

Episode 8: The Vietnam War, History & Memory

Transcript

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Steve Sisson: Hello, and welcome back to the History and Memory Podcast with Doctor. Alexander Mendoza. Alex, how are you this fine afternoon?

Alex Mendoza: Doing well, doing well, Thank you very much.

Steve Sisson: Good. Well, we are approaching the end of our project here and moving into perhaps the most contentious war in American history. And this will create more stress and challenges on our group of folks that we're following through, but for many Tejanos, it's just more of the same, but in a different tenor and with a different kind of reaction by the general community overall to what a war situation is. As we think about that transition from that strange, period coming off of the Korean War where there was that really although I think a lot of Tejanos veterans came back from wars feeling unappreciated, still continued to be discriminated against, it seemed like post Korean War, this got even worse or seemed to come up in people's consciousness, or the expectations were different. Can you unpack that for us? What is the difference between people coming back from World War I, World War II, and coming back from Korea?

Is there a difference? Am I making this up? But it seemed like in your book, was more frustration, and maybe it was based on the idea that their war service should be recognized.

Alex Mendoza: I think you're absolutely on target. And one of the reasons why there seems to be a difference is that Korea is the very first limited war. And the prior two world conflicts, I mean, the war to end all wars, mean, World War I, and then obviously World War II, a total war, which led and was concluded with atomic weaponry. Those obviously demonstrate and suggest that America, The United States is willing to do anything to win a conflict. But in Korea, the problems with General Douglas MacArthur, the problems with [President Harry S.] Truman, the idea of just the ceasefire, and was it a real declaration of war?

All those are difficult for soldiers to unpack. And one of the consequences of that is, there is now uncertainty as to like what they're fighting for. I mean, there's abstract notions such as anti-communism, trying to prevent communism. And this is something that, they find difficult to kind of grasp as opposed to Pearl Harbor or as opposed to the USS *Maine* in 1898, something that is more tangible.

Steve Sisson: And at the same time, we've got kind of changing landscape in America during this window, generally, where people are much more aware of civil rights. This is coming out of Korea, but it's much more about the societal upheavals that are going on in The United States that are how does this affect the Tejanos and folks in Texas of Mexican American descent? How are they reacting to managing in these early years prior to Vietnam around this idea of civil rights?

Alex Mendoza: It is certainly a salient point that they have to recognize the changing world around them. And from 1950 all the way to 1964, the advent of the Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act, you can't divorce just general American society from what it means for Tejanos and for schools and for voting and for just basic privileges that were kept from them for generations. And this is something that becomes tangible. Now to point out, just to be precise, the African American civil rights movement never worked in in total conjunction with the Mexican American civil rights movement. And the two leading organizations, LULAC and the American GI Forum, all promoted this idea of assimilation and Americanization, English only.

So there seems to be, like, for the Tejano community in the mid to late 1950s and well as into the early 1960s, this general idea that they are still going to be rewarded if they follow the rules and the laws of The United States proper. So, resistance is still not there, but we will see that by the late nineteen sixties to change a little bit.

Steve Sisson: What do you think was it about the mindset of the leaders of LULAC and the American GI Forum? Do you feel like they honestly believed that this was the best route because it was the only option? Or how do you think that mindset was functioning when you think now looking back on it with many years of hindsight, you're like, that didn't work. Right? I mean, it worked to some in some sense, but certainly not to the level that they thought it was.

So we've got this hindsight of history. Right? But why do you think that was the approach that they took?

Alex Mendoza: I think it's, generally speaking, having to do with generations, and social class. The original LULAC was made up of middle class citizens, upper class citizens. So, therefore, they are, by nature, a little bit more conservative, a little bit more patient. they want to play things conservatively like a long game, so to speak. But you also see some of these symptoms in the larger, broader civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King et. al., who take a more patient approach.

But as younger generations pop up by the 1960s, that patient seems to wear thin and they want to agitate for more change by resisting, passive resistance, active resistance, whatever it takes, but their patients has worn thin that, you could still assimilate and Americanize and follow the rules, and eventually you'll be rewarded. And I think it comes down to, like, people that are poor, people that are young that believe that shaking things up leads and translates to a better outcome.

