will have to read... it to understand why Sleepy Lagoon challenges every victory-minded person in the United States, Jew or Protestant or Catholic, Spanish-speaking or Mayflower descendant, immigrant or native-born.

"The biological basis," said Mr. Ayres, "is the main basis to work from".... When the Spaniards conquered Mexico they found an organized society composed of many tribes of Indians ruled over by the Aztecs who were given over to human sacrifice. Historians record that as many as 30,000

Indians were sacrificed...in one day, their bodies...opened by stone knives and their hearts torn out...This total disregard for human life has always been universal throughout the Americas among the Indian population, which of course is well known to everyone...This Mexican element...knows and feels...a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon...His desire is to kill, or at least let blood...

We are at war. We are at war not only with the armies of the Axis powers, but with...Hitler and with his theories of race supremacy...

We are at war with the premise on which seventeen boys were tried and convicted in Los Angeles, sentenced to...prison terms on January 13th... We are at war with the Nazi logic...set forth by Mr. Ed. Duran Ayres, the logic which guided the judge and jury and dictated the verdict and the sentence.

And because this global war is everywhere a people's war...all of us together take up the challenge of Sleepy Lagoon.

Source: *The Sleepy Lagoon Case*, prepared by the Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth (Los Angeles, 1942).

3 Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots, The Zoot Suit Riots, 1943

At the end of the three-month Sleepy Lagoon trial, a public campaign against Mexican American youth intensified. Over a two-week period in May and June 1943, police stood by while several thousand servicemen and civilizations beat up Mexican American youth, stripping them of their draped jackets and pegged pants. The Los Angeles City Council banned zoot suits within the city. The "zoot-suit riots" became a symbol of wartime prejudice and ethnic strife.

California's Governor, Earl Warren, formed a committee to investigate the causes of the "Zoot Suit" riots. Excerpts from the report follow.

There are approximately 250,000 persons of Mexican descent in Los Angeles County. Living conditions among the majority of these people are far below the general level of the community. Housing is inadequate; sanitation is bad and is made worse by congestion. Recreational facilities for children are very poor; and there is insufficient supervision of the playgrounds, swimming pools and other youth centers. Such conditions are breeding places for juvenile delinquency...

Mass arrests, dragnet raids, and other wholesale classifications of groups of people are based on false premises and tend merely to aggravate the

situation. Any American citizen suspected of crime is entitled to be treated as an individual, to be indicted as such, and to be tried, both at law and in the forum of public opinion, on his merits or errors, regardless of race, color, creed, or the kind of clothes he wears.

Group accusations foster race prejudice, the entire group accused want revenge and vindication. The public is led to believe that every person in the accused group is guilty of crime.

It is significant that most of the persons mistreated during the recent incidents in Los Angeles were either persons of Mexican descent or Negroes. In undertaking to deal with the cause of these outbreaks, the existence of race prejudice cannot be ignored...

On Monday evening, June seventh, thousands of Angelenos, in response to twelve hours' advance notice in the press, turned out for a mass lynching. Marching through the streets of downtown Los Angeles, a mob of several thousand soldiers, sailors, and civilians, proceeded to beat up every zoot-suiter they could find. Pushing its way into the important motion picture theaters, the mob ordered the management to turn on the house lights and then ranged up and down the aisles dragging Mexicans out of their seats. Street cars were halted while Mexicans, and some Filipinos and Negroes, were jerked out of their seats, pushed into the streets, and beaten with sadistic frenzy. If the victims wore zoot-suits, they were stripped of their clothing and left naked or half-naked on the streets, bleeding and bruised. Proceeding down Main Street from First to Twelfth, the mob stopped on the edge of the Negro district. Learning that the Negroes planned a warm reception for them, the mobsters turned back and marched through the Mexican cast side spreading panic and terror.

