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Escalation: Youth Mobilization, Militancy, and Conflict

YOUTH CARRY THE
MOVEMENT FORWARD

While the emergence of the Chicano Movement certainly owed much to individual leaders and organizations, it's important to know that this was not a movement of a select few but of many—and most of them were young people. César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, Reies López Tijerina, and Corky Gonzales certainly inspired Mexican Americans across the country, giving visibility to the community's struggles against poverty, discrimination, and racism, and to its general marginalization in Anglo society. But what made the Chicano Movement a movement was what young Mexican Americans did with that inspiration. Influenced by a multitude of factors—experience working with federal antipoverty programs, exposure to the African American civil rights struggle, protests against the Vietnam War, and awareness of Third World anticolonial and liberation struggles (such as the Cuban Revolution)—young Mexican Americans began to mobilize and form their own organizations on college campuses across the Southwest.

In 1964, Armando Valdez organized the Student Initiative (SI) at San José State College, the first student organization to focus on the needs of Mexican Americans. Two years later, the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) was established at St. Mary's College in San Antonio, Texas, and the Mexican American Student Organization (MASO) was founded at the University of Texas at Austin. Chapters of United Mexican American Studies (UMAS) were formed on numerous campuses in Los Angeles, and the Mexican American Student Association (MASA) was launched at East Los Angeles Community College. In Northern California, the Student Initiative at San José State College changed its name to the Mexican American Student Confederation (MASC), and subsequent chapters were established at other area colleges and universities, including the University of California, Berkeley, in 1968.

Although organizations such as these continued to proliferate, their goals were in no way uniform. All of them emerged out of

a need to give Mexican American students a voice. Far from radical, most of the organizations believed, like the Mexican-American Generation before them, that education was the key to success. They worked for recruitment and retention, sought out Mexican American professionals to fund scholarships, and organized around electoral politics. But as the 1960s civil rights struggle gave way to more militant mass protests (epitomized by the Black Power movement) and as the likes of Tijerina and Gonzales espoused a more confrontational philosophy, some Chicano youth groups began to eschew middle-of-the-road politics and activism.

At first, student activists played a supportive role. They invited Chávez, Tijerina, and Gonzales to speak on their campuses, they organized caravans to bring food to the striking farmworkers in Delano, and they helped provide much-needed manpower at supermarket picket lines to support the grape boycott. As more students began to identify with *Chicanismo*—the Chicano worldview and ideology—and as cultural nationalism engendered a more critical view of traditional "Mexican American" identity, they began to coalesce around issues that impacted them directly as students and as urban youth, such as the failures of the educational system, police brutality, and the war in Vietnam. In 1968, with student demonstrations exploding around the world, many Chicano students began to believe that they were not just supporters of the Movement but a driving force.

STUDENT WALKOUTS AND THE BROWN BERETS

On the morning of March 3, 1968, students at Lincoln High School in East Los Angeles walked out of their classes. Later in the day, some 10,000 Chicano students from area high schools joined them, crippling the largest school district in the country and bringing the

full weight of law enforcement against them. The students carried signs that read "Chicano Power" and "*Viva la Revolución*" (Long Live the Revolution), but their demands were hardly radical. Led by Sal Castro, a Lincoln High School teacher, they called for the elimination of discriminatory school policies and racist teachers; they sought a curriculum that addressed Mexican American history and culture; and they wanted more Mexican American faculty members and administrators. With high school dropout rates near 50%, students were calling out a school system that had failed them, rather than that they had failed.

College students from nearby universities, including members of UMAS, joined the striking students, handing out picket signs and assisting organizers with their list of demands. The Brown Berets, a nascent Chicano self-defense organization, showed up in case

police tried to intimidate the students. In all likelihood, their presence only increased police aggression. With the media spotlight on East Los Angeles, law-enforcement officers attempted to disperse students at Roosevelt High School, who claimed their legal right to demonstrate. The situation quickly escalated into outright violence, as officers of the LAPD were captured on film brutally beating student demonstrators. Parents and community members, many of whom had been skeptical of the students' tactics, were swayed to their side. The police response was clearly incommensurate and incompatible with student demands for better treatment and a more equitable system.