Steve Sisson: They also had a lot of examples of that. I mean, you've got everything from just a small social aspect of rock and roll and how rock and roll and the whole idea of rebellion was big in the late 50s and into the 60s. Then you have seeing the agitation and the function of agitation, even in the jazz music scene with African Americans moving into the appropriation of rock and roll music. Just thinking musically about how much this is the vibe of the times, starts

in the late 50s and rolls all the way through the 60s. I imagine at some point Mexican Americans are looking around and saying, We are dealing with very similar or even worse situations.

Or ours may be different, but similarly restrictive and really horrible. So, something different has to happen. Here are some models. Models that are accepted by the general public but other ones which get more militant. Why don't you unpack just a bit about the Chicano movement in the mid to late '60s for folks?

It's not really the topic of your book, but I think it's going to be really, really helpful when we start to go into the storylines of these Tejanos veterans and their experience in war, which they're a little more aware of. They seem to be more aware of what's going on around them politically than the prior generations, or at least what we understood about the prior generations. It's not denigrating the prior generations; it's just more of how much it's aware. I think the Chicano movement is important for people to understand.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. The first thing we need to do just to get things started is to kind of define what Chicano was. And Chicano is originally a derogatory term. It means clumsy. It is a term for Hispanics that is generally regarded as a derogatory term.

But this in itself is going to lead this younger generation to kind of lean into that as a separate type of identity as opposed to Lulek and the American GI forum. I mean, even in their seals and their official correspondence, they lean into their red, white, and blue, the American flag, the notions of the past and Americanization and English only. The Chicano movement adopts the idea of, Mexican heritage of Aztec roots. And this is something that obviously bothered Texas officials at the turn of the twentieth century during the World War one era. But by the late nineteen sixties, they feel emboldened that it's alright to be different.

And to your earlier point about rebellion and music, I mean, you find that in film, you find that in just American culture that people are trying to stake out, that it's okay to accept their identity. So the Chicano movement adopts this idea that it is fine to be different, and they lean into that sense of difference. They call themselves Chicano. They embrace their indigenous roots, which is also something that it becomes very palpable by the late 1960s. And they will emulate what they've seen in terms of resistance movements across the board of the civil rights era, which is sit ins, strikes, and no longer just working within the confines of the status quo.

Steve Sisson: I noticed in your book, you mentioned it offhandedly, but I wonder how important a thread it is to talk about here, given what we're discussing with the Chicano movement, is there was a loss after, somewhere after World War II of Spanish language newspapers, Spanish language there was a lot more of that going on in the first fifty years of the history, but later those go away. Do you think this has some impact too? There's no voice, there's no place to go, there's no way to be seen or understood and that has to come out somewhere as well.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. With Native Americans, the turn of the twentieth century being sent to so-called Indian schools and basically trying to erase that language and that culture, I mean,

this is something the younger generations begin to sort of grapple with, the Chicano era movement, which is the fear of losing out on language and culture just because of the full bore effort to try to lean into this American notion of the English language and American values and American ideals. And it's practically overwhelming the 1950s. During the Eisenhower administration, this is where we get "one nation under God," and the idea of "In God we trust" in the national currency.

So clearly, Cold War rhetoric to try to differentiate Americans from those godless communists. I mean, that that kind of has an effect. But by the same token, for the Chicano movement, it is a sober reminder that their identity, their heritage, their past is slowly being stripped away. And speaking Spanish, which had been targets for schools and school districts in the nineteen fifties and the nineteen sixties, the whole idea of language becomes a salient point that they want to maintain.

Steve Sisson: And as we move into thinking about the military conflict that is bubbling up, we're still as we start to think about why people talk a little bit about this period of time post we talked about it last episode a bit, but coming out of the Korean War, America deescalates their military again. They've lowered the number of people. Talk a little bit about how this works and then how the Tejano communities are looking at military service as an option. This is an ongoing theme we've been discussing through each of these wars. Are they the same story?

Are there some new stories going on relative to what's happening in terms of why Tejanos are deciding to join the military? What is it in the military as well? There's a lot there to unpack, but it'll set us up as we start going into the Vietnam War proper.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. How we got started, we started looking at, like, monuments and civic celebrations along the border, El Paso, Laredo, McAllen, to kind of think of, like, what these dignitaries often point out. They just pointed out simply love of country, love of nation, love of democracy when it's actually more complex. It's a very comprehensive series of reasons why soldiers enlist, why they are motivated to join the armed forces. And still in the nineteen sixties, it's economically driven because most Mexican Americans in Texas are poor or of the poor classes.

