

“Chale No, We Won’t Go!”

The Chicano Moratorium Committee

The Vietnam War had a profound effect on Chicano youth of the 1960s and ’70s. The high proportion of Mexican Americans fighting and dying in Southeast Asia, coupled with these young people’s heightened awareness of social issues, led to a vigorous protest against the war. In this maelstrom of discontent, Rosalio Muñoz, a former UCLA student-body president and in 1968 a minority recruiter for the Claremont Colleges, received his induction orders in December of that year for the following September. “I was concerned and wanted to do something,” he later recalled, “but when I was drafted, and it happened to be for September 16, it catalyzed for me as . . . an opportunity to strike a blow against the war and the draft.”¹

Though Muñoz’s initial motives were inherently selfish, he quickly became convinced that he had “to do something for all Chicanos.”² There was, first of all, the symbolic importance of the day on which he was to report for induction: September 16 was Mexican Independence day. He had also already become disenchanted with the draft because of his experiences at the Claremont Colleges. The Chicano students whom he visited told him how draft boards tried to discourage them from considering college by telling them that student deferments were not available. These incidents only served to crystallize Muñoz’s sense of the war as an act of discrimination against Mexican Americans. As he

saw it, “There were so few of us even qualified [to go to college] and those that were qualified they would try to discourage to get a deferment.” For him, “the horribleness of the war and discrimination against people and then the upsurge of peoples’ forces and of the Chicano Movement” created the climate necessary for a Chicano struggle against the conflict in Vietnam.³

Initially, Muñoz set out to organize protests against the draft, not the war. Shortly after receiving his induction orders, he discussed his plan with his friend and former fellow student Ramsés Noriega. Muñoz turned to him because of the latter’s experience as an organizer with the United Farm Workers and as the manager of Muñoz’s earlier campaign for student-body president. The two had also worked closely in founding the United Mexican American Students. Noriega warned Muñoz that what he proposed was dangerous. “Do you want to die?” he asked his friend. “Because what you’re asking is to take on the United States government on this. It’s a very large issue, very dangerous — many people will die.” “I’m ready to die,” replied Muñoz. “If you’re ready,” responded Noriega, “let me think about it and start putting [together] a program of a movement.” Several days later, the two embarked on a tour of the state to survey Mexican-American attitudes toward the war and the feasibility of their plan.⁴ In August 1969, following the tour, they created *Chale con el Draft* (To Hell with the Draft) to aid individual Chicanos in their deliberations about whether to seek a deferment or to resist being drafted.⁵

Muñoz’s own decision was to resist, and he chose September 16, 1969, the day that he had been ordered to report for induction, as the occasion for his announcement. His intention was to go through pre-induction processing and then to refuse induction.⁶ On September 16, he went with more than a hundred supporters to the Armed Forces Induction and Examination Center on Broadway Street in Los Angeles. In an apparent effort to appease the crowd, officials postponed his induction until the October draft call.⁷ This news caused Muñoz to pull from his pocket a prepared statement that he read to the press:

Today the sixteenth of September, the day of independence for all Mexican peoples, I declare my independence of the Selective Service System. I accuse the government of the United States of America of genocide against the Mexican people.

Specifically, I accuse the draft, the entire social, political, and economic system of the United States of America, of creating a funnel which shoots Mexican youth into Vietnam to be killed and to kill innocent men, women and children. I accuse the law enforcement agencies of the United States of instilling greater fear and insecurity in the Mexican youth than the Viet Cong ever could, which is genocide.

I accuse the American welfare system of taking the self respect from our Mexican families, forcing our youth to the Army as a better alternative to living in our community with their own families, which is genocide. I accuse the education system of the United States of breaking down the family structure of the Mexican people. Robbing us of our language and culture has torn the youth away from our fathers, mothers and grandparents. Thus it is that I accuse the educational system of undereducating Chicano youth.⁸

Muñoz's action brought him and his new organization instant recognition. It also caused him to realize that opposition to the draft was not enough. "Very quickly we began to see that [going against the draft] . . . was not actually going to change the problems of the war — the disproportionate number of Chicanos dying in the war."⁹ Hard statistics on these deaths had only recently been brought to Muñoz's attention. They were the work of Ralph C. Guzmán, a founder of the CSO and MAPA, and, at the time, the sole Mexican American on the staff of the UCLA Mexican-American Study Project.¹⁰ Guzmán, a recent Ph.D. in political science, revealed that between January 1961 and February 1967, a period when Chicanos constituted 10 to 12 percent of the population of the Southwest, they comprised 19.4 percent of those killed in Vietnam.¹¹

Guzmán offered three reasons for the disproportionately high casualties. Mexican Americans joined the military in larger numbers than others in order to gain social status and to provide financial assistance to their families. They were also driven by a strong desire to prove their "Americaness." Finally, the number of Mexican Americans who could circumvent obligatory military service by going to college was quite small. At the University of California, for example, only 1 percent of the 97,000 students enrolled in 1969 were Chicanos.¹²

The economic factors pushing Chicanos into the military were strikingly evident in East Los Angeles, where the greatest concentration of Mexicans in the United States lived. The median income of a Mexican-American family was \$7,622, as compared to the median income for all California families of \$10,729, a difference of 29 percent. Of 23,752 families in East Los Angeles, some 3,974, or 17 percent, lived below the poverty line (as defined by the Social Security Administration).¹³ Housing conditions were deplorable, with 75 percent of the 23,381 housing units having been built before 1949. In 1968 the Los Angeles County Department of Urban Affairs reported that only 28.67 percent of the houses in East Los Angeles were in livable condition.¹⁴