The walkouts, or "blowouts" as they were called, led to the formation of the Educational Issues Coordinating Committee (EICC), composed of parents, community members, high school students, and members of UMAS. Together with the strikers, the EICC

pressured the board of education to hold a special session to hear student demands. There were 36 demands in all, ranging from bilingual education and better facilities to community control of the schools. On March 28, some 1,200 people attended a community meeting held at Lincoln High, where board members listened to student and parent grievances and claimed to be sympathetic, but denied any prejudice in the allocation of funding and claimed to have insufficient resources for the proposed changes. Two weeks later, the EICC, frustrated at the lack of response or concrete action on the part of officials, led a group of 800 protestors to occupy school board offices.

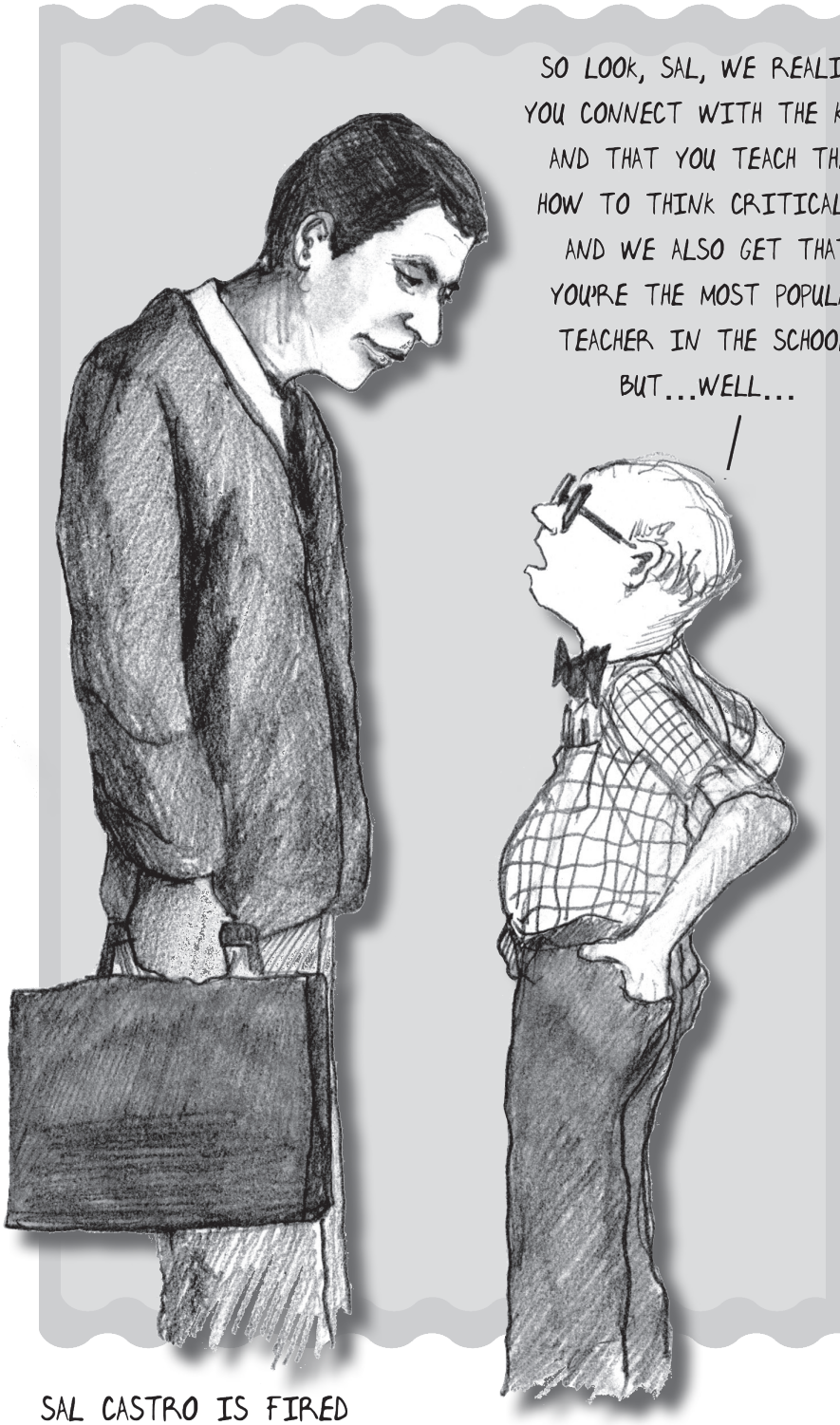
East L.A. 13

Even though school board members had gone on record opposing discipline for the participants in the strike, law enforcement on June 2 arrested 13 organizers of the walkouts. Among them were student activists from UMAS, members of the Brown Berets, antipoverty workers, publishers of a local Chicano newspaper, and Lincoln High School teacher Sal Castro. They were all labeled "outside agitators"

and charged with conspiracy to disturb the peace. Although disturbing the peace was a misdemeanor, conspiracy made it a felony and raised the possibility of time in prison. Sal Castro was immediately barred from teaching.