But you're right. There are new developments surfacing. And one of the impacts of this, and we have actual testimonials pointing out that Hollywood is making a name to kind of bring people on board as to, like, the wonders of the military and heroism and love of country and loyalty. So, young teenagers, young boys are beginning to love the military thanks to movies throughout the fifties and the nineteen sixties. I mean, there's so many of them, too many to list, you know.

But, *The Longest Day*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *Von Ryan's Express*, which had, I believe Frank Sinatra in the leading role. And this is just cultural and impact. Of course, John Wayne is going to, throw his hat into the ring later on in the 1960s.

Steve Sisson: Even the future president of The United States will as well. Right?

Alex Mendoza: And Ronald Reagan. Good old Ronald Reagan. So, there is that that palpable difference now that people are getting it. And sometimes history plays a role too. And people begin to look at their family histories. I mean, of course, by World War one as ambivalence runs rampant in terms of the Tejanos community, should they join, should they not?

By the nineteen sixties, the family history was pretty rich. You have soldiers that could point to the past, to their fathers, to their grandfathers who might have fought in World War one, brothers, uncles. And we have testimonials that, men like Richard Brito from Brownsville, his father's cousin flew a P-47 in World War II. And he pointed out that this is why he joined. George Saenz, for example, from South Texas, his dad served in the Second World War.

So, he had the stories to tell. Jose Antonio, or he went by the name of Tony Dodier. I mean, his dad was World War 2. His granddad was World War 1 vet. He believed that this is just what was in the cards for him.

Thus family history, I think matters a great deal too. In addition to the factors of love of country, the economically driven factors and there's just so much as to why some people join the ranks and people are still trying to run away from home, trying to run away from problems. And that also, contributes to some of these men joining the armed forces. But it's still economics, but Hollywood and family history, obviously have an impact. And I think that the cold war era really did a good number on people.

And as we discussed, like back in the 1950s, I mean, military bases, armed forces day, parades, celebrations, the impact that those have American community, on communities at large, just to put it simply. This common dominates the mindset of many Tejanos families and the Tejanos community as to, like, why they need to support military.

Steve Sisson: So this is just an anecdotal offering, but I grew up in San Antonio in the late seventies, early eighties, and in that window of time or post-Vietnam War but it's so funny in all of this process of talking through this, my memory of most Tejanos and the Mexican Americans in San Antonio was a disproportionate number of them were proud of their military service. San Antonio was a military town. And Anglo and even African Americans, it wasn't the same level of pride in their military service. Some of that might just come out of what's going on culturally. It might be just a San Antonio picture.

But again, anecdotally, as I grew up, I always marveled at the amount of pride that there was in the Mexican American community around their service in the military. Again, I don't know if that's representative across other places in Texas or in the Southwest, but it is something that was surprising to me in earlier episodes that wasn't as big of a theme. But as I grew up, was like, no, they're very proud of their service in the military. And now I know why. Now I know why, because it was the main ability, the main pathway towards basically being American but in their own unique way, in a way that any American could be.

Right? Like, think about being it was a lot harder for a Mexican American to be billionaire, a millionaire or a billionaire, than it was for an Anglo, but here was a way that they could absolutely assimilate, fit in, and also raise the value of raise the options for their family.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. I think I think you're on target. I mean, I know you speak of things anecdotally, but I'll give you a couple of examples. I spent the last few years not only writing this book, but also traveling around the state, going to track meets. And I usually just kind of hang out in, some part of town, just kind of look around.

And Waco has seen a resurgence, a revitalization of their river area and they have like a brand new celebration to veterans. I mean, most towns in Texas have celebrations to veterans. But one of the things that I found unique is that El Paso, Laredo, Eagle Pass, Del Rio, and the Rio Grande Valley, I mean, they are emphasizing the Hispanic veterans. As I mentioned, Laredo created theirs in 2004.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. They're OG. Yeah. They're original.

Alex Mendoza: Back, like, over twenty years ago. I mean, Arlington just opened their doors to the Congressional Medal of Honor Museum, just in the last year. But Laredo was the first and El Paso and then, McAllen, the Rio Grande Valley followed. They do a point to emphasize or perhaps overemphasize the Hispanic contribution for the reasons he mentioned. I think you're right.