Throughout the night the Mexican communities were in the wildest possible turmoil. Scores of Mexican mothers were trying to locate their youngsters and several hundred Mexicans milled around each of the police substations and the Central Jail trying to get word of missing members of their families. Boys came into the police stations saying: "Charge me with vagrancy or anything, but don't send me out there!" pointing to the streets where other boys, as young as twelve and thirteen years of age, were being beaten and stripped of their clothes...not more than half of the victims were actually wearing zoot-suits. A Negro defense worker, wearing a defense-plant identification badge on his workclothes, was taken from a street car and one of his eyes was gouged out with a knife. Huge half-page photographs, showing Mexican boys stripped of their clothes, cowering on the pavement, often bleeding profusely, surrounded by jeering mobs of men and women, appeared in all the Los Angeles newspapers...

At midnight on June seventh, the military authorities decided that the local police were completely unable or unwilling to handle the situation, despite the fact that a thousand reserve officers had been called up. The entire downtown area of Los Angeles was then declared "out of bounds" for military personnel. This order immediately slowed down the pace of the rioting. The moment the Military Police and Shore Patrol went into action, the rioting quieted down.

Source: *Governor's Citizen's Committee Report on Los Angeles Riots, 1943.*

4 Carlos E. Castañeda, Discrimination against Mexican Americans in War Industries, 1945

In the spring of 1941, after the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for 150,000 people to march on Washington to protest racial discrimination in defense industries, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued an executive order prohibiting discrimination in war industries and created the Fair Employment Practice Commission (FEPC) to investigate complaints. With a tiny staff, the FEPC lacked the resources to force contractors to end discriminatory practices. Here, Carlos E. Castañeda, a special assistant on Latin-American Problems to the FEPC, testifies before a Senate committee on behalf of a bill to prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, creed, color, national origin, or ancestry. The bill was defeated.

castañeda

Our Spanish-speaking population in the Southwest... are ill-dressed, ill-fed, ill-cared for medically, and ill-educated... because of the low economic standard to which they have been relegated as the result of... restricting their employment... to the lowest paid, least desirable, and most exacting jobs... Not only have they been restricted to the lowest bracket jobs, but even in these jobs they have been paid wages below the minimum... in all the... industries in which they have been employed...

... Out of the 315,000 persons of Mexican extraction, only 10,000 were being employed in the Southern California shipyards, 2,000 in the San Diego aircraft industry, and 7,500 in the Los Angeles aircraft industry, making a total of 19,500 employed in essential war industries in the area included between Los Angeles and San Diego. Much better utilization was being made of Mexican labor in the San Francisco area where, with a... population of... 30,000 persons of Mexican extraction, 8,000 were

engaged in basic war industries... 22% of the Mexican Americans were being employed in San Francisco, while only 6% had found employment in basic war industries in the Los Angeles and San Diego area...

Texas, with a population of 6,414,824, has approximately 1,000,000 Mexican Americans... Less than 5%... are employed... in war... industries. Such industries... have restricted them to common or unskilled labor jobs... regardless of their ability, training, or qualifications. In the oil, aircraft and mining industries, in the numerous military installations, in the munitions factories and shipyards, and in the public utility corporations... their employment has been limited and their opportunities for advancement restricted.

The prevalent... belief among employers for the various industries, personnel managers, officials of military installations, and... government agencies in the Southwest is that the Mexican-American is incapable of doing other than manual, physical labor; that he is unfit for the... skilled labor required by industry and the crafts...

Mexican-Americans have generously responded to their responsibility in the present world struggle for the victory of the democracies. They have unstintingly made the last sacrifice on a world-wide battle front in order that all peoples may enjoy the blessings of freedom and peace. Equal economic opportunities, the right to work and earn a decent living on a par with all other persons regardless of race, creed, color, national origin or ancestry, is a basic principle of American democracy.

Source: Fair Employment Practices Act Hearings, Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. Senate, 79th Congress, 1st Session, March 12-14, 1945.

5 The Méndez Case: *Brown v. Board of Education* for Mexican Americans, 1946

As late as World War II, it was common practice in the Southwest to segregate Mexican Americans in schools. In every California community with a sizable Mexican population, schools were segregated. Sometimes there was just a Mexican room, but many districts identified a separate Mexican school.

Gonzalo Méndez, a tenant farmer, and a group of Mexican American World War II veterans in California's Orange County, demanded that their children attend the same schools as Anglos. They filed a lawsuit in federal court against four Orange County school districts seeking an injunction that would order their schools' integration.