As they had been in previous decades, East Los Angeles residents were

also subject to harassment from county sheriffs and city police. Law enforcement officials regularly stopped and questioned Mexican-American youths in the evenings, often using abusive language and sometimes beating them. Sheriff's deputies heavily patrolled the streets where youths congregated in East Los Angeles, issuing citations and stopping cars for no apparent reason.¹⁵ If the streets were troublesome, the jails were deadly. In a two-year period, from 1968 to 1970, six Chicanos allegedly hanged themselves in the East Los Angeles sheriff's station. To many in the community, the deaths were acts of murder by the Sheriff's Department.¹⁶ Residents felt besieged in their own community. "We not only face genocide when they shove us into the battlefields . . . but [also] when the police repress us on the streets of our own barrio," declared a resident. "Some cops inspire more fear and hatred than the Viet-Cong."¹⁷

To engage in a war abroad while these conditions existed at home became anathema to many Chicanos, especially the youth who were expected to fight the war. The combination of the social inequalities and the war's impact prompted young Chicanos to react angrily. Muñoz shared these sentiments and broadened his goal to ending not only the draft but also the entire war effort.¹⁸ In November 1969 he quit his job with the Claremont Colleges and began a fast to protest the war. He chose his alma mater, UCLA, as the locale for his announcement. "I am beginning a fast which will continue until the people of this country realize that the genocide in Vietnam is, besides the Vietnamese, directed towards the Chicanos." He committed himself as well to combating "the most powerful and oppressive system the world has ever known."¹⁹

In the meantime, another Chicano effort against the war emerged in Denver under the leadership of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. His Crusade for Justice had been criticizing the Vietnam involvement since August 1966. Gonzales knew of Muñoz's actions, but the two did not meet until November 15, 1969, at a symposium on "Chicano Liberation" held at California State College at Hayward. Muñoz suggested that they organize a nationwide demonstration by Chicanos against the war modeled after the moratoriums against the conflict that had been sponsored by the Student Mobilizing Committee (the MOBE) in October and November 1969. Gonzales liked the idea, and so did the three hundred people attending the symposium. The protest was to be a Chicano-run event. Other antiwar activists could attend, but Chicanos would be in charge.²⁰ As Noriega explained, "The reason why they [whites] were against the war was very different from why we were against the war."²¹

A planning meeting was held in Denver in early December 1969. Those present agreed that their national protest should take place in the summer

of 1970 in Los Angeles. That gathering would be preceded by a smaller demonstration in Los Angeles in December to build enthusiasm for the main summer protest. Responsibility for the demonstrations would fall to the newly formed Chicano Moratorium Committee, created when the Brown Berets and student groups joined in their efforts to end the war. Also helping to generate support for the summer meeting would be a Youth Liberation Conference, already scheduled for March in Denver.²²

On December 20, 1969, the Chicano Moratorium Committee, with David Sánchez and Rosalio Muñoz as co-chairs, staged a rousing protest that attracted two thousand people. Advertised as a “March Against Death” to “Bring All Our *Carnales* Home . . . ALIVE!,” it began at twelve noon at the Memorial Monument (a memorial to Mexican Americans killed in the Second World War), located at Brooklyn and Indiana Streets in East Los Angeles.²³ Its success led to another demonstration on February 28, 1970, which attracted five thousand people despite a driving rain. Participants came from all over California, as well as from Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. “It’s time we got rid of this political system,” declared local attorney Oscar Acosta. “It’s time we did more than march; your whole life has to be for the Chicano. . . . So far as the Vietnam war is concerned, I have nothing to say about it; it doesn’t exist; our fight is here.” Woodrow “Niño” Díaz, speaking for the Puerto Rican Young Lords of New York, added: “This social system is killing our brothers in Vietnam. We have one enemy, the capitalist system and their agents in the Democratic and Republican parties. We must organize independent political parties along with Puerto Ricans and including poor whites in a political coalition.”²⁴

Not everyone warmed to the idea of joining with others, especially whites, in combating the war. Muñoz was among them, and he stressed the need for a *Chicano* antiwar movement.

Historically, Chicanos have only been offered the dirtiest work of American society. Chicanos pick the crops, man the factories, sew the clothes, wash the dishes and clean the mess of white America. . . . This demonstration aims to expose the fact that second to Vietnamese, the heaviest burdens of the war have fallen on the Chicano community. . . . The Chicano people, through its moratorium, is now saying that the front line for Chicano youths is not in Vietnam but is the struggle for social justice here in the United States.²⁵

Though the rain soaked the demonstrators, it failed to dampen their ardor. They left the gathering chanting “Che, Che, Che Guevara” and waving red “Che” flags in the air.²⁶

The three thousand people who convened in Denver on March 25–29,

1970, for the Chicano Youth Liberation Conference were just as outraged about the war and eagerly looked forward to the summer protest in Los Angeles, now set for August 29 (see figure 4). Indeed, by this time, demonstrations against the war were widespread, with eighteen taking place during the months before August in such cities as Fresno, Riverside, San Francisco, San Diego, Santa Barbara, San Antonio, Austin, Houston, and Chicago.²⁷

