Lessons from the Chicano anti-war movement

by Mario T. García

NCR Today

*Raza Si, Guerra No!* This was the clarion call forty years ago when Chicanos staged an unprecedented and still little known anti-Vietnam War demonstration on August 29, 1970. That day some 30,000 people -- mostly Chicanos -- protested the war in East Los Angeles in what was called the National Chicano Anti-War Moratorium.

No other minority group rallied against the war as did Chicanos. As part of the Chicano Movement -- the largest and most significant civil rights and empowerment movement in the history of Mexican-Americans in the United States -- the Chicano anti-war movement focused its opposition to the war on two major issues.

First, Chicanos were dying and being maimed in the war disproportionately to their percentage of the U.S. population.

A study by Professor Ralph Guzmán at Cal State Los Angeles at the time revealed that while Chicanos represented about 10 percent of the population of the Southwest, they represented almost 20 percent of the casualties from the same region.

This resulted from the unfairness -- perhaps even racism -- of the military draft system of the time. Because of inferior conditions at their schools, many Chicano young men either dropped out of high school or were not encouraged to go to college. This created a large pool of eligible draftees for the military.

The second reason that propelled the Chicano anti-war movement was that the war was siphoning potential funding for education and anti-poverty programs from Chicano communities. Many in the Chicano Movement also claimed that this was racist in nature.
These two arguments became the kingpins of an emerging Chicano anti-war movement that was burgeoning by 1969.

Despite the fact that Mexican-Americans had a long history of patriotically participating in U.S. wars -- including the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and now Vietnam -- Chicano activists argued that the Vietnam War was different.

The U.S. had no business engaging in what amounted to a civil war and hence no business sacrificing the lives of Chicanos for a war not in the interests of Americans. Vietnam was a war of choice, not of necessity. If Chicanos were going to fight a war it should not be in Vietnam, but in the barrios against racism and poverty.

Building on these sentiments, Chicanos articulated a powerful anti-war message beginning with efforts to resist the draft.

These were led by key anti-war leaders such as Rosalio Muñoz in Los Angeles. Over several months, what came to be called the National Chicano Moratorium Committee built support for a national demonstration to be held on August 29, 1970 in East Los Angeles -- the main Chicano barrio.

The demonstration proved to be more successful than Muñoz and other organizers imagined.

Put together as a peaceful protest, the moratorium was brutally and violently attacked by police forces. County sheriffs marched into the site of the rally and broke up the demonstration with tear gas and unnecessary force.

The police claimed that some loafers had sought escape into the crowd. No evidence was ever presented to substantiate these claims. It appeared that the county sheriffs who ruled over East L.A. were not about to allow Chicanos to run the streets that day.

Three people were killed that afternoon in the police riot that ensued -- including Ruben Salazar, the most prominent Latino journalist of his time. A reporter and columnist for the Los Angeles Times as well as news director for KMEX, the sole L.A. Spanish-language television station, Salazar was covering the moratorium with his TV crew.

During the melee following the police attack, Salazar and his crew went to the Silver Dollar Café for a respite. Shortly after they arrived, a squad car of deputy sheriffs pulled up.

After forcing some patrons back into the bar, one sheriff fired two or three tear gas projectiles into the café. One of them struck Salazar in the head -- instantly killing him.

Despite a later investigation of Salazar's death no prosecution of the deputies ensued. This has led to a variety of conspiracy theories that Salazar was specifically targeted by the sheriffs in retaliation for his outspoken views on police brutality in East Los Angeles.

Forty years later, the current county sheriff has finally agreed to consider releasing some of the secret files on the Salazar case.
While the Chicano moratorium, at one level, represented the highpoint of the Chicano Movement, it also
unfortunately represented a low point in police relations.

Nevertheless, the Chicano anti-war movement illustrated that Chicanos would no longer accept this
country?s wars uncritically -- especially if they harmed and damaged the interests of Chicanos and
Americans in general. The lesson today and for a new generation of Chicanos and other Latinos is that we
should not blindly and uncritically accept war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Being a patriot is not just following orders but sometimes questioning those orders. The war in
Afghanistan is no longer justifiable and cannot be won. Chicanos and other Latinos -- along with all
patriotic Americans -- must now begin to call for an end to this conflict and for the troops to come home.
An American military empire is not in the interest of Chicanos -- or Americans of any background.

Source URL (modified on 08/03/2017 - 8:31am): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/lessons-
chicano-anti-war-movement

Links
[1] https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation