

Episode 6: World War II, History & Memory

Transcript

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Steve Sisson: Hello everyone and welcome back to the History and Memory Podcast with Dr. Alexander Mendoza. Hello Alex, how are you today?

Alex Mendoza: Doing well, doing well, thank you much. Glad to be back.

Steve Sisson: Good. We're moving towards the end of our time together in terms of exploring Tejanos in American wars. In this episode, we're going to go through from World War II into the sort of forgotten war of Korean War. But we're going to spend a good bit of time at the beginning talking a little bit more about what the experience of the Mexican American experience was in Texas during this timeframe before we jump into the Korean War, because Korean War wasn't a very long one. Little longer than the Spanish American War, but still, there's a lot more interesting things related to the experience of the warriors we're following in terms of what their experience in war was had a lot to do with what happened prior, between World War II and World War, I mean, sorry, and Korea.

So, as we get started here, let's talk a little bit about what sort of experience for the veterans coming back from World War II was when they came back. What were they expecting, and then what was the reality?

Alex Mendoza: Well, it's a good thing you mentioned that because I believe that the whole idea of Pearl Harbor, the war against Japan and Germany, trying to defeat the Axis powers, all of that just enveloped the entire Tejanos community. And while the war was going on, everyone was willing to ration, sacrifice, and basically do their best part for the war effort. And the expectation was that by contributing themselves to American society and the ideals of Washington, D. Everything that it stood for, that eventually they get a reward, that they get recognition, that it might be a step towards, first class citizen status. Unfortunately, as soon as 1945 rolled around, with the demobilization of the US Armed Forces from 16,000,000 to pittance five years later, the same vestiges of racial discrimination and ethnic prejudice continued.

And this is the one thing that the Tejano community just found themselves totally perplexed by, because in their estimation, they had done their part. They assumed that things would change after 1945. They thought that by contributing to American society, to the goals of the US Armed Forces, that they reap rewards of some sort. But what they found was a world that still was not ready to sort of receive them. And this is something that becomes sobering for the Tejanos community.

Steve Sisson: I mean, we when we think about this period of time in general American history, especially those of us who pay attention to what was going on in the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, we think so much about the discrimination against African Americans, but it's not as well documented or well discussed about the kinds of experiences that were happening in Texas,

especially in Central And South Texas in a similar way. You've got two really pretty big examples of this kind of letdown or this kind of I can't imagine it to be anything other than just the deepest sadness to come back and realize that what you had considered something heroic is you don't get to take part in the win in a big way. But you've got two specific cases here that I think are really, really interesting in terms of getting some a little bit more than just generally people were discriminated against. You've got two exact examples I think are really great for people to hear about.

Alex Mendoza: I think the first one that we need to start with, throwing things back to our alma mater and our time in the 1980s and the 1990s at UT Austin, is one of my professors. I mean, I was very fortunate to have Ricardo Romo and David Montejano teach me about Texas and American history, and it sort of grounded my foundation. But David Montejano wrote this book back when we were in school, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836 to 1986*. And in more recent times, like at the end of the twentieth century, he wrote a short work called "The Beating of Private Aguirre." And what this was, this was a cathartic experience for Professor Montejano to go to San Angelo and to explore a little known incident of racial strife that hit the Tejanos community in that West Texas town.

And what it involved was that this former soldier in September 1945, just shortly after the Japanese had surrendered, Ben Aguirre. He was out and about in San Angelo, they had gone out with a couple of his friends, when all of a sudden, they come across group of Anglo teenagers, 18, 19 years old, young men, who basically saw a couple of Mexicans walking down the street and decided to have fun. And I mean that loosely because what they did is they jumped out of their truck. Both of Aguirre's friends ran away. Aguirre was caught.

He was of slight build, probably weighed a little bit over one hundred and twenty pounds, according to Montejano, and then they beat him savagely. The sad part was that they knew who the perpetrators were, but they were well connected within the financial community. They were Anglo. They were well off. They were well-to-do.

And the Mexican American community in West Texas was appalled that no punishment was levied out. I believe one of the teenagers received a 100 fine, and that was essentially it, while Aguirre remained bedridden for months. But this was a sobering time because Aguirre had served. He had been a member of the armed forces. He had fought against the Axis powers.

And then to go back to the same old, same old was a sobering experience for the Tejano community. So when Montejano wrote about this, it was included in another major work of World War II history. He pointed out that for the Mexican American community, this is when he was writing in the 1990s, they still remembered how things were. , he's talking about the older generation who, he went around town, took oral histories and began to chronicle these events, but that the Hana community still remembered, the vestiges of this dual standard. So even though that is not as well-known as the second example that you brought up, it it still remains a sobering part of the entire narrative of, like, just how back to normal everything went so quickly after defeating, Japanese and the Germans.