The principal organizer of the protest scheduled for Los Angeles was Ramsés Noriega. He worked behind the scenes offering guidance and advice to Muñoz, who served as the co-chair and main spokesperson for the Moratorium Committee. Sánchez, the other co-chair, was responsible for garnering support from the Brown Berets, but enthusiastic help also came from many people in the community who were unaffiliated with a specific protest group. “Everybody [did] everything from stuffing envelopes to public speaking,” explained a member of the committee.²⁸ A “semiofficial,” volunteer central committee of ten to fifteen people planned the demonstrations. Central committee membership was acquired as a result of longtime commitment to the moratorium effort. Members ages ranged from 18 to 35, with most being in their twenties. Their plans were then presented to the community in open meetings where, usually after brief discussions and minor revisions, the recommendations won approval. Membership in the Moratorium Committee was open to all Chicanos who were willing to participate and who agreed with the Moratorium’s nonviolent goals and tactics.²⁹

Despite attempts to maintain consensus among those in the Moratorium Committee, disputes broke out. The most serious involved the Brown Berets, who became angry when the committee denied their request to have a speaker at the forthcoming summer moratorium. The hostility between the committee and the Brown Berets stemmed from the former’s perception that the latter were only engaging in attention-grabbing efforts while having done little to protest the war.³⁰ Nonetheless, denial of a Beret speaker incensed David Sánchez and his followers, who convinced themselves that they had been responsible for the success of the protests of December 20 and February 28. The Berets’ *La Causa* singled out Muñoz, Noriega, and Moratorium Committee member Robert Elias for special criticism, accusing them of being “ego trippers and opportunists.” They also denounced the Moratorium Committee for funding the travel expenses of a “rumor and scandal team of which we have received reports from Fresno, Frisco, Oakland and Denver, in their purpose to sabotage [*sic*] and cut off Brown Beret National resources.” These differences were eventually papered over, but not before the Berets

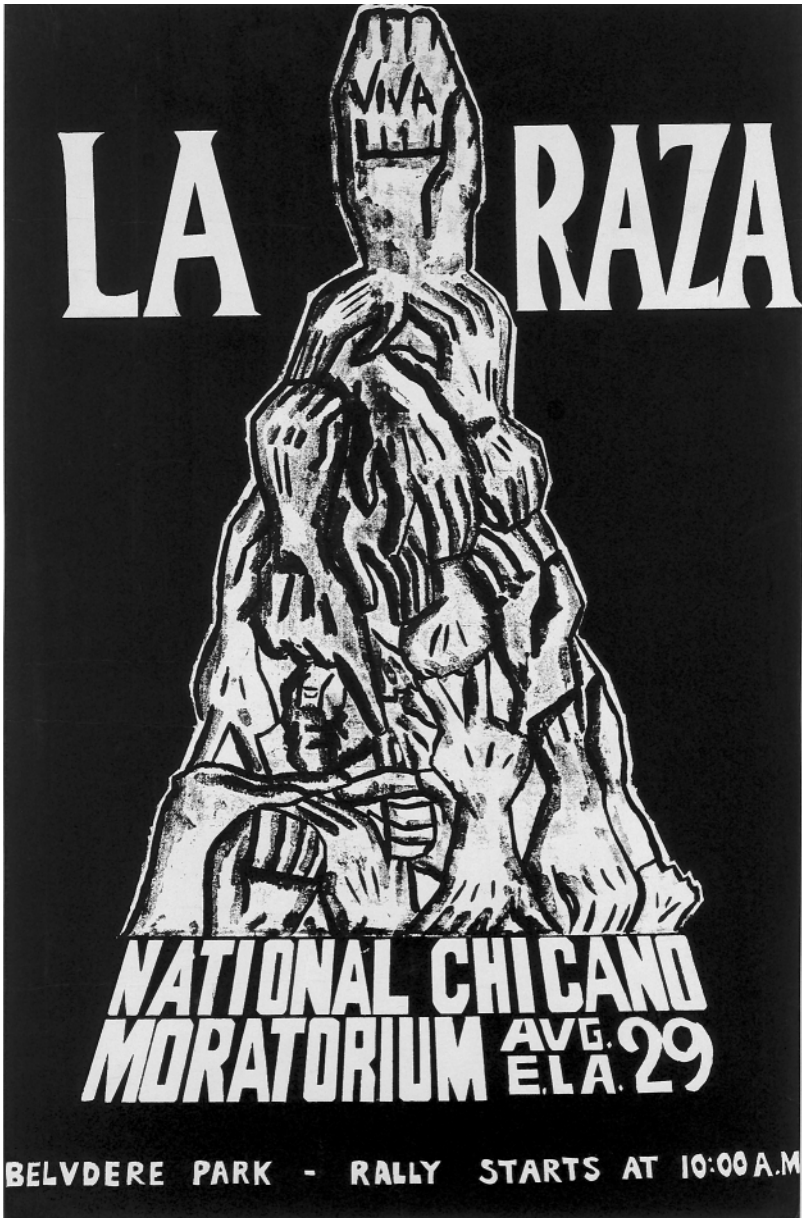


FIGURE 4. "National Chicano Moratorium" poster, August 29, 1970. Artist unknown.