Steve Sisson: So let's move our way into this complicated scenario of war. How do we how do you don't need to give us a this is not a podcast for how America got into the Vietnam War, but it is important to recognize, at this point, we'd just come out of Korea, a war in which many people afterwards said, How hell did this happen? And now here we do again. There is one basic thing that we mentioned in terms of why the military, that military brainwashing you were just discussing about this cold war and the so what is what's going on here? Who's the big bad the big bad daddy who turns out to not be just one bad daddy, but lots and lots of bad daddies all over everywhere.

I mean, just say the C word. Right?

Alex Mendoza: I'll be honest. I was very, very fortunate to be finishing up, like, the Cold War era chapters of my book right when my colleague and my neighbor across my hallway, Dr. Geoff Wawro, who was the former military history center director at UNT for, like, twenty years, who was finishing up his book on the Vietnam War, a very well received study. And he allowed me to read his galleys. It was entitled *The Vietnam War: A Military History*. And what he determined is what we've kind of known for a while, and most serious historians often point this out. It's just a series of blunders, hubris, so to speak.

This is America's longest war, and no president wanted to be the one to be seen as being weak on communism. Nobody wanted to see South Vietnam fall to the communists because it would

be the domino theory fulfilled. It would be America's nightmare of foreign policy to see the Soviet Union, the communist Chinese win a nation, win a nation state on their behalf. So, you have just a series of presidents, Truman, to Eisenhower, to John F. Kennedy, to Lyndon Baines Johnson, and later Nixon.

Just everyone is refusing to acquiesce. They're refusing to give in. And what it leads to is just a disastrous conflict. Most historians would agree that it's a disaster. There's no congruent policy. There's no real determination in terms of how they're going to go about this. And I think one of the things that always stuck with me in terms of Geoff Wawro's book is he pointed out that at the end it was costing about a \$168,000 for every confirmed kill that the US military was able to obtain. During the 1960s, and obviously there in the early 1970s, couldn't have both guns and butter at the same time, thus leading to this disastrous notion of what the Vietnam War was all about.

Steve Sisson: And the way we stumble in is just a lot, it seems to me that there's a hinge. I wonder if Wawro's book talks about this, but there seems this hinge of we're already we get we slip, we slide into it in the late fifties. And then in the early sixties, after JFK wins, he's required because of what's going on with Castro and the fears that were going on in The United States at that point of how close and how horrible a conflagration could be if this was the war that we got into in terms of this close to the US. But it seems to me it's just so interesting. One of things you said in your book was something I didn't really realize was I forgot that JFK died and then the South Vietnamese's leader, who was a horrible person by pretty much all levels of understanding, but he died right before JFK died. Then things got even worse for LBJ and Lyndon Baines Johnson because of this weird thing of history that just one leader dies and then another leader dies, and now by the time he picks up Vietnam, it's as bad as it could possibly be, which a place which he could not find a way politically to extricate himself.

Probably could have found a way to extricate himself if he hadn't just been thinking about it from a political death. Right? But that's another piece of the puzzle here. It's like, from this point on, every war that happens in America is as I mean, I guess they've all been political, but it just seems the politics of the Vietnam War are so crucial. But then there's this three month window where there's everybody a six month window where things are basically ignored, then it's in a major complication that there's no way to get out of without and safe face.

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. And Lyndon Baines Johnson's papers are at UT. And, they have recordings and they have basically the full documentation. A lot of this is just a disregard for the Vietnamese. And I teach the Civil War class, and I just finished teaching it this spring. And the general consensus students have is like, the South didn't really have much of a chance or fighting against this larger, stronger nation like the United States. The Union has more money, it has more resources, has more men. They never had a chance. Well, the story is in Vietnam, and this is something that even Johnson and Nixon disregarded. The Vietnam War was just a lot of it was about hubris. They disregarded, the will to resist, to make things difficult for this large, powerful nation state of the United States. And Johnson has this one quote that I read years ago that always sticks out and, he was a colorful individual, but he often regarded, the

Vietnam, the Vietnam nation as a piss poor country. And he would say “they're not bright enough to pour piss out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel.” So, this is a type of view that basically led, these administrations to just pour more money and then later more men, then more material into this ever-growing conflict.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. So, let's move into the soldiers' experience. Talk a little bit about what service is like and the ways things have changed, from drastic change from World War 1 and then into World War 2 where there's more order and planning. And then, of course, we have I think Korea is a little bit different just because it was a surprise in a lot of ways. It came up quickly, whereas this war was obvious it was coming and we were already rattling the sabers of war because we are America and we're a country that can We're a warrior nation, right, in a lot of ways.