Steve Sisson: And I just want to highlight that things like this probably happened in many communities all over Texas, regardless of race. Some punk white boys decide they're going to go out and have some fun, right? Yet, you would think that the special status of a veteran, probably wouldn't have stopped the initial beating, but at least would have brought further attention and more recognition that there is a special status for those who go above and beyond and decide to be. And if this were a white person that this had happened to, they had decided to jump an old man or a tramp, somebody who decided to, sometimes that'll happen too. We're both, you and I are both certain, and I'm sure the professor's also certain, that there would have been a very different outcome to what happened. So, I just think it's really important that this idea of this special status, which especially during this window of time, is afforded to veterans. At this juncture, at post-Vietnam War, which I will talk about in the next episode, the idea of veterans having special status is a little bit changed because of the complicated historical and political situations and a lot of the social unrest that's going on in The United States in the late sixties.

But at this juncture, 1945, we would expect some form of recognition of special status for a veteran, and there's none of this afforded to this man.

Alex Mendoza: That's absolutely correct. That's the most intense element of all this that for many Mexican Americans, they assumed that being a veteran for fighting for their nation, that they would have been afforded at least the benefit of the doubt by the law enforcement community, by authorities in cities and counties and in the state. But they were relegated back to second class citizens in their estimation because of the lack of wherewithal for law enforcement authorities to do anything about repercussions.

Steve Sisson: But as we trace this line, as we've been tracing through all of our episodes to this point about memory, I do think the second case of Felix Longoria is really helpful too because it is an example of the memory aspect. Of course, with Ben Aguirre how do you say that? I'm not like I'm always Aguirre, like I can't say his last name. Say it. How do you say it?

Alex Mendoza: Yeah, you have to roll the double Rs. It's Aguirre.

Steve Sisson: Aguirre. Right. So I think this is, while the first is definitely more visceral, right? We feel it. I feel so sad.

But thinking about the situation with Felix Longoria, it's a little bit more at least in the thread of what we've been discussing around memory.

Alex Mendoza: Correct, because it's funny you mentioned that, because it's very, very keen of you to kind of pick up on Felix Longoria. I'll just talk loosely about the incident. He is a private, a private in The U.S. Army that fights in the Pacific, he gets killed in action, and his hometown, Three Rivers, which is just about fifty, sixty miles outside of Corpus Christi, they want to have his family wants to have a burial. But, the mortician basically suggests that since he is a

"Mexican," he needs to be buried in a separate part of the cemetery. So, this becomes a political, a completely political event, where a veteran of the US Armed Forces is relegated literally and figuratively to second class status.

Now, the reason I mentioned that it's so important in terms of like memory, is when I started teaching at the University of North Texas, they screened a documentary on Felix Longoria. And it was like a big event. Auditorium was filled. The dignitaries came, far and wide to kind of listen and watch the screening of the Felix Longoria affair. It's a wonderful documentary.

However, there was a resident of Three Rivers in attendance who took umbrage as to like how it was unfair, and the concept of memory and how something meant. It was important to the Tejanos community did not speak to all of the Three Rivers citizenry. And what he had a problem with was that it relegated all of Three Rivers to one more idea of what should be afforded for, post life. So, this discrepancy in terms of how we remember the past, it becomes public. It becomes like an intense feeling that people still have personal attachments to.

And this gentleman who was, by my recollection already in the 60s and 70s, who had obviously lived in Three Rivers most of his life, he took umbrage with the documentary because it he believed that it unfairly, portrayed the citizens of Three Rivers in in a broad brush.

Steve Sisson: And you can appreciate his point of view, but you can't but it just shows how you can appreciate his point of view from his point of view, purely. That's all I'm saying, right? Correct. That he has this experience, but it's still failing to reckon with the actual fact of history, and then it's about the memory of Three Rivers instead of the memory of Felix Longoria, is basically representative of an entire racial community, of the entire community, right? So, yeah, it is I think this thread of memory, which we'll probably be unpacking finally in our conclusion, just a variety of these different instances where this happens and how this shifting idea of memory plays through, it's still it sticks in your craw as someone who's a non-initiated into the actual stories of this, right?

To hear this and say, Yeah, this is not Both of these two stories to me just kind of make me want to puke in my mouth. But I also can see an older, in the 90s Well, I guess this would have been early 2000s, right, when the film was made? Yes. Yeah. Just, again, this idea that everyone has to defend their turf or they have to hold whatever they have to hold, right?

But I think one thing that's important here is just thinking about how this leads into the various ways in which we are still reckoning with the America of the 1945 to 1953, which we'll be covering in this episode. What that gentleman was frustrated about a lot was he was living in an America of 1945-1953, not an America of the year that in which that film was screened, in my opinion, thinking about it that way is an interesting way to conceptualize it.

Alex Mendoza: I think that one of the things that we need to also keep in mind is that to this older gentleman's point, he did recognize that the whole Longoria affair did become a political football in 1948. And as the nation is moving towards the Cold War, something we're going to

discuss in a few minutes and greater depth, there is another civil rights organization that pops up because of this Longoria affair in the postwar era, and that is the American GI Forum. And a gentleman, another well-educated Mexican American, a medical doctor, Doctor Hector P. Garcia, from nearby Corpus Christi, chooses to make this a big deal.