threatened to disassociate themselves from the committee. When the Berets sensed that the demonstration would succeed without them, they reconsidered their stance and participated in the August 29 event.³¹

Such disagreements did not sidetrack effective publicity for the upcoming demonstration that emphasized a measure of ethnocentrism and cultural nationalist ideals.³² The organizers' principle vehicle for reaching the public was Los Angeles's Spanish-language television station KMEX, Channel 34. Radio was also used, as Noriega said, "to make Los Angeles a classroom." Daily broadcasts on news radio station KFWB kept the community abreast of the plan for the moratorium.³³

Security was considered as important as publicity in ensuring success for the August event. Organizers obtained the necessary parade permit and met regularly with officials of the sheriff's department (the law enforcement agency for unincorporated East Los Angeles, where the demonstration would take place), informing them of their plans and seeking advice. Two to three monitors were assigned to each block along the parade route in order to guarantee order. As another precaution, moratorium leaders created a special corps of attorneys and law students to observe the procession and provide legal advice.³⁴ To house the large number of people expected to come from out of town, California State College at Los Angeles offered its dormitory facilities. To the chagrin of everyone, however, the college rescinded its offer with no explanation on the day before the event. The out-of-towners were left to find their own lodging.³⁵

On August 29, 1970, at 10 A.M. the demonstrators met at Belvedere Park on Third and Fetterly Streets. Eventually, an estimated twenty thousand people made their way to Whittier Boulevard, a mile from Belvedere Park, and occupied six lanes of the street. The atmosphere was festive. Marchers carried brightly colored banners and flags bearing the names of the groups represented: the Brown Berets, El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), and the Emma Lazarus Jewish Woman's League, among others. Also much in evidence were placards carrying such slogans as "CHALE CON LA DRAFT," "BRING THE 'CARNALES' HOME," "OUR WAR IS HERE," and "DEAR MOM AND DAD, YOUR SILENCE IS KILLING ME." Chanting "Chale No, We Won't Go!" and "Chicano Power!" the paraders proceeded peacefully down Whittier Boulevard. County sheriffs dressed in full riot gear lined the route.³⁶ They remained in position because the moratorium monitors took swift action at any sign of a potential outburst, as when a demonstrator threw a rock. At approximately 1:00 P.M. the procession reached Laguna Park and the rally began.³⁷

The program proceeded peacefully. Thirteen speakers from a variety of organizations, among them Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales of Denver’s Crusade for Justice, attorney Oscar Acosta, and Rosalío Muñoz, addressed the crowd. The program opened with three entertainment groups that reinforced the peaceful, festive atmosphere. Muñoz then spoke, calling for social change and pointing out that a war had now broken out in East Los Angeles — a war for social justice. He asked for support of Chicano leaders, specifically naming Ricardo Romo, the Peace and Freedom Party candidate for California governor.³⁸ When he suggested that Laguna Park be renamed Benito Juárez Park in memory of the nineteenth-century Mexican president, the crowd roared its approval, prompting Muñoz to proclaim that the park’s name had been changed.³⁹

In the meantime, a dispute had begun across the street at the Green Mill Liquor Store. Because of the hot weather, many paraders had gone to the liquor store, the only establishment open in the area, to buy soft drinks and beer. When about fifty customers had filled the building, the owner, Morris Moroko, locked the door. Moroko then refused to unlock the door so individual customers could depart, intending to open it once all the customers inside had completed their transactions. After a half-hour with the doors still locked, many customers became restive, as the cold drinks they purchased got warm. Moroko panicked and called the sheriffs. At 2:34 P.M. three officers arrived, two carrying clubs while the other held a riot gun. Immediately, the door was unlocked and the deputy sheriffs inquired about the “looting.” Meanwhile, outside the store, someone tossed an empty can at the sheriff’s car parked in front. Within minutes, approximately twenty-five officers were on the scene.⁴⁰

The deputies formed a skirmish line at the store, which was only several hundred yards from the speakers’ platform. Most of the people at the rally, however, had their backs turned to the fracas and were unaware of the sheriffs.⁴¹ By 3:10 P.M. deputies with riot guns had stationed themselves at hastily set up street-corner barricades. They then declared the situation to be critical and told those assembled outside the store to disperse.⁴² Instead of moving people away from the site, however, the officers pushed and followed them to nearby Laguna Park, where Muñoz was speaking. When he saw the deputies charge the crowd, he shouted at them, “Police, hold your line!”⁴³ The Moratorium monitors then formed a line of their own between the people and deputies and asked the officers to leave. The deputies responded by calling for reinforcements, including the LAPD. As squad cars arrived and plainclothes policemen went into the throng trying to arrest the protesters, some in the multitude

began pelting the police with rocks and bottles, which, in turn, gave the deputies the excuse to move further into the masses.⁴⁴

Many people now began to exit the park and seek safety in adjacent homes. Police shot tear-gas canisters onto the front porches of those homes, causing even more protesters to seek refuge in other houses. Officers also began boarding buses and beating passengers who had sought shelter there. Angered by the police actions, many in the crowd returned to Whittier Boulevard and began breaking the windows of white-owned businesses, sparing only those stores they believed were owned by Mexicans and other minorities. Two hours later, at around 6 P.M., with 1,500 officers occupying Laguna Park and the nearby streets, the violence came to an end.⁴⁵