The criminal indictment of the East L.A. 13, or ELA13, triggered protests against the Los Angeles Police Department and demonstrations in support of the arrestees. The Chicano Legal Defense Fund and Attorneys for Civil Liberties raised funds for legal expenses, and Chicano Movement lawyer Oscar Zeta Acosta defended the activists. After a series of dramatic sit-ins and protests, the school board reinstated Sal Castro and all charges against the ELA13 were eventually dismissed. With attention focused primarily on the legal case, student activism in the schools subsided.

The East L.A. blowouts brought national attention to the failure of the educational system to serve Mexican American youth. It was also the first mass Mexican American protest against racism. Whereas the farmworkers' strike and the land grant movement had focused on issues that related to injustice and mistreatment of Mexican Americans, the striking students directly spelled out the effects of racism and discrimination. And though Sal Castro played a key role at the outset, the strike leadership was composed almost entirely of students, both male and female. The walkouts demonstrated to students in other parts of the country that they, too, could



SAL CASTRO IS FIRED

demand change, and the next two years brought strikes throughout the Southwest, including in Denver, and in Crystal City, Texas.

In addition, despite the students' reform-minded demands, the aggressive response by law enforcement and the lengths to which the schools, the police, and the courts were willing to go to suppress their constitutional rights, increasingly radicalized Chicano youth and the Movement as a whole. The Mexican American community had long felt that they were struggling against a system that sought to repress them. The response to the blowouts gave them tangible evidence that not only was this case, but that democratic pleas to authority were futile. That sentiment gave rise to the so-called Brown Power movement, reflected above all in the emergence of the Brown Berets.

The Brown Berets

Ironically, the blowouts and the Brown Berets, the most militant group of the Chicano Movement, originated at a high school leadership camp in Malibu, California. Sponsored by the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, the annual Mexican-American Youth Leadership Conference brought together high-achieving Mexican American students with the hope that they would go on to leadership positions and have a positive impact in their communities. Held at Camp Hess Kramer, the conference had students staying in cabins with counselors and workshop leaders. While its mission was ostensibly assimilationist, the event had the opposite effect: high-school age Mexican Americans were exposed to more politicized college students, who in turn shared their progressive ideas. Bright-eyed youth entered the camp focused on leadership activities and left talking about César Chávez and the farmworkers' struggle.

The Young Citizens for Community Action (YCCA) emerged out

CAMP HESS KRAMER MALIBU, CALIFORNIA

of Camp Hess Kramer. Founded in May 1966 by future blowout leaders—among them Vickie Castro, David Sánchez, Moctesuma Esparza, Ralph Ramírez, Rachel Ochoa, George Licon, and John Ortiz—the YCCA began with a belief in conventional politics. Participants created surveys to address students' needs, met with education officials, and worked to elect Julian Nava as the first Mexican American school board member. As the students became more politicized, however, they changed the name of the organization to the Young Chicanos for Community Action. In October 1967, with the help of a supportive priest, Father John B. Luce, the YCCA opened a coffeehouse in East Los Angeles called La Piranya. With the coffeehouse serving as its main office, the organization began hosting prominent leaders of the Chicano Movement, such as Chávez, Reies López Tijerina, and Corky Gonzales, as well as leaders from the Black Power movement, including Stokely Carmichael and Hubert "Rap" Brown. La Piranya sponsored a number of other events and

gatherings, most of them focused on encouraging young people to attend college. But local law enforcement saw the coffee shop as a den of radical activity. Sheriff deputies frequently harassed patrons, questioning them extensively and performing illegal searches. Upset by this treatment, YCCA members organized a demonstration at the nearby sheriff's station—to little avail.