So talk about what the service looks like and then how that service is thought of by the Tejanos community and then also the veterans, the warriors who were going to be soldiers that are going to be, either volunteering or being conscripted into this war?

Alex Mendoza: Well, many of the men that joined the ranks, and I'll talk about the Tejanos who I explored, some of them actually believe that they want to beat the draft, so they enlist before. And this is not knowing, like, what the warfare is going to be like. And there is a certain level of naivete that they enlist. They're trying to get into one gentleman who was going to enlist in the Air Force. He had a college degree, but he didn't want to be drafted, and he just chose his own path.

But they really don't understand what they're going to be facing. And this is going to be one of the biggest differences in their testimonials that in prior conflicts, they're going to be fighting men in uniform. they fought against the Japanese. They fought against the Germans. They fought against the North Koreans.

And then obviously the Chinese and the Korean War in World War 1, they fight against men in uniform and German uniforms, for example. But here they're going to be fighting against guerrillas. These are civilians, and they blend into the jungle. They hide behind rocks, and they leave, explosives, what we call IEDs now, just for them to be trapped. And they find this thing to be difficult, this notion.

I mean, it's like an abstract war that they're having to fight now where you don't know where the enemy is. You don't understand the history of this nation-state. And this is one of the challenges that that we're going to see. And by extension, what happens? Unlike the previous conflicts when soldiers often point out that they're seeking vengeance for Pearl Harbor, that they're seeking an end to the fascist regimes of Italy and Germany.

This war is going to take precedence of being loyal to their fellow soldiers, their friends, their comrades. And many of them notice that that this is far more important because they can't wrap their heads around, like, what exactly are they fighting for when no one in the nation seems to

want them there to begin with? So, one of the biggest challenges, I believe, in terms of Vietnam as opposed to prior wars is you see like the shift towards what motivates these men. And it's basically the person next to them. their fellow soldiers is what's dominating their motivation.

Loyalty to country eventually taken over by loyalty to their comrades, to their fellow soldiers. And this is going to be something different.

Steve Sisson: But there the Tejanos and other Hispanic soldiers are also kind of stuck in the middle of something as well. So, their experience is there's a there's a there's a rat there's a lot of strife between Anglo and African American soldiers, and it seems like the Hispanic soldiers are stuck in between. Talk a little bit about that experience and how it's pretty unique in the history of American warfare. Like, this is they're they were it's usually it's one against another, but in this case, they sat in a they sat in a unique position.

Alex Mendoza: Oh, absolutely. And, one of the things that we kind of have to consider is that going all the way back to Jose de la Luz Saenz, the World War I veteran who left behind the very first memoir of Tejanos in World War I. One of the things that I noticed as I was going through this, I mean, Tejanos discriminated during this era. And one of the challenges of the Vietnam War conflict is that they find themselves right in the middle of the civil rights movement. I mean, 1962, you have sit-ins.

1964, you have, have, broad scale movements, going on. I mean, Dr. Martin Luther King is alive till 1968. Obviously, he's on the tailend of *Brown v Board of Education*. You have, so many resistance movements in terms of Little Rock, Arkansas, Ole Miss, and Tejanos find themselves kind of caught in the middle of all things. And we've noticed that in past conflicts, light skinned Mexican Americans somehow feel, they're exempt from, like, the discrimination and the biases that exist.

But now all of a sudden, they're right smack in the middle of, this tension between black soldiers and white soldiers. And a lot is class oriented. I mean, we have deferments. you have people avoiding Vietnam, because they're college students. And at the time, obviously, just being college student was reserved for those that were well-to-do or, somewhat well-to-do.