The melee resulted in 158 damaged buildings and 4 that were completely destroyed. Some four hundred people were arrested, an uncertain number hurt, and three killed. Angel Gilberto Díaz died when he tried to leave the area and rammed his car into a telephone pole. Lynn Ward, a fifteen-year-old Brown Beret, received fatal wounds from an explosion that hurled him through a plate-glass window. Witnesses testified that a tear-gas canister exploded in front of Ward, but the police claimed that a bomb planted by demonstrators killed him.⁴⁶

The death attracting most attention was that of Ruben Salazar, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who was well known and highly respected in the ethnic Mexican community. Salazar's weekly column in the *Times* sought to explain the Chicano community and its concerns to a larger public. His topics ranged from racism aimed at Mexicans to exploring ways to bridge the gap between Chicanos and the older "traditionalists" who were not always sympathetic with the aims of their youth.⁴⁷ He was in no sense a political activist, but his untimely death made him a martyr in the ethnic Mexican community, every bit as esteemed as John and Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr. Salazar's death also dramatically affected the future of the Moratorium Committee.⁴⁸ Originally, he was thought to have been shot, but a subsequent investigation revealed he had been hit in the head by a tear-gas projectile as he sat inside the Silver Dollar Café on Whittier Boulevard, where he had gone in hopes of escaping the commotion.⁴⁹

In the days that followed, the sheriff's department sought to discredit the Chicano Moratorium Committee. Peter Pitchess, who headed the department, accused the committee of never having intended a peaceful protest and cited leftist propaganda found at the demonstration site as evidence. Moratorium organizers vehemently disagreed, claiming that the

event had begun as a peaceful demonstration against the war and the socioeconomic conditions of Mexicans and only became violent when the police overreacted and began brutalizing the crowd.⁵⁰

The FBI had also been present in Laguna Park on August 29 and offered no support for Pitchess's claims. The views of the FBI agents present were sought by U.S. Attorney General John Mitchell, who wanted to brief President Richard Nixon on the matter in anticipation of his meeting in San Diego in September 1970 with Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Mitchell specifically wanted to know "whether there was substance in the allegations some persons may have traveled interstate for the purpose of inciting a riot." Here, he had in mind Gonzales, who had come from Denver. The FBI told him there was no evidence to support such charges.⁵¹

Perhaps the best example of the Los Angeles authorities' aims to discredit the Chicano Moratorium Committee and the August 29 march was the inquest into the death of Ruben Salazar.⁵² This public drama — described by the *Los Angeles Times* as a "quasi-judicial proceeding that looks, acts and sounds a little bit like a trial, but isn't" — lasted from September 10 to October 5, 1970, and was televised live on local stations.⁵³ Conducted by the Los Angeles County coroner's office, with seven jurors, the inquest was actually an investigation into the August 29 violence, the Mexican-American character, sheriff's department procedures, and the credibility of Chicanos and law enforcement officials. The questions asked by the county attorneys probed all aspects of the march and were thinly disguised attempts to brand the Chicano activists as radical leftists. Mexican Americans responded with hostility to the questions and spoke passionately about the innocence of the marchers and parade organizers and especially about the injustice of Salazar's death.⁵⁴

Police set the tone of the investigation on the first day when Captain Thomas W. Pinkston unhesitatingly blamed the violence on Chicanos. Immediately challenging him was Loyola University Law School student Robert Fernández, whose loud protests resulted in deputies quickly escorting him out of the room. That action brought a sharp reaction from Jorge "Cokie" Rodríguez, a former MEChA leader at Roosevelt High School. "You're being biased in this whole . . . thing," he yelled.⁵⁵ Such emotional outbursts punctuated the entire proceedings.⁵⁶ At 18, Rodríguez was the youngest member of the "blue-ribbon" committee composed of twelve community activists appointed by the coroner's office to quell any potential disruptions at the proceedings. Among the other blue-ribbon committee members were Father John Luce of Lincoln

Heights's Church of the Epiphany; Alicia Escalante and Robert Gándara, welfare rights activists; attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta; *La Raza* editor Raúl Ruiz; and Católicos Por La Raza member Gloria Chávez.⁵⁷

By the time the inquest ended, sixty-one witnesses had testified, 204 exhibits had been offered in evidence, and 2,025 pages of repetitive testimony gathered. Though many residents of the Chicano community testified during the inquest, Moratorium Committee members refused to do so because, as Noriega explained, the proceedings were “a kangaroo court . . . a show.” The coroner's jury had two verdicts: Salazar's death was at the hands of Deputy Sheriff Thomas Wilson, and it was accidental. Two weeks later, Los Angeles County District Attorney Evelle Younger affirmed that “no criminal charge [was] justified, and that [the] . . . case was considered closed.”⁵⁸

The investigation into the death of Ruben Salazar, along with the violence that occurred at the annual September 16th celebrations a few weeks later, led the Moratorium Committee to rethink its strategy.⁵⁹ In October 1970, during a well-attended demonstration against police abuse at the East Los Angeles sheriff's substation, the committee announced its intention to broaden its concerns to include police brutality.⁶⁰ The war in Southeast Asia would remain a major issue, but, as *La Causa* noted several months later, the committee was soon acting as if its “mission on that subject [had] . . . been accomplished. Anyone who participated on that day [August 29] is now clear on the fact that our war is here — that we really live in the belly of the monster.”⁶¹ The shift in focus had the potential of attracting wider support since it affected more people than those directly impacted by the draft and the war. On the other hand, by emphasizing a local issue, the committee weakened and then lost its coalitions with the Crusade for Justice and other antiwar groups.