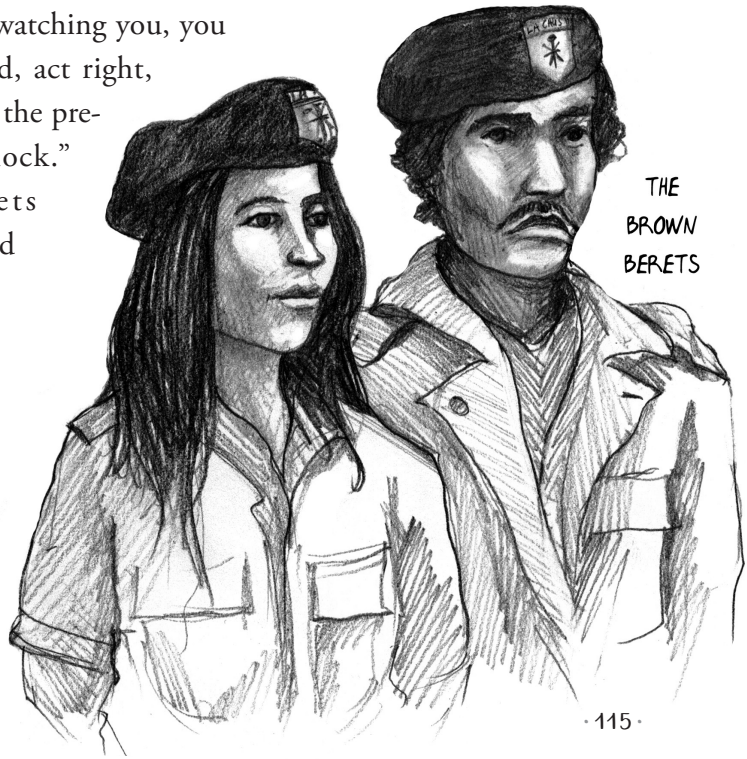
A BROWN BERET

In late 1967 and early 1968, as members left for college, they spent less time with the group; among them were two of the female founders, Rachel Ochoa and the YCCA's first president, Vickie Castro. David Sánchez assumed leadership of the organization, and as police harassment continued, the group became notably more militant in its approach. Members took to wearing military khakis and a brown beret adorned with a patch; on it appeared the words "La Causa," over a yellow pentagon, two bayoneted rifles, and a cross. Soon they were calling themselves the Brown Berets. The high school blowouts in March 1968 gave the group wide visibility as a community self-defense organization similar to the Black Panthers. Most of the members were young adults who saw it as their duty to protect the younger demonstrators from the police.

During the summer following the blowouts, the Brown Berets developed a "Ten Point Program" to articulate their goals; these, too, were modeled after the Black Panthers. The ten points included many of the demands made by student demonstrators, including bilingual education and a curriculum relevant to Mexican Americans. Another was police accountability, including the hiring of officers who spoke Spanish and were sensitive to the community's needs. Other goals included economic justice, fair housing, the right to

vote regardless of the ability to speak English, a jury of peers, and the right to bear arms to defend their communities. Essentially, the Brown Berets were asking for the Mexican American community's basic rights as guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. Their motto "to serve, to observe, and to protect," proclaimed that the Brown Berets would be present and watchful to ensure that government agencies, especially law enforcement, respected these rights. Early members did include women, though they soon grew disenchanted by their exclusion and subordination within the organization. They eventually split off and formed Las Adelitas de Aztlán, which, though short-lived, encouraged other women who found their voices suppressed within the Movement.

Ultimately, the Brown Berets' paramilitary appearance was more symbolic than anything else, used to emphasize an ethos of self-discipline and self-respect. The group stressed community unity and organizational discipline. As leader David Sánchez wrote at the time, "Because your people, the land, and the enemy are watching you, you must look good, act right, and move with the precision of a clock." Brown Berets were expected to hold a high standard of personal conduct, which included dressing well, being fair and courteous