And the American GI Forum, as the name implies, will emphasize patriotism and military service as the fulcrums of what it's going to stand for. But it reached out to Lyndon Baines Johnson, who was running for the US Senate in 1948. And because Johnson has something to gain, he needs a South Texas vote in order to reach the US Senate, he does throw his weight behind the support of the Longoria campaign. And Longoria bypasses Three Rivers. And thinking about memory, well, he gets the highest accolades, and he is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

And the funny part is, is since Johnson is a political animal, he really is supporting the Tejano community, but he doesn't want the Anglo community to know how much support he really has. So at the actual burial in Arlington, Johnson remains far distant from the cameras. He's there, but he's kind of lurking in the background just to make sure that he doesn't upset the apple cart, so to speak. But, truly a very, very turning a very big turning point in terms of the Tejano history.

Steve Sisson: And one other thing that you, you talk about in basically, from, the turn of the century the turn of the twentieth century until this point, voting in Texas, voting in Texas especially, is really nearly impossible for anyone in the lower classes and almost every minority. We didn't really unpack this, but it's something that's not taught in the history as I knew it. Now, again, I was educated in 1988, in the '80s in Texas. But talk a little bit about what vote I think it's an important thread that we can use here because I think, there's many ways to discriminate, but one of the most devastating ways to discriminate against a group of people is to say that they are a part of a country, but then they have no voice within that country, especially if they're calling themselves a republic. So talk a little bit about what voting is like for an impoverished laborer who lives in Laredo versus your run of the mill average white person in in North Central San Antonio in these in this era?

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. It's fascinating because the Democratic Party really did a number on minorities in Texas. And what they did is they enacted, their Jim Crow laws, and one of those was the white primary. So, they couldn't exclude people from the actual vote, the national elections or the state elections, because of the fifteenth Amendment. But what they could do is exclude them from the primary elections.

So therefore, Tejanos and African Americans, they could not actually nominate any candidates that would speak to their interests, so thereby nullifying them entirely. Now, during World War II, Franklin Roosevelt and others recognized that they need to keep minorities at least satisfied. So, the white primary is done away with during World War II. But the poll tax is another way that they could limit minority and poor whites from voting. So, when I teach classes and we ever we discuss some of these ideas, and there's always an election looming, whenever I teach, I asked my students, like, how would you all feel if you had to pay \$20 to vote?

Because the poll tax was approximately the equivalent of \$20 a day. For poor college students, their hands go down once they realize they'd have to pay \$20 to vote. And I say, well, this is the impact that the poll tax would have. And this brief informal survey kind of demonstrates just how limiting it could be for those that are not inclined to part with a dollar or \$2 out of their weekly paycheck. They're farmers, if they're poor, they're menial laborers.

And those that are sort of pushed into voting are sponsored, which, again, manipulates the vote. Even though it's the secret Australian ballot, you're still kind of beholden to boss politics at the midpoint of the twentieth century. It's truly debilitating.

Steve Sisson: And if we think about it financially, it's problematic. But the place in which, from my point of view, the place that's even most problematic is ideological. It's going against everything that we're talking about America is. Everything that America is supposed to be. How different we are from Europe and other and Central And South America, and every other place in the world, we're supposed to be this bastion of every vote counts.

And, we know that now. I think most I don't know that most kids know this, but most adults realize pretty quickly that their limp- their- their- the optionality and the voting when they walk into the booth is already pre- a lot of things are stacked. But things were even more stacked before in an era where money, at least money from the corporate side, is a little bit less obvious. But like you said, poll taxes and bosses, I mean, are the terms that we know from Tammany Hall in New York City back in the day, right? It's happening, though, everywhere in America, and especially in the Texas, South Central Texas area, where the Latino and Latina community, the Tejanos communities literally manipulated across multiple factors, from class level factors, racist level factors, but most importantly, ideologically to me, it's like, this is a stain, a deep stain in Texas history.

And, when we talk about partisan politics, both Republicans and Democrats are equally complicit. Not in every case, I don't want again, we're painting with a very broad brush, but it's part of the American political system to give you to give speak about one thing and then act another way. This is a perfect example of that in my opinion. Oh,

Alex Mendoza: absolutely. And for the Tejanos community, during this time period, they're being told about democracy and all the wonders and the beauty of this special nation, and yet they feel hamstrung by the idea that democracy is not what it means, at least in a pamphlet or on paper. And that's truly demoralizing for many.

Steve Sisson: And I mean, this is we should just take this to lead right into this whole idea about what is to be American. Like you say, stars and stripes and apple pie, right? Like, is the idea. And when we look back in American history, this period of time, the June Cleaver and the like, there's a whole vision of America as this perfectly prim and proper white people who have, a picket fence and a dog and dad goes to work in advertising and mom stays home and folds clothes and But this is that vision of that period that we have now was the only show at the theater. This is the way people were.

It wasn't actually what was happening in their day to day life, but it was in the magazines, it was what was going on. And at this point, advertising, movies, television is starting to come into the game. Radio, all of this is impacting what it means to be American, and there's this whole, like you say, Stars and Stripes and Apple Pie, which I think is pinning the tail of the donkey right there.

Alex Mendoza: Correct.