The shift did not lessen the LAPD's and the sheriff department's harassment of the organization. On November 11, 1970, more than a dozen LAPD squad cars parked in front of the committee's office at 3053 Whittier Boulevard. There was no raid, probably because there were several Chicano law students and newspaper reporters present, but the police presence proved intimidating nonetheless. Two days later, on November 13, six officers of the Special Operations Conspiracy (SOC) squad entered the Moratorium headquarters without knocking. When asked for a search warrant, the officers pulled their revolvers. “This is all the search warrant we need,” declared one of them. They then ransacked the office.⁶²

The next night, November 14, approximately thirty officers of the LAPD Hollenbeck Division entered the building. A fight resulted, in

which three teenage boys were injured and required medical attention. The young men were subsequently arrested and charged with “felonious assault on a police officer.” In addition, three other men, Ralph Ramírez, Sergio Robledo, and Frank Martínez (who, it was later discovered, was an informant for the LAPD and the U.S. Treasury Department’s Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division) were also apprehended and charged with “interfering with an arrest.”⁶³ The LAPD told Sue Marshall of the *Los Angeles Free Press* that the raid occurred after officers in a patrol car saw five young men sitting outside the Moratorium office with a shotgun. Moratorium Committee members, who were at the office during the confrontation, denied the accusation.⁶⁴

A week later, there was another incident. On November 21, 1970, Los Angeles police officers followed eight Berets and one student from California State College at Los Angeles from the Moratorium office to the city of Downey (a suburb of Los Angeles). There, the young men were stopped and, according to *La Causa*, were charged with armed robbery on the flimsy grounds that a carbine (legally registered and containing no clip) was found in their car. No money or evidence of stolen goods was in the vehicle.⁶⁵

These incidents led the committee to set up a weekly picket line on Saturday mornings at the Hollenbeck Division station of the LAPD on First Street in Boyle Heights.⁶⁶ Committee members followed this with a demonstration against police brutality in early January 1971. The protest consisted of a march from East Los Angeles to Parker Center, the Los Angeles Police Department’s downtown headquarters. A flyer called for a large turnout:

The National Chicano Moratorium Committee, along with other community groups, has been attacked, harassed and beaten day after day since the August 29th Moratorium by flunkies of the LAPD. The Metro Squad and Hollenbeck Division of the L.A.P.D. have conspired with each other to annihilate the Movement in East Los Angeles. We are calling for a mass rally and demonstration on January 9, 1971, here in our community we have dared to speak out against the police brutality, and are now being attacked by a racist police department.

The flyer also noted other provocations: “Fifty-two members of the National Chicano Moratorium Committee have been arrested on false charges within a month. The L.A.P.D. along with the Sheriffs and FBI have shown us a good example of what kind of governmental conspiracy is going on by their ruthless murder of Ruben Salazar.” The attacks were the result of a “conspiracy!”⁶⁷

The leaflet attracted over a thousand people to Hollenbeck Park, from where they set out for Parker Center at 1 P.M. on January 9. As they reached the First Street Bridge, which crosses the Los Angeles River and links East Los Angeles to downtown, they encountered a large number of police who aroused anger by asking jaywalkers for identification and sometimes issuing them a citation. Upon arriving at Parker Center, some marchers congregated at a construction site across the street. After about an hour, a policeman announced through a loudspeaker that everyone at the building site had to clear the street or face immediate apprehension. As the participants began dispersing, a large formation of helmeted policemen emerged from the station while an equally large group of motorcycle officers confronted the demonstrators on the street. In the resulting melee, windows were broken and marchers were chased, beaten, and arrested.⁶⁸ By the end of the day, there had been thirty-six arrests and numerous, but no serious, injuries.⁶⁹

In the aftermath of the violence, both the Moratorium Committee and the Los Angeles Police Department issued conflicting explanations. "We have a half-dozen people trying to sift the rumors and find out what really happened," declared Gonzolo Javier of the Moratorium Committee. "We don't want to guess now at the connection between the rally and the window-smashing. We hear too many rumors. It's too early to be sure of anything." Rosalio Muñoz, however, did not hedge his words, blaming the police for the violence and claiming that the protesters at Parker Center had been ready to disperse when the police tried to speed up their departure. The LAPD had another story: Inspector Peter F. Hagan stated that there had been no order to disperse until the crowd began throwing bricks and bottles at the officers, interfering with police employees attempting to enter a parking lot, and breaking the window of a passing car. LAPD Chief Edward Davis described the violence as the work of "Communist agitators working within the Mexican-American community." "By God," he declared, "we're going to have peace in this city. A revolution isn't going to start here."⁷⁰

The events of January 9 led to a larger demonstration on January 31, which the Moratorium Committee publicized as the "Marcha por Justicia" (March for Justice). The committee, announced Muñoz, is "planning a non-violent demonstration, but if the officers attack there will probably be civil disobedience."⁷¹ Police behavior, not the war, was the sole issue. "We must not forget the lesson of August 29th that the major social and political issue we face is police brutality," declared a leaflet calling for public support. "Since the 29th police attacks have been

worse. Either the people control the police or we are living in a police state.⁷²