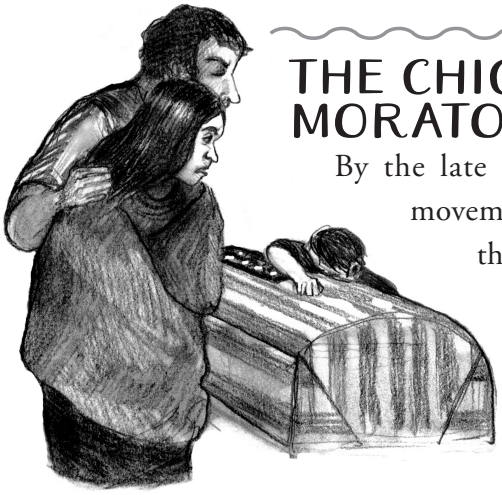


to others, and serving as an example for the community. Although some members certainly sought more revolutionary action, the Brown Beret's espousal of violence—protection of the community by "any means necessary"—was a matter of rhetoric rather than of action. This didn't mean there was no violence, or that the Brown Berets were ineffective as a community self-defense organization. The Brown Berets inspired countless chapters throughout the country—in such places as Kansas City, Missouri; Seattle, Washington; and Minnesota—comprising thousands of members. They also inspired similar organizations, such as the Black Berets and Los Comancheros in New Mexico. Finally, the Brown Berets created a free medical clinic in East Los Angeles, and were instrumental in the Chicano antiwar effort and helping to plan the seminal Chicano Moratorium of 1969 and 1970.

CHE GUEVARA

The Argentinean freedom fighter Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who fought in the Cuban Revolution and the Congo before his death in Bolivia after a failed military campaign in 1967, became an iconic figure and ubiquitous image in the Chicano Movement.

His face was emblazoned on countless pamphlets, newspapers, posters, murals, and banners. Those who understood the Chicano Movement as a struggle against colonialism and imperialism viewed Che as a defender of the poor who was willing to rise up in arms against oppression and tyranny. In a famous mural at Stanford University titled *The Chicano Last Supper*, Chicano artist José Antonio Burciaga replaced Jesus with Che Guevara at the center of the table.