So clearly, there are some biases there. But all of a sudden, you have Tejanos and Mexican American soldiers from California and elsewhere all of sudden be, smack in the middle of, like, these outright tensions, and they're trying to kind of navigate their way through as best as they can.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. you tell one of the stories of a specific stories that you tell in the book is about the friendship between Eduardo Teniente and Nacho Torres. Do you want to talk a little bit about them? Their experiences as instructive or as an example of what it is like for one of our Tejano for our two Tejano soldiers in this war.

Alex Mendoza: Yeah. I mean, that that touches on, like, the sense of family loyalty that is, like, very, very important. And we have a lot actually from Teniente because he survived. And they're both from Laredo. And then Teniente gave, like, interviews in the postwar era to local newspapers, which is where I came across a lot of his information.

So, he's speaking to them, like, the 1980s and the 1990s, having survivor's guilt because his friend Ignacio Torres, otherwise known as Nacho Torres, he died in Vietnam. And Teniente sought vengeance, became braver to a fault, in terms of attacking Vietnamese soldiers. And but in his return to South Texas, he had survivor's guilt and he had never reconciled that until he went to go meet with his friend's parents, to meet the family, to talk about his feelings. And, in our last podcast, we mentioned, the strong silent type where you have to try to suck it up and be stoic and continue to forge ahead. But we're noticing that in Vietnam, soldiers are recognizing, their sentiments or feelings for their fellow, soldiers or loved ones a little bit.

It's more pronounced and this is something that matters to many of them.

Steve Sisson: But we have heroes here too. Right? I mean, it's one of the things that heroes in the standard sense of what we think of as war heroes. The disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic conscripts into the military does have one upside, right? And that there's more opportunity for heroism to be valued, there is this.

And you've got a number of great examples but talk about two of them or whatever ones feel most appropriate to bringing up just to give people a flavor of, again, the experience of a Tejanos soldier in Vietnam.

Alex Mendoza: I I would be remiss if I don't talk about sergeant Roy Benavides. I mean, he stands head and shoulders in some respects. Raul is his real name, but he went by Roy. Mister Benavides actually was born in Cueto, Texas, but was raised in El Campo after his dad died of tuberculosis at the age of two. So, his dad was like a Mexican laborer, just a farmer.

So, they had made their way there. His mom was a Yankee Indian and Roy Benavides was basically destined for a life of a labor. But when his dad died at two and then his mom died just a few years after being remarried. So, he's not even past elementary school and he's basically like an orphan. He joins the Texas National Guard as soon as he's of age, and that's his path to survival. And we know about this because he wrote three autobiographies. *The Three Wars of Roy Benavides* is the title of one of them, and one of those wars is his war against, being an orphan. And once the 1960s rolled around after being in the National Guard, I mean, this is a man who just wanted to be in the military.

This is going to be his outlet. So, his story really seems like a Hollywood movie in some respects because in 1965, he goes to Vietnam. He's part of a special forces outfit, over there. And he steps on a landmine in 1965. He is told there's no way you're ever going to be able to walk again. I mean, that's it.

You got to succumb to this reality, but the will of Benavides, who had already been married for a couple of years, he contradicts doctors' orders to remain bedridden. And according to his account, he, would wake up at night and just try to practice standing or try to practice wiggling his toes. Mean, he's doing his own physical therapy in some respects. And sure enough, like, within a year, he's able to walk again, much to the surprise of many of the medical personnel.

And what does he do?

He wants to go back to Vietnam. So, he's back in Vietnam by late 1968, and this is where he establishes his heroic nature. He calls it six hours in hell, but this is a man who took 37 bullets, various bayonet wounds, and to save fellow soldiers, and he's considered dead. I mean, they have the body bag out for him. And according to him, he had to spit on the doctor so he could realize that he's actually alive.

So, he had been six hours in hell. I mean, there's no survivors left. I mean, he basically takes out a small contingent of enemy soldiers. But, in the city near the city of Loch Nien. And what he is awarded for heroism. he's given obviously the Purple Heart and various other awards, but the elusive one is the Congressional Medal of Honor. And the way the government worked, time passed, and he's not eligible for the Medal of Honor. one of the caveats is you have to have an eyewitness since it can't be your testimony. And for him, he's just a little bit perplexed: "Like, there's no eyewitnesses. We killed everyone." I mean, no one's left.