Steve Sisson: Anyway, so let's jump into, one of the things that's a big piece of what that is, is also what happens during this period when we start to have this looming fear of the communist, right? And what it means to be American has a lot to do with what it means to not be a communist, and later on in the 40s, late 40s and into the 50s, get a whole political thing going on with that, but this is a really important piece when the Soviet Union goes from being our ally to our enemy, and then that is what the Cold War is. How does this impact the Tejanos communities, and how does it impact their thinking about what will be soon, within only about eight years, I mean, about five years, they're right back in a situation where they're going to, they have to make a decision, run back we're going to talk about this again. They're going to run away to Mexico or they're going to end up being conscripted in the military, because we were at really low numbers in the people in the military at that point.

Alex Mendoza: Correct, correct. But the Cold War just looms large, like this overarching shadow over the entire country. So as to your point, in the fifties, even the late nineteen forties, as Hollywood comes into play, films and soon television, not everyone has a television. But by the nineteen fifties, more and more people have televisions. But every aspect of American commercialization has to distinguish between us and The Soviet Union's communist state.

I mean, and China had turned communist in 1949. So, there's that double whammy. And Americans in general lived in fear of nuclear attack. I mean, 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. I mean, this is half a century almost, forty five years of living in fear.

And it impacts every aspect of American culture to the point where during the Cold War, everyone has to toe the party line. You have to be an American. You don't want to be investigated by the FBI. There's a Red Scare going on. Joseph McCarthy is making a name for himself, rooting out traitors inside the federal government, inside the State Department.

So, you can't separate the Tejano community from the larger tidal wave of publicity and attention that the Cold War is receiving. So, you have to demonstrate love of country more than ever before. So, for the Tejano community, as it applies to the military and everything around it. In this era, in Texas especially, most towns where Tejanos lived had a military base, an airfield of some sort, a relic of the Second World War. I mean, your hometown of San Antonio is regarded as a military town, but even my hometown of Laredo had an airbase all the way up to the 1970s.

But every town had an airbase, a military for military installation, some vestige of the military. So the public is getting that information about supporting the military, supporting the armed forces, and the importance of patriotism. ROTC on high school campuses becomes overwhelming. And it all deals with this general fear of communism. You have abstract ideas, such as protecting the nation from those Soviets, but also from the Chinese.

So think of The United States kind of drawing a line in the sand and saying, if you're behind this line, you have to demonstrate patriotism. And to your earlier point, love of country, love of apple pie, and everything that goes with it.

Steve Sisson: Mhmm. But then at the same time, we've got this it's such an interesting period of history for me because I recognize how large the military was at the end of World War II, but how much they draw back in their military because of really, Harry Truman has so much to do with this, right? He really was I don't know if it was him or if it was the entire situation of the politics at the time, but he gets painted with that brush of really trying to scale back what was going on in terms of because the military industrial complex at that point was so financially important to taking us out of the horrors of the Great Depression, and now we were flushed, but the idea of supporting a military of that size, I I think you had something like six, I don't know how many, what do know, 6,000,000 Americans? I mean, I don't remember the number, it was like a very large number of people who were in the military at the end of WWII, and then they have to scale all the way back to well under a million. I think there's half a million people in the military during that window.

This is a little known aspect of American history that I think really plays into the challenges of how we what happens, why Korea is such a weird war, but yet is going to end up being very, very important in terms of the way America doesn't learn its lesson in terms of going into the next war in Vietnam. I mean, while it's scaled up because of the Cold War stuff, there's still not a lot of planning going on. But I think a lot of that has to do with this ongoing struggle in The United States between balancing a budget, finding and controlling a military industrial complex that has so much money that it can actually unbelievably impact. I mean, some ways, there are only these democratic forces that are trying to keep America from becoming basically a military state. I mean, I think a lot of people looking at The United States would consider us in a lot of that period of time as being a military state, but we didn't consider ourselves as that.

So, anyway, this doesn't have a lot to do with Tejanos and American wars, except that it will impact them as they're deciding what to do and how to do it because there's so many less jobs. I mean, there it was a big scale back in this window of time.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. But I think one slight correction to your point. You're right. But I think we could continue past Vietnam even though our podcast will conclude generally with Vietnam, but I think this is the American way of war. People are willing to send in soldiers.

But as soon as this war is over, everyone wants their boys home, their fathers, their sons, their brothers. Everyone wants to just go back. And this was found in the Civil War. This was found in the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II. Everyone just wants to go home.

I mean, people want to be with their loved ones. And the idea of a permanent military post-World War II, you have technology. And this is like a continuing struggle even now in the twenty first century as we're moving towards drones. But this idea of having men in uniform is being fought over. And now the Pentagon after 1947, where officials that are proponents of air power think that they can solve any war now with technology, with the atomic bomb, and then later, by the nineteen fifties, the hydrogen bomb, they think that that should be enough.