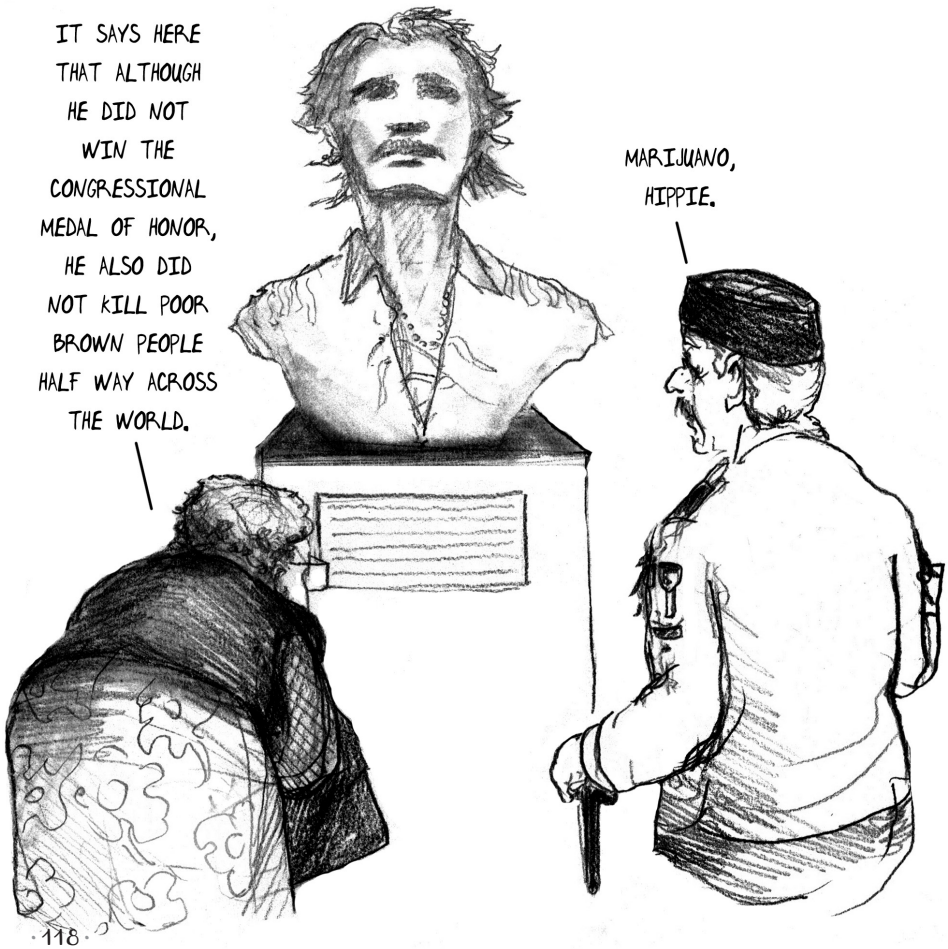


THE CHICANO MORATORIUM

By the late 1960s, the anti-Vietnam War movement had grown to hundreds of thousand strong, with countless demonstrations and university campus strikes across the country. Public support for U.S. involvement waned dramatically as the war dragged on with no end in sight and as the number of casualties rose. The Mexican American community was slow to turn against the war, however, in part because of a proud history of serving in the U.S. military; this had long been viewed as a way to prove one's patriotism and contribution to society at large. Organizations such as the American GI Forum lobbied on behalf of Mexican American veterans, arguing that their service entitled them to respect and equal treatment. But as more and more Mexican Americans returned home in body bags and in disproportionate numbers—Mexican Americans represented more than 20% of casualties in the Southwest but only 10% of the

population—it became harder to support the war effort. What's more, as the Chicano Movement gave visibility to the mistreatment faced by the Mexican American community, many began to question why young Chicanos were fighting poor brown people in Vietnam when the real struggle was in the barrios at home.

Chicanos began to refuse induction into the armed forces; among them were such prominent activists as Salomón Baldenegro of Tucson, Arizona; Ernesto Vigil of Denver's Crusade for Justice; and Rosalio Muñoz, a former student body president at University of California, Los Angeles. On September 16, 1969, Muñoz attempted



to bring attention to his draft refusal by holding a protest at the local induction center. In a speech delivered that day, he declared his independence from the Selective Service: "I accuse the draft, the entire social, political, and economic system of the United States of America of creating a funnel which shoots Mexican youth into Vietnam to be killed and to kill innocent men, women, and children." Traveling around the Southwest speaking to other activists about the draft, Muñoz became convinced that what was needed was a national Chicano peace protest.

Meanwhile, earlier that year, the Brown Berets had returned from the Denver Chicano Youth and Liberation Conference, where they had discussed the war's negative impact. Corky Gonzales and the Crusade for Justice had long voiced opposition to the war based on the disproportionate toll it took on poor communities. Thus, many youth left the conference convinced that they needed to raise awareness back home. On December 19, 1969, the Brown Berets held the

first Chicano Moratorium Committee (CMC) rally at Obregon Park in East L.A. The turnout of nearly 2,000 people surprised organizers, who immediately began planning another one. They also asked Muñoz to be a co-chairman of the planning committee.

On February 28, 1970, the CMC organized another rally at nearby Salazar Park, this one attended by 5,000 people. The event brought significant attention to the CMC, which decided to build on the momentum and organize yet another, even larger moratorium on August 29. The CMC was renamed the National Chicano Moratorium Committee (NCMC), and with the financial support of the Southwest Council of La Raza, Muñoz began organizing full time for the event. At the Second Annual Chicano Youth Conference that

March in Denver, Muñoz garnered the support of Corky Gonzales and fellow draft resister Ernesto Vigil. In the months leading up to the national moratorium, attendees sponsored hundreds of antiwar demonstrations throughout the Southwest.

Although everyone was united against the war, not all the organizers agreed politically. The more radical activists opposed the war for anti-colonialist or anti-imperialist reasons; many of them even sided with the Viet Cong and their leader Ho Chi Minh, viewing him as a freedom fighter in the same vein as Che Guevara. Others saw the war and its draft policy—which left Chicanos few opportunities for deferment—as a genocidal conspiracy against minorities who were dying in inordinate numbers while their communities languished at home. The more moderate activists, uncomfortable with these more controversial reasons, simply couldn't accept the countless flag-draped coffins returning home from a war being fought for reasons they didn't understand. Some of these political differences played out in organizing the moratorium, as almost 150 people ended up on the steering committee.