Participants came to the protest site at Belvedere Park from all over Southern California, many of them walking from such areas as the San Fernando Valley, Long Beach, San Pedro, Santa Ana, and La Puente.⁷³ The rally ended peacefully with Muñoz telling the crowd, estimated by the *Los Angeles Free Press* at four thousand, to avoid provocative behavior. “Disperse peacefully — the most important part of the rally is the way we disperse. I hope you’re going to respect those who came a long way. Don’t go to the police station unless you want to get involved in a suicide.” Unfortunately, not everyone heeded his advice. About a hundred young people gathered around the East Los Angeles sheriff’s substation on Third Street, adjacent to Belvedere Park. They began chanting for the release of the prisoners inside: “Let them go! Let them go!”⁷⁴

What followed next was a riot that resulted in the destruction of twelve sheriff’s cars, one highway patrol vehicle, two floodlights, and a sign at the substation. In addition, more than eighty stores were burned or had their windows broken. Also destroyed were a bail-bond office and a car dealership, including six of the agency’s cars. The riot produced ninety arrests, many injuries, and one death. Among those arrested were sixty-three men, eight women, and nineteen male juveniles. Seventeen adults and two juveniles sustained gunshot wounds, while two juveniles and sixteen adults suffered other injuries (included in this number were ten sheriff’s deputies and one woman reserve officer). The one fatality of the day was Gustav Montag Jr., a twenty-four-year-old East Los Angeles College student who was killed when a ricocheting buckshot pellet pierced his heart. A resident of East Los Angeles, he went to the demonstration because, as his sister-in-law recalled, “he was just curious. . . . People were predicting a riot and he wanted to find out what one was like.”⁷⁵

In the days that followed, the Chicano Moratorium Committee blamed the police for the devastation. Muñoz, at a meeting of other Chicano leaders held on February 1 at the East Los Angeles Community Union (TELACU), charged that “the police opened fire with guns against people with sticks and stones. There was no order to disperse, no tear gas fired. They used Russian tactics [a probable reference to the force used by Russian troops against the citizens of Prague in August 1968]. They let the people come in and then they opened fire on them. They drew them in and then opened fire with guns.”⁷⁶

Muñoz weakened his explanation by also acknowledging that the crowd had ignored the warnings of both Moratorium Committee mem-

bers and law enforcement officers. Monitors had used bullhorns in an attempt to disperse the crowd toward the north, away from the sheriff's substation and heavily traveled Whittier Boulevard. Nonetheless, one group had headed south. "I was making efforts to get bullhorns from the sheriff to get to the front of the crowd and disperse it," he said, "but they said they couldn't get them. We didn't get any kind of cooperation. The monitors tried to get to the front of the crowd but before they could force their way to the front the police had opened fire." KMEX reporter Roberto Cruz confirmed the presence of an angry and unruly crowd. "They were . . . screaming and waving rocks and what looked like sticks. I tried to talk to some of them to ask them to go home, and one wanted to fight me." He continued, "It looked like a thousand of them were streaming down the street. Then one sheriff's car arrived with three officers in it. The mob kept on coming. The officers stepped back a few paces, firing in the air. I ducked, and when there were more shots I looked up and saw men falling."⁷⁷

Richard Martínez of the Congress of Mexican American Unity testified to much the same. He told the *Times* that he had joined Muñoz at the sheriff's substation and tried to "keep things calm." "The crowd went on," he said. "I tried to get up in front of it, but it had gone on. There didn't seem to be a leader; it was more a spontaneous thing."⁷⁸

The sheriff's department blamed the Moratorium Committee for the violence. Two days after the disruption, Sheriff Peter Pitchess informed a press conference that, while the committee professed to serve the best interests of the Mexican-American people, it had "accomplished nothing but destruction." Later, Pitchess told the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors that the five events staged by the committee in the last six months had reaped "a rather grim harvest — vandalism, arson, burglary, assault and death." The rally and the rioting that followed, he declared, were "typical of the pathetic pattern [of the Moratorium Committee] — a grave disservice to the Mexican-American people." Pitchess also accused Muñoz of engaging in deception. Muñoz, he stated, told him prior to the event that the police brutality issue was just an "attention getter," and that the demonstration was actually to protest inadequate housing and education. "Muñoz said law enforcement people were simply the visible symbol of the establishment against whom they were revolting. The only hope for stopping this," declared Pitchess, using words reminiscent of Richard Nixon's, is for "the silent majority in the Mexican-American community to stand up on their feet and say we don't want this," by which he meant the "hoodlum element of the Moratorium group." Muñoz denied

he had told Pitchess that the brutality issue was only an attention-getter. "I told him we have to overcome the fear placed upon us by his and other agencies before we can deal with the issues of life, such as better housing and education."⁷⁹

The recriminations ended but not the bitterness between the Moratorium Committee and the law enforcement agencies. The district attorney's office heightened that bitterness when it filed formal charges against those arrested. Eight persons were indicted for felonies and forty-one for misdemeanors. In addition, charges were filed against twenty juveniles.⁸⁰

Several sheriff's deputies were also charged with mistreatment of prisoners following the January 31 demonstration. On February 4 the Sheriff's department dismissed deputies Roy C. Bell, Michael W. Crowley, and George Guinn for hitting two prisoners who had shouted obscene remarks at them and for firing type of gas aerosol spray, called a "federal streamer," through the bars of a holding tank. The department also suspended Sergeant Robert T. Decker for five days for failing to stop the above incident, and charged Sergeant John Love with improper behavior and then later reassigned him.⁸¹