Now with jet airplanes, helicopters in the 1950s, you think that technology will supplant the use of manpower. So therefore, you have like that, that dichotomy, The United States regards itself as a peaceful nation. But at the same time, the military industrial complex is building and supplying vast sums of modern day weapons for them and their allies. Now by the nineteen fifties, NATO too.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. And one thing we want to make sure we trace here right before we jump into the actual action in Korea is this other piece that becomes really, really important for all of us, and we're talking about it every day in our daily conversations around politics in The United States. This idea of immigration and how immigration is affecting what's going on here, both in terms of the way that Tejanos are using the military as a way to have a path towards citizenship, but also just during this window of time, I mean, there's a lot of controlling the border and sending people back. In fact, the name of one of the, INS' processes is the term, I'm not going to use it because you can use it because you're a historian, but it's like, I mean, it's just crazy that at the same window of time, we've got this big force, and this is definitely impacting Central And South Texas.

Alex Mendoza: Oh, most definitely. And it goes back to like how The United States, how Americans just generally regard their histories. I mean, I often when I teach, I suggest that history is cyclical. Every three thirty years, every twenty or thirty years, you have the same culture wars. You have fear of immigration.

I mean, this is all the way back to the nineteenth century Chinese exclusion, then you have quotas based on Southern And Eastern Europe, then you have deportations in the nineteen thirties. And as you mentioned a couple of minutes ago, as soon as those jobs and the end of World War two kind of finishes up, then you have another wave of deportations under the Eisenhower administration. This is post 1952. And, yeah, I'll say it. I mean, because they regard it as Operation Wetback because Mexican Americans had come in, and they were brought in by the federal government during World War II under the Bracero Program.

So even my father, who was in his 20s at the time, late 1940s and the early 1950s, was a bracero. So he came to work during World War two. And what's fascinating is that as soon as the war is over and those immigrant laborers are no longer needed, it's time to get everyone out

to allow the affluence of The United States to mushroom in the postwar era. So, this operational wetback, according to the INS, was able to deport 1,300,000 Mexican Americans. And, of course, some US citizens, as we could reflect in the modern era happening with ICE, get wrapped up and get deported too.

Steve Sisson: 1,300,000 people in one year. You said not in one year, 1954. Like, that's that is huge, a number of people.

Alex Mendoza: And Texas was the fulcrum of, like, how these deportations would take place, the railroads. So, we're talking about Mexican Americans coming in from Chicago and Los Angeles and the American Southwest basically being funneled through El Paso and Laredo and elsewhere to get them back to Mexico, to repatriate them back to Mexico.

Steve Sisson: So, we've got this Communism thread we're pulling. We've got this thing that's changing and shifting, yet we've got the same old racist stories and classist stories that have been going on in America. And now we have this conflict. And talk a little bit I do think it's important since Korea is a conflict that's not well known, just how did we get how did that in as tight a way you can wrap it up, like, how did we get there? I mean, and then it's a real war.

In fact, some of the worst stories I've ever heard about what it is to be a warrior come out of the winters in Korea. I mean, seems to be an incredibly horrible time to have been a soldier. But, like, tell us a little bit how we get to Korea. It's such a short engagement and it's kind of a cluster, but however you feel most I mean, book goes into this really well. You do a really good job of giving us an overview and consolidating and bringing the stories of these Tejanos into the story as it goes along.

So, I highly recommend this chapter to anybody that's listening. It's really, really well done. But give us a little bit of an encapsulation of how we get to Korea, and because it's so short, maybe even all the way through it.

Alex Mendoza: I'll be as brief as I can. And to your earlier point, it's a forgotten war along with the War of 1812. And this is because Americans are very selective. I mean, for the War of 1812, you're between the two pillars of the American Revolution, which is independence and the Civil War, which is national unification. And because of that, any war in between just gets short shrift.

Korea is between World War Two, the greatest generation and Vietnam with all its discourse over protests and dubious aspects. So, Korea gets forgotten as well, despite how brief and how short it is. But in many respects, Americans got themselves into this Korean War because they neglected Southeast Asia. They essentially never mentioned the importance of, having these borders, these boundaries. And South Korea had been leaning towards democracy and North Korea, Korea, which borders China, China had had been leaning towards Communism.

Communism. And this is the beginning of the domino theory, the idea that if one small nation happens to topple towards communism during the Cold War, then other nations will soon topple

right after that. And before it, then it hits Japan, then it hits The Philippines, and then before it, it's going to be right on the doorstep of San Francisco. So, Americans had no other alternative but to support South Korea and to try to make sure that they could keep communism at bay. And this is going to be the foundation for practically the next forty years as wherever communism pops up, Americans have to oppose it logistically, militarily, or financially.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. It's at this thinking back to the mid-eighties when I was when we were both in high school and the Iran Contra affair and what was going on in Nicaragua. How long that window is of the fear that the Cold War pressed over us. It's still something we're I know the historians are thinking about it, but I'm not sure the average, everyday American is actually thinking a little bit about how much that has impacted the way that they operate, the way they think, the way they maybe even deselect politics as a mode of paying attention even though everything is political from what you buy at the grocery store to how you vote. Everything has a political element.

But what do we when we think about the experience in Korea, though, let's talk a little bit about maybe one or two of the stories of these Tejanos who are in this war. They I mean, as you say, as we said in World War I and then not in World War I, it was a theme, but in World War II, it became an overwhelming theme, and by Korea, it is absolutely in our faces. These veterans do not want to talk about what happened to them when they were there. And can you unpack some of that for us? Because, again, is this particular to the Mexican American community?