Despite the division among organizers, thousands of activists arrived from all over the United States on August 29, 1970, to join the local Mexican American community march three miles down Whittier Boulevard toward Laguna Park, where the main rally was to be held. The organizing committee had recruited hundreds of monitor-volunteers to preserve the peace and quell any disturbances. They were joined by hundreds of stone-faced police officers and sheriff deputies, who erected barricades along the parade route and by all accounts were prepared for a riot. In the largest mass protest in Mexican American history, indeed the largest antiwar effort by any American minority group, between 20,000 and 30,000 people took part in the Chicano Moratorium. Most of the demonstrators were young, but there were also many families with children. The mood was festive as musicians and performers entertained the crowd.

Despite the heavy police presence, none of the marchers expected the violence that ensued.

Responding to a disturbance at a nearby liquor store where local youth stole soft drinks and beer, police found their excuse to break up the demonstration. As Rosalio Muñoz was about to speak, squad cars descended upon the park and police officers in full riot gear began forcing participants to leave. Some of the demonstrators, angry at the mistreatment, hurled objects at the officers. They, in turn, responded with even more aggression, wielding their clubs and moving across the park in military formation. Tear gas canisters were fired at the crowd. Men, women, and children, many of whom hadn't heard the orders to disperse or were simply confused by the unfolding events, were trapped and panicked. Frustrated protestors began to riot and were viciously clubbed by police. Others were caught up in the mayhem and trampled.

By the time the smoke cleared, several hundred demonstrators had been arrested, including Corky Gonzales, one of the slated speakers.

Sixty demonstrators were wounded, and two Chicano youths were killed; one of them was a 15-year-old Brown Beret. Perhaps the most alarming result of the violence was the death of Ruben Salazar, a respected journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* who had become an inadvertent spokesperson for the Chicano Movement. Salazar's death and the brutal police response to a mostly peaceful demonstration was yet another reminder that the quest for Mexican American civil rights was viewed as a dangerous threat to the status quo.

Ruben Salazar

Ruben Salazar's death at the Chicano Moratorium transformed him into a Chicano martyr. The irony is that Salazar was far from being a militant. In fact, he was a classic example of the Mexican-American Generation, a middle-class striver who did his job quietly and diligently and kept his distance from politics and civil rights. The bulk of his work as a journalist, including stints as a foreign correspondent in Latin America and war correspondent in Vietnam, displayed no overt criticism of the United States or its policies. When he returned to Los Angeles, Salazar began covering the Mexican American community, which included the growing Chicano activism. His articles

THE POLICE ATTEMPT TO INTIMIDATE RUBEN SALAZAR.

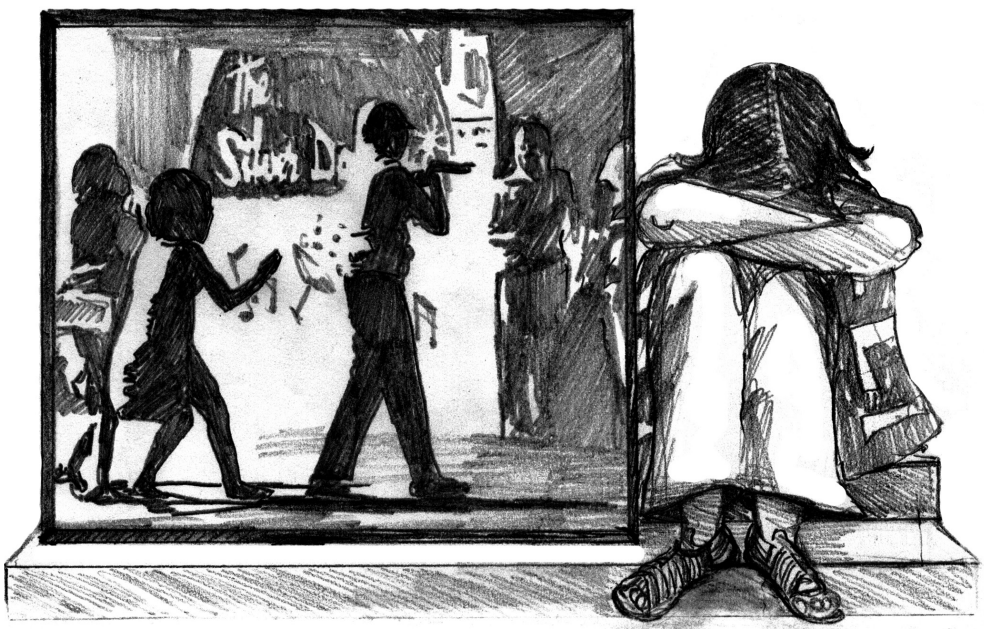
straddled the line; he was both sympathetic to the aims of the protestors while at times criticizing their tactics. Perhaps most importantly, Salazar translated the goals of Chicano activists for a skeptical public and, in a way, explained to Chicanos themselves a clear way of articulating their position to the rest of the world. A good example of this is his *Times* column of February 6, 1970, titled, "Who Is a Chicano? And What Is It the Chicanos Want." In a blunt and succinct opening line, he captures the essence of that identity: "A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself."