Following the January 31 demonstration the Moratorium Committee kept a low profile, reassessing its tactics and finally deciding to take its message to other parts of the state. In May it held a "Marcha de la Reconquista," which began on May 5 in Calexico, in southeastern California near the Mexican border, and proceeded to Sacramento, covering approximately eight hundred miles before ending on August 7. Implicit in the march's name was the notion that the land — the Chicano nation — rightfully belonged to Chicanos and needed to be taken back from the Anglo invaders. This protest revealed that the Moratorium had abandoned its single-issue focus on police brutality in favor of a wide range of vague goals. "The events of the last few months," announced a leaflet, "have clearly shown us that it is useless to place any trust in the present political system." Now the issues, besides police brutality, included Immigration and Naturalization Service deportations of undocumented Mexican workers; the Vietnam War; attempts by California State College at Los Angeles officials to remove Chicano student groups from the campus and to reduce funding for Educational Opportunity Programs (EOPs); and Governor Ronald Reagan's proposed reform of the state welfare program.⁸²

The march proceeded peacefully until August 7, when it reached Sacramento. There, the participants, now numbering about two thou-

sand, gathered at South Side Park, approximately two miles from the State Capitol, where they rested and ate a lunch provided by a local Chicano organization before going on to the Capitol building. For that march, they arranged themselves in double columns, with the Brown Berets as monitors and the Mescaleros (a Chicano bike club) leading the way and securing the traffic ahead. As they approached the Capitol, the protestors noticed other Chicanos on the building's steps and joined with them in shouting "Chicano Power," "Que Viva La Raza," and other slogans. A large Mexican flag was placed in the center of the steps and then surrounded by banners from other organizations. A sense of elation ran through the crowd and, according to a participant, "tears ran from the marchers eyes."⁸³

The joy was short-lived. As Beret leader David Sánchez began speaking to the crowd, someone lowered the American flag from the pole in the Capitol plaza and set it on fire while others hoisted the Mexican flag to the same pole. Two dozen masked police in riot gear proceeded to haul down the Mexican flag and return it to the marchers. That action aroused the demonstrators' anger and caused the Brown Berets to lock arms and form a buffer between the authorities and the Chicanos. Both sides remained calm and the police left the area.⁸⁴

Not long thereafter, as another speaker addressed the rally and the California state flag was lowered from its pole, the police returned and charged the demonstrators. Again the Berets locked arms and formed a buffer. Once more, both sides avoided violence and the police retreated. Alarmed at what could occur, however, march organizers ended the rally and the demonstrators left the capital peacefully.⁸⁵

This rally was the last for the Moratorium Committee, since shortly thereafter the group disbanded. The immediate cause was an incident at nearby Deganawidah–Quezalcoatl University (D.Q.U.), a Native American–Chicano university located seven miles north of Davis, California.⁸⁶ Many of the marchers were staying at D.Q.U. before returning home. On August 7 forty-three young men from Oxnard arrived at the university seeking to kill Brown Berets. It seems that a group posing as Berets had beaten up one of the members of the Oxnard group in San Francisco and they wanted to retaliate. Ramsés Noriega believed that the people who did the actual beating were undercover law enforcement officers who hoped the Berets and the Oxnard group would engage in a fight, thereby giving the National Guard, which had a base in Sacramento, an excuse to violently end the conflict. He took aside David Sánchez and the leader of the Oxnard group and explained to them his

suspicions, eventually persuading them and their followers to leave the area and go home.⁸⁷

Not long after the incident, Noriega called a meeting of the Moratorium leadership and urged them to disband the organization. "The Moratorium is over. The reason why is that there is too many killings, too many attacks, everybody's confused, there's too many problems. . . . It's over with, go home, go underground and surface in ten years and maybe in ten years you'll know what has happened. But I am not going to be responsible for one death, because from now on the killings are going to escalate." Because those present respected Noriega, they went along with his request and disbanded the organization.⁸⁸ That the action was final became clear when the planned rallies scheduled for the weekend of August 28–29, 1971, did not occur.⁸⁹

Though never a group with a national following, the Chicano Moratorium Committee had a large coterie in Southern California, where it brought greater awareness of the Vietnam War's effect on the Mexican-American community through mass demonstrations against the Anglo establishment. Chicanos, like other American youth of the 1960s and the 1970s, opposed the Vietnam War. Unlike their white counterparts, however, they viewed the disproportionate number of Spanish-surnamed casualties as evidence that the conflict was a genocidal war against Mexican-American males.

While the war served to unify a large number of Chicanos around a single issue, the effort gave way when the committee shifted its emphasis to local issues not shared with the Mexican-American communities elsewhere. Although police brutality occurred in other Chicano communities, the Moratorium Committee framed the issue as affecting only East Los Angeles. Thus, as broad concerns gave way to local issues, the committee fractured and lost its vitality and sense of larger purpose. Yet the Moratorium Committee had organized twenty thousand Chicanos — the largest gathering of that group in the nation — around a single issue, the Vietnam War. Even if that unity may have been for only one day, it was nonetheless significant, though to this day it has not been repeated.