Or do you think this is rife all the way through all of the veterans who are coming back? African American, Anglo, anybody? And what is I mean, again, you do unpack this a little bit in the book, but I'm just curious if you can give us an idea of how war in America was considered, at least up until Vietnam, and then after that we've got this back and forth that we have going on. It's considered the right thing to do. But yet, when these men come back from war, they don't want to talk about it?

That sounds like hell. So how can hell be the right thing to do? And we're sending all these people in I mean, whatever. It's been happening forever and ever. War has been happening.

But just talk about this a little bit because I think it's important for people to realize this stoicism that we may sense from men in general. I mean, it is not many men who want to talk about their experiences in war, but in Korean War, it seems like they want to speak about it even less. I think that's part of it. By the time we get to Vietnam, people want to tell their story because they felt like they were manipulated and they had been lied to and that the vast cancerous under belly of the political system was coming people were becoming aware of what was going on. But yet these Korean gentlemen come back and they're like, don't want to talk about this.

Alex Mendoza: It's absolutely right. And to your point, I do mention a thing that I think it's generational. It has nothing to do with race, social class, anything else of that nature. And let me just kind of go off tangent just for a little bit, if you could allow me. My son and I have been avid fans of *The Sopranos* for years.

And in the book, I snuck in a line that Tony Soprano would often mention. Tony Soprano sees a therapist, for those who may not know *The Sopranos*, and he gets a lot of feedback from this therapist. And, he's trying to cope with his anxieties and his mental health. But he always points out that why can't we have men like Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type? And I went back to kind of research this because of that line of *The Sopranos*, believe it or not.

And this is a day and age, 1950s, 1940s, where the strong silent type in Westerns and film, men are supposed to be stoic. Men are supposed to kind of bottle up their feelings. And it is just human nature. I mean, nobody understands the concepts of post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illness, or shell I mean, they called it just shell shock at the time. But I think truly underscores just like how devastating, combat experience could be.

And I remember coming across like one particular episode with Jose Cantu, who was a veteran of Korea and he came back to South Texas. He worked for the Texas Department of Transportation and his family just completely I mean, his wife was a teacher. He had seven kids and nobody heard about his military exploits until he passed away. And then, awards and the mementos, which were hidden. His mentioned that, his father had a storage room, and it was made out of Adobe.

This is like late twentieth century, like 1980s, 1990s. And this is like an Adobe storage room where we keep all these tools. But he had this box in South Texas in the heat of South Texas just filled with, like, some of his old war memorabilia, but the family would never get, like, details about what he experienced, and what things were like. So, he passed away at an early age in the 1990s, but others have come across to be able to talk about it, those Korean veterans, into the early 2000s, to at least chronicle their experience, to at least recognize some of the trials and tribulations to your earlier point of how cold it was in Korea, how brutal the fighting was in Korea, just how frustrated they felt by these geopolitical decisions of not being able to attack because MacArthur said so. All of this, for some, those who survived into the 2000s becomes apparent that they had been bottling up their feelings or sentiments or pain for far too long.

But this is generational. I mean, people are men are supposed to hold the party line and be stoic and reserved.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. It's our definition of a warrior. Right? I think, though, one that I think is really important to unpack here is as we move, because we're going to move into a much more contentious, challenging battle, but one of the things that we've been I mean, war scenario with Vietnam, but one of the things we've been tracking is how for the Tejanos veteran, the Tejanos, there's this opportunity to be in military, provides financial opportunity. Sometimes those things don't turn out to be the way that they think they are, or they do turn out to be from a financial perspective, but yet there's still this vast underbelly of racism that's going on in America at the time.

But after coming out of into Korea and then coming out of Korea, we're going to start to sense a little bit of a different vision of war. That war is not maybe the exact kind of venue in which to optimize, unless your scenario is being incredibly poverty, unless the day to day, your day to day life in South Central Texas is, or in El Paso or wherever it may be, is actually worse than war, right?

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. A lot of the testimonials that I came across while doing this chapter spoke to the economic factors of, hey, post-World War II, you have the GI Bill. And people saw that and it fixated on the idea that you will have economic opportunity. So, what this is, is a transformational experience. Of course, they may not know the ramifications of combat, the struggles of combat, you may think that maybe technology will help you in the nineteen fifties and beyond.

But to them, it just seemed like a good trade off to don the uniform, receive, know, your two, three, four years of duty, and then go back to get your education or to get a skill to enter the workforce in a much better place than where they stood. And some of the testimonials spoke about this because there's one child, who grows up in the late 1940s, and he's like one of five or one of six. And they have no other recourse but to join the military because they know that they'll be taken care of. So, discrimination, prejudice, that goes out the window when it's coming down to survival for many of these men.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. So, let's wrap up this episode, let's and, of course, every time we wrap up, we want to talk about memory, and there's two threads I want to peer pull here. The first is just around this idea of ROTC, which you brought up earlier, which really is a way of remembering. And again, it's maybe not even remembering, it's like seeding future memory. We have an entire enculturation of American high schoolers into the values of the military, which is really I hadn't thought about it until I read your book, Alex, and I'm like, Wow.