It actually takes over, like, ten years before an eyewitness learns about what happened to Roy Benavides and says, hey. I saw what happened. And he writes like that. I think it's like a nine or 10 page testimonial and signs it.

And this is enough to kind of push him forward, Benavides forward to get the Congressional Medal of Honor. It's actually Ronald Reagan who gives him the medal of honor in I believe 1981. And this becomes the face for Mexican American veterans during this conflict. And his papers are housed at the University of Texas at Austin. I went through them and he was actively campaigning for this.

There's no doubt. I mean, he was writing his autobiographies, writing his memoirs. He's going to succumb at a, I think, relatively young age, age of 68, the end of the 1990s. He dies from diabetes and pulmonary disease. But this is a gentleman who actually promoted the idea of heroism.

And he was a public speaker, and did speaking engagements around the country, every year. And it's so unique, his story, again, three autobiographies, but he becomes the very first Hispanic to be featured as a GI Joe doll. And this is like something that I first learned about it years ago when I was first researching Tejanos in the military. I mean, that that that was unique because I never I never noticed that. But I think it was like right around the year 2000/2001.

So I think I was done playing with GI Joe's. So this was one of the unique stories, and you can't really talk about too many Mexican American veterans without thinking about Benavidez because he bought the whole idea of American democracy and nationalism and, patriotism when he carried it until his death.

Steve Sisson: Did he die in El Campo? Is that where he did he live there all his life, or did he move?

Alex Mendoza: No. No. He moved. He moved. Yeah. I believe it was San Antonio, if I remember correctly. He had challenges in terms of his later years. And one of those challenges that I think Social Security tried to take away is disability. So he was, an advocate of trying to fight for as much medical treatment as possible, especially for veterans and along, talking to congress. So he had believed to move to San Antonio. That's why his papers are close by in Austin.

Steve Sisson: So this is a form of memory. Right? The GI Joe doll is definitely a unique and incredibly unique version of it's not a statue, but yet maybe it gets in more hands and is seen by more people by being represented as a doll than it. And these GI Joe dolls are not dolls in the sense that we think of as dolls that girls played with. Every little boy played with these GI Joe dolls.

I did for sure, the late 70s, early 80s. I had like eight or nine of them. And it's interesting that they don't seem to be as prominent in our society anymore. But definitely, when you and I were growing up, these they were around everywhere. From the tiny little green the tiny little green ones that you could buy and, that were that were nondescript and they weren't any one person.

Right? But all the way to ones that had they were named and they knew exactly who that particular was. They would even come with a storyline or a or a timeline of their life history. So this idea of Benavidez as being the first GI Joe doll is a really unique version of this idea of memory thread that we've been pulling all the way through.

Alex Mendoza: Oh, absolutely. I think that I mean, that's a testament. Mean, there's been schools, obviously, that have recognized, but I think that, being the very first Hispanic to be part of the GI Joe series. I think that that is a testament to just how popular he was. I'm waiting for the movie to come out.

I'm sure there's going to be a movie one day.

Steve Sisson: So as we're wrapping up here, what else do we want to cover? We've got, this mem this idea of memory and the thread of memory is one that we've been pulling on. I think it's probably important to at least end with some idea with some discussion around the Chicano movement itself and that how important that brings forward memory generally for Tejanos, but especially for Tejanos in these American wars because some of these gentlemen are coming out of battle, out of war scenarios, and, you hear about I mean, community is different. Right? There's no racial group that is more vigilant postwar than other groups.

But it does seem like you hear more anger that there's a little less of that in the Tejano veteran community. The Hispanic soldiers coming back from wars, the veterans coming back from wars, they're not they don't it seems generally they're maybe more apt to fitting back in, doing what a lot of Mexican Americans have postwar, and all the stories that we've told, is, Can I get home? Can I get back to my family? Can I get back to my life? Whereas there were a lot of Anglo and African American veterans who came back very angry and more militant.

Do we have this element playing out for the Tejanos community or are they more I bring up the Chicano movement just because there's more memory there. Right? There's this recognition of a racial group that has been discriminated against and not allowed to be authentically who they are. How do the Tejanos veterans coming back fit in there? Do they or what's the experience for them?