Increasingly, Salazar began reporting on police brutality in the Mexican American community, including the shooting of two innocent Mexican nationals. Dissatisfied with the official police reports, he provided his own coverage of the killings, which prompted two policemen to visit Salazar and request that he tone down his

reporting. It was stirring up the Mexican American community, they claimed. Undeterred, Salazar wrote a column about their visit; other intimidation tactics soon followed. Both local law enforcement and the Federal Bureau of Investigation opened files on the reporter, suspecting him of radical activity.

After covering the moratorium march and the mayhem that ensued, Salazar and several fellow journalists stopped at the Silver Dollar, a nearby bar, to have a beer before heading off to write their articles. Shortly after they entered, a sheriff deputy who claimed later that he was responding to a report that a gunman was inside, shot a tear gas projectile into the crowded bar. The 10-inch projectile struck Salazar in the head and killed him. His body lay on the floor for three hours before homicide detectives came to investigate. Eyewitnesses and deputies offered conflicting accounts, and details surrounding the killing remained murky.

Because of his public visibility, along with his prior criticism of



ICONIC IMAGE: THE DEATH OF RUBEN SALAZAR AT THE SILVER DOLLAR

police brutality, many couldn't help but think that the Salazar's death was intentional. Despite photo evidence that showed the deputies ordering bystanders back into the bar and then firing indiscriminately into the crowded establishment, an inquest found that Salazar's death was an accident. The officer was not charged.

Salazar was the first mainstream journalist to cover the Chicano community, and his absence was felt immediately after the moratorium. The newspapers that covered the event at all ran stories regurgitating the police reports. According to a brief article in the *New York Times,* for example, "five hundred policemen and Sheriff's deputies tried to break up roaming gangs." Most newspapers ignored it completely. Salazar, having witnessed the events firsthand, and sympathetic to the cause of the tens of thousands of demonstrators, would have told a far different story.

Aftermath

Ruben Salazar's death and the police violence at the Chicano Moratorium outraged community members and Chicano activists. Often the moratorium is referred to as the pinnacle of the Chicano Movement—tens of thousands of Chicanos, young and old, gathered to demonstrate for their civil rights—but it was also a moment of great tragedy, and in some ways, the beginning of the Movement's decline. Following the moratorium, organizers planned further protests, this time focused on police brutality. But police responded with more violence, and the intimidation worked: attendance at subsequent rallies dwindled. Law enforcement also escalated tactics to infiltrate and undermine the activist groups, including the National Chicano Moratorium Committee and the Brown Berets. Paranoia fueled division in the ranks, and the organizations became less effective as they focused more on internal squabbles and power struggles.

The energy and shared vision that had inspired the burst of

activism from the high school blowouts in 1968 to the Chicano Moratorium in 1970 had taken a serious blow from which it never truly recovered. Despite public resistance and intense political mobilization, few of the Chicano activists' demands had been met. In *Occupied America*, his classic text of Chicano history, Rodolfo Acuña summarized the state of the Movement at this moment:

> After the smoke cleared, in spite of real change for most North Americans, very little progress had been made by Chicanos. The importance of activist, youth, and grassroots organizations declined after this point. The 1970s restored to the middle class its hegemony over the movement.

Catalina Island "Invasion"

On August 30, 1972, 26 members of the Brown Berets traveled off the coast of California to Catalina Island and claimed the territory on behalf of all Chicanos. Reminiscent of Tijerina and the Alianza's takeover of Kit Carson National Forest, the occupiers argued that, under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, all coastal lands were still Mexican property. The occupation lasted 24 days and ended when the Berets were

threatened with forced removal and arrest. It garnered a lot of publicity, but little else. Not long thereafter, following significant internal discord, Brown Beret leader David Sánchez disbanded the national organization (though chapters have continued operating around the country to the present day).