What a difference it is from 1935 where there's, war is just war. But 1945, if you're a high schooler, you're being walked up to by a teacher or somebody in the military and saying, Hey, why don't you join the ROTC? Like, to me, it's like some And then also in your A lot of what you write in the book, there's images of your Especially your Laredo Martin high school's ROTC Not just the ROTC, but your newspaper and how the newspaper continued to perpetuate this idea of the ROTC. I think it's kind of interesting to think of as a sub like a little thread coming through here is how this sea changes war in the minds of young people. I was at, my dad went into the ROTC, in this area.

He was born in 1944, and when he went to high school, went into the ROTC, and then that ended up paying for him to go to school, to go to a university, and then he went into the military after that. So the ROTC is a really big piece of what's going on when we think about anybody in the war, and if you think about a young person who's coming from an immigrant family or coming from a socioeconomic place where they're looking at their parents and going, Wow, like, this guy over here is making a bunch of money and my dad doesn't make anywhere near. Maybe I should join the ROTC because there's going to be more opportunities. Maybe unpack

this idea of the ROTC a little bit because I think there may not be another window for us to talk about it, and I think it's so crucial when I think about every young person, at least in Texas, coming through, how important the ROTC is to this.

Alex Mendoza: Oh my gosh, I hope I don't run out of time because there's so much to unpack about the ROTC. And one of the things that I found truly fascinating is I went back to kind of look at newspapers and yearbooks, and I was like, totally surprised. My hometown had only one public high school in the 1940s and the 1950s. It was Martin High School, Raymond and Tirza Martin High, Laredo Martin. And I was surprised going through their yearbook that the ROTC for that school had more pages for the unit for the ROTC unit than the football team.

This is like Texas. I mean, that's unheard of.

Steve Sisson: I mean, y'all your football team was horrible, Alex. Let's just say let's just say it's true.

Alex Mendoza: I recognize that they were 0 and 10. Even they were 0 and 10 even in 1990. I'm sorry, 1980s when I went to school.

Steve Sisson: I mean, I didn't go to Nixon, but I know the folks from Nixon Oscar Vela would be saying something really derogatory about your high school at this point. No kidding. No kidding.

Alex Mendoza: But it's still Texas. I mean, football reigns supreme in the Lone Star State. But ROTC had a strong following to the point where yearbooks are dedicated to the local commander of the ROTC unit. That's how much respect that they have. They have, obviously, their nominations for homecoming queen, homecoming king.

I mean, you name it. Proms. But it kind of suggests that it develops all the way to the nineteen sixties and the nineteen seventies. Even one of my favorite movies, Animal House, if you think about it includes an aspect of the ROTC and just like how dominant they could be on a campus. The building that I work at the University of North Texas was constructed during the Vietnam War era.

And ROTC used to be on the 3rd Floor of my building. And it's like a pillbox because of just how the sentiments shifted. And what I mean by a pillbox, like there's no windows, I don't have an office window. And the stairs are designed in such a way where you really can't cordon off anyone because this was the age of sit ins. During the Vietnam War era, you sat and you protested silently, passively.

But this construction of this building is basically designed for a military engagement or zombie apocalypse, no windows, staircases that are just unable to be cordoned off by a small number of students. And it was designed just to keep any potential, anti ROTC protesters at bay. But, back to, like, the 1950s, what the ROTC stands for, I think you hit the nail on the head, you mentioned the term acculturation. So it's another way for young Mexican American men to kind

of be given that option that the military is not so bad. When you see it now in part of your school community, in terms of your town community.

And by and large, as we talked about just a few minutes ago, Texas is a military state in many ways. So, this is just another fulcrum to kind of pivot in that direction.

Steve Sisson: So we don't have a whole lot more time, but I do think it's important to unpack, especially relative to memory, just Richard Cavazos's story, or at least giving us a little bit of a frame of what's going on there, especially because it has some relevance today in some way. Tell us a little bit about him and how that is important. We just talked about the ROTC in memory, but how is Cavazos important with memory and as we end this episode?

Alex Mendoza: Richard Cavazos is from Kingsville. He served in both Korea and Vietnam. He gets awards for both, but he rises through the ranks to become the very first four star general in the US Army. And this is huge. And he passed away in his 80s, of course, unfortunately, due to Alzheimer's.

But what's important for the Tejanos community is that they've never really been recognized in the Lone Star State. And when we get to our concluding episode, we'll talk about the monuments, and the efforts of the Mexican American community to sort of frame themselves into this larger lexicon of that of war in Texas. So, when the Biden administration came into play, there was a move in the late 2010s to kind of do away with honoring US Army bases named after Confederate war generals. Over there in Georgia, you have Fort Bragg named after Confederate General Braxton Bragg, Texas had Fort Hood in nearby Killeen, named after their General John Bell Hood. And obviously, once these efforts were made to remove those vestiges of the Confederate past, I mean, you can't really use the name of a general who fought against the US Army to name a US Army base in the modern era.