Alex Mendoza: I think that they generally fall in line with the general ambivalence that people had about war itself. I mean and Hollywood, really tilts the playing field against looking at Vietnam veterans in in a nice friendly way. I mean, you think about, the war ends, soldiers leave, like, by the mid nineteen seventies. And if you think about the movies that pop out to kind of refer to the crazy, mentally withdrawn Vietnam veteran, you think of, like, *Rambo*, *First Blood*, you think of *Lethal Weapon*, before the movie series became a comedy, I mean, he was suicidal. He was crazy, the special forces Vietnam veteran. I mean, obviously, you have, *Taxi Driver*. You have other films that just kind of negatively portray all Vietnam veterans. So, I mean, this is part of it.

Steve Sisson: It only gets worse in the eighties. Right? It only gets way worse in the eighties. Yeah.

Alex Mendoza: You see you have that, general standoffishness about Vietnam. But I think that one of the ways that Hispanic communities and the Tejanos communities have, kind of tilted back towards recognizing the military service of the men who served in this conflict is through art. And, I have to name drop my former Mexican American history professor at UT, Ricardo Romo, also the very first Mexican American to run sub four minute mile at our alma mater. But before he became president of UTSA and then since retired, he was an urban historian. His book on East Los Angeles really touched into urban history and geography.

And what he's been doing, now that he's an independent historian and researcher and he loves artwork. So, he's been exploring murals that depict or I'm sorry, veterans in Hispanic community. So Chicano artwork, which is colorful, which is bright, which, ties into Aztec roots and the warrior tradition that we've discussed on this podcast. That is the form of how the Tejanos communities kind of memorialize and remember, this conflict through their artwork, through their sacrifice, through that warrior tradition, but found in murals. And, murals are very important part of a community.

It is not just a photo op, for influencers like it is in Austin or in Dallas. But, you go to San Antonio, you see these large scale replicas of the Tejano icons, and you begin to reconcile like what they mean on a broader sense to the community as a whole.

Steve Sisson: So they're less statues and more murals.

Alex Mendoza: For this particular conflict.

Steve Sisson: Yeah. That's interesting. Also, I may be off base here, but I do think of my and when I went to the University of Texas in the late '80s, early '90s, I took a class on the Chicano movement, and they definitely used murals a key was one of the threads that we went through, it was just a way for the Chicano movement to articulate and have an ability to express, and some level of it was graffiti, right? There was some graffiti element of illegality that was there, but then there was also a But there was always this thread of This Aztec warrior thread that played through, and you see it all over Austin and San Antonio, the murals everywhere. They're this beautiful representation of a way that the Hispanic community has taken graffiti and or wall art and made it their own in a strong way that I think the memory of the Tejano veterans can come through that way in a much more beautiful way. It's just an interesting piece of how things are different in different cultures. Know?

Alex Mendoza: Absolutely. I mean, Corpus Christi lays claim to a statue for Selena, the artist.

Steve Sisson: Oh, she's my wife's favorite. But her murals. I know. Yeah.

They're way more important. Yes. They're everywhere. Yes.

Alex Mendoza: They're part of the communities.

Steve Sisson: Yes.

Alex Mendoza: Because she matters. And heaven forbid, if your wife tries to go get a special Selena cup at H E B, hopefully she doesn't get shanked because those things turn into real hot commodities.

Steve Sisson: No, she's mostly just into the music. But also the pride of she is Mexican American, so she's also got this and she's definitely Tejana and indigenous, so there's this thread for her where it represents an aspect of her identity that is both what it is to be a little girl growing up in She grew up in Seguin, so growing up in Seguin and feeling someone represented her at the time, and she was listening to that music as it was happening, as it was playing out. And then, of course, it stays in those communities so powerfully. It'd still be played. You don't hear it in Austin much, but you hear it in San Antonio, and I'm sure you hear it in the Rio Grande Valley as well.

Alex Mendoza: I believe it, yes.

Steve Sisson: Well, thank you, Alex. This was really, really cool to see. In our next episode, we'll wrap this all up with some conclusions and provide some threads for people to consider and think about going forward. But thank you so much for sharing your knowledge and all the research that you did around this and in your book. Again, I just want to remind people there's much more information in the book than we can possibly talk about in the context of a forty five minute to an hour long conversation.

So please go there and read what Alex has written about. It's really interesting content. Thank you, Alex, again for a great episode, and we'll talk next and conclude.

Alex Mendoza: Thank you.