Well, Fort Hood was renamed for Fort Cavazos, in honor of Richard Cavazos, and the Tejano community, the Mexican American community was enthralled. I mean, here you finally have recognition, because what could possibly go wrong? This was a person who fought for his country, received wounds for his country, and was recognized for doing his duty. But politics comes into play. And after 2024, when the new administration came in, the idea to preserve the Confederacy, well, they did it in a very duplicitous way.

They couldn't rename it after a Confederate general. So, they had officials go through the rolls to look for anyone else that happened to be named Hood, to rename Hood and strike Cavazos from the annals of recognizing a Tejano. So, yeah, the name was erased. So, it was a short lived recognition of only a couple of years.

Steve Sisson: But we'll see. We'll see. The political tides change. And I think there's definitely throughout all of America, the vast majority of people would want to recognize Fort Cavazos over Fort Hood for any reason. I can't think of anyone in my circle of friends, family, and I have a lot of folks in my circle that are various political schemes.

It seems to me so much more a factor in the ways that politics can get positioned by the powers that be and the voices they use, and the way that they can separate us, honestly. But I don't know if a Cavazos, a name like Fort Cavazos, other than it being military, which will divide people at one way level or not, But still, I'm hopeful, optimistic that, again, maybe it doesn't turn back to Cavazos, but at least there's a recognition of that. It is hard for a lot of people for the names that come off the tip of their tongue. They're not beloved because they don't know why they like it. I think of Robert E. Lee Boulevard in Austin, Texas, right? I mean, again, Robert E. Lee as a human being, he was a he's very controversial for a lot of reasons, right? But when they changed the name of that road to another name, it was Morton is what they named it. And to me, it was like, Oh, like I was grumpy, even though politically I'm down for that. Right? But I do think there's a big piece of what we mean by memory is the American people beginning to realize what we really value as a people. And I do think the American people in general across wide swaths of who we are as Americans, we do see ourselves as diverse.

We do recognize someone else's race or class. I think the biggest challenge for most people in America these days is what their mental health is, which is getting worse and worse and worse. But those things are way beyond class and race. They're moving into many different places, especially as we see older people dealing with, as we see families dealing with Alzheimer's and everybody's mental health being really pretty significantly Mental health is now a topic for conversation, and as we do that, I think we'll begin to realize what we mean by our general health, physically and psychically as a country, if we even continue as a country. To me that seems more potentially problematic than even anything else, especially being in Texas.

We live in interesting times, and I think this idea of Fort Cabazos is one in which, to me, represents the short term ideas about politics, because I have a sense that I'm hopeful that we go back to that. And that's not a leftist or rightist position. It might be perceived by some as that, but again, even the people that I know who are conservative would probably very much prefer the name Cavazos over Hood. It's the political derangement that's going on in our country right now on both sides that it continues to separate us and not recognizing that around us everywhere we are all the people that have been in Texas for as long as we've been in Texas, and the memory can be what your son decides and my stepdaughter decides. So, to me, I'm not sure I want to use the word hope, but I'll just use the word optimism that we have shifted so much.

In the next episode, we're going to talk about the most contentious and embattled and difficult time, especially relative to memory and history. I'm really excited about the next episode. So, again, this episode went a little bit longer, but what's forty five minutes to an hour among friends? It's all good. So, anything else you want to wrap up with here, Alex, before we end this episode?

Alex Mendoza: Well, I just want to point out that I too share your hope or your optimism that hopefully something will pan out in terms of Cavazos or anyone else. But I think that it's important for us to kind of keep in mind that Hood was not even born in Texas. He led the Texas

Brigade during the Civil War, but he was born in Kentucky. So, I mean, they're really not honoring an individual that was native to Texas, and he didn't even move back to Texas after the Civil War. He went to New Orleans to make a living.

He was without one leg and without the use of one arm. He was a veteran of Gettysburg, the Battle of Chickamauga, the Atlanta campaign. So, he really didn't have strong ties to Texas, but yet he stood for something. And this is what resonates now with that community you spoke about. He stood for the Confederacy, and this is something that people begrudgingly don't want to give up on.

Steve Sisson: So It's just a small segment of the population, though, to me. I mean, maybe I'm insulated in the spaces that I'm in, but I just can't imagine that is recognized across a wide swath of America. Mean, who want anyway. We appreciate you all for listening. We got little political there at the end.

Hopefully we didn't turn anybody off in terms what we're discussing and talking about. If so, let us know. You can reach out to me. If you look on your podcast app, there'll be a way to contact me as the host. And I can send this over to Alex and he can give you an answer to your question or give you a viewpoint.

But again, Alex, I think what's really cool about this particular episode is, it's going to be the longest one we have, but yet it's the least impactful, the most forgotten war, but I think that's really in keeping with the memory. I think, know, before World War I, had this huge swath of time we needed to talk about that were so impactful for the Mexican American community, the Tejanos community, the way that America was changing. But this war also is equally important, even though it's kind of forgotten, because of its what's going to come next. I'm excited to talk about that with you next time.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. Thanks

Steve Sisson: Thanks guys for listening and we will talk to you in the next episode.

Alex Mendoza: Thank you all.