To the Line of Fire

*Mexican Texans and World War I*

José A. Ramírez
CHAPTER ONE

Prelude

WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THE TEJANO COMMUNITY DURING WORLD WAR I? Any study that proposes to answer this question must deal not only with the period of American involvement in the war but also with the thirty-three months that preceded it. From the beginning of the war on June 28, 1914, to April 6, 1917, when the United States finally joined the fray, the Tejano community was in the midst of change and instability unlike any since the days of the Texas Revolution of 1836 and the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846-48. As economic transformation heightened anti-Mexican prejudice in South Texas, the Mexican Revolution was sending refugees, intrigue, and violence across the border. The result was that by the time of the American declaration of war against Germany, Tejanos and Tejanas were as ready as anyone else for the wartime upheaval that lay ahead. Until then, however, local concerns took precedence over foreign ones, even when it came to the largest and most destructive war the world had ever known.

As mentioned already, Mexican affairs were largely responsible for ushering in this turbulent new era in Tejano history. Besides triggering the first great wave of Mexican immigration to the United States, convulsions from south of the border put the Tejano community in an awkward position by exacerbating diplomatic relations between the United States and Mexico.

The policies of Porfirio Díaz lay at the heart of these developments. The former general had set about modernizing and pacifying his war-torn country shortly after assuming the Mexican presidency in 1876. Díaz suppressed one revolt after another and, largely through his cooperation with American and other foreign capitalists, produced economic and industrial growth unprecedented in the history of Mexico. As investment poured in from the United States and abroad, railroads and manufacturing plants sprang up all across the country, and the Díaz government oversaw the creation of an agricultural sector capable of raising surplus crops for export abroad.
Nevertheless, the transformation had its downside. The growing influence of U.S. corporate capitalism south of the border, according to scholars Gilbert G. González and Raúl A. Fernández, eventually relegated Mexico to the status of "economic colony," with unsettling results for the masses. As the profits of the changing economy mainly went to foreign capitalists and a select group of the richest Mexicans, peasants derived little, if any, benefit from their country's new wealth and actually saw their standard of living plummet. In many cases, this was the result of new land laws that required them to prove ownership of their communal landholdings through legal title, a blatant attempt by Díaz to confiscate "inefficient" village lands for his agricultural and colonizing projects. Without the means to support themselves, landless peasants were forced to seek seasonal migrant work, toil in unimaginably harsh conditions on sprawling haciendas, or immigrate in search of higher wages to the United States, where they were integrated mostly as unskilled laborers into the agricultural and industrial sectors of the American economy.3

The events of the 1910s provided even more incentive for Mexicans to flee northward. By then, the Díaz presidency, with its sham elections, intimidation tactics, and occasional use of force to bludgeon critics into submission, had transmuted into a brutal dictatorship. When, in late 1910, a wealthy but democratically inclined landowner named Francisco Madero issued a manifesto calling for a mass uprising against the government, commoners and idealistic aristocrats alike responded with the force of thirty years' worth of pent-up resentment. In a little over two years, Mexico saw Díaz escape to Europe in exile, a properly elected Madero lose the presidency in a coup led by Victoriano Huerta, one of his former generals, and the Mexican Revolution, as this conflagration would come to be known, degenerate into factional warfare.4

Initiated during the Díaz presidency, one of the most astonishing demographic shifts of the twentieth century came to pass. By 1930, when the final, lingering effects of the revolution at last faded away, Mexico had lost close to 1.5 million people—roughly 10 percent of its population—to the United States.4 Desperate to escape the ravages of warfare and, in many cases poverty and political persecution, most of these refugees arrived in the American Southwest. In Texas, the Mexico-born population increased from approximately 125,000 to 252,000 from 1910 to 1920. By the latter year, Mexican immigrants were 50 percent of the population, and Corpus Christi, where they made up 35 percent. In El Paso, immigrants composed an incredible 73 percent of the ethnic Mexican population.5

Besides engorging it, the new arrivals reinvented the Tejano community. Although their numbers paled compared to those of their less fortunate counterparts, many members of the middle and upper classes also found their way into Texas, and with them came new restaurants, grocery stores, pharmacies, and businesses of other sorts. Meanwhile, newcomers of all backgrounds provided Tejano enclaves with a fresh infusion of customs and folklore from the traditional homeland. The Spanish language itself found new life in Texas not only orally but also through the writings of exiled authors, intellectuals, and journalists. Some of these individuals thought of the United States as only a stopover, as with Ricardo Flores Magón, editor of the anarchist newspaper Regeneración, who campaigned actively from San Antonio—and then later from Los Angeles—for the total reformation of Mexican society. Others came to stay. For example, Nicasio Idar, whose La Crónica rivaled Flores Magón's paper in readership throughout the Southwest, settled permanently in Laredo and concerned himself primarily with the edification of his fellow Tejanos. Their differences notwithstanding, both men, like their transplanted compatriots, significantly enhanced the Mexican presence in Texas.6

Of course, the revolution also had its deleterious effects on the state, particularly in that the violence and banditry it spawned often spilled across the border. In February 1916, Secretary of State Robert Lansing reported to the Senate that twenty American civilians and sixteen servicemen had died at the hands of Mexican bandits in U.S. territory from 1913 to 1915.7 Many of these Americans had either lived or served militarily along the border in Texas. Not surprisingly, state officials had raised cries of alarms years prior to the issuance of Secretary Lansing's report. As early as 1911, Gov. Oscar Colquitt had expressed his concerns to Pres. William H. Taft after stray bullets from a firefight in Ciudad Juárez killed several El Paso residents.8 Then, in early 1914, he requested permission from the Wilson administration to allow Texas Rangers to pursue a group of Mexicans who had allegedly kidnapped and murdered a Tejano rancher named Clemente Vergara. After the White House had denied his request, Colquitt exorciated the president for his "nemby-pamby" handling of Mexican affairs. For years, he argued, "bandits and marauders" from Mexico had invaded Texas soil and committed depredations of all sorts against Americans and their property.9 A year later, members
of the Texas House of Representatives made the same observation in a resolution requesting aid for more federal troops to patrol the border. "Particularly since the factional war in Mexico," they declared, "straggling bands of Mexicans have been crossing the Rio Grande river [sic] into Texas for the purposes of plundering the citizens of this State." During these raids, they continued, "American citizens are being ruthlessly taken by these murderous outlaws."10

To the further chagrin of U.S. officials, Texas had become a hotbed of clandestine activity, much of which violated American neutrality laws. From the areas on the U.S. side of the border, refugees lent support to a wide array of political and military leaders in Mexico. Madero himself had plotted the overthrow of the Díaz government as an exile in San Antonio.11 With arms and ammunition now priz ed in revolutionary Mexico, unscrupulous American soldiers sometimes profited by stealing machine guns from military armories and selling them across the Rio Grande. Meanwhile, a few Texas Rangers were known to trade arms for cattle with revolutionary factions. Gunrunning became a thriving business, with more than a few members of the Tejano community—in many cases the most desperate and underprivileged—joining the smuggling rings that soon prevailed along the border.12

By the mid-1910s, U.S.-Mexican diplomatic relations, once so harmonious due to Díaz's encouragement of American investment in Mexico, had reached their lowest point in a half-century. A particular point of contention was that the revolution imperiled the lives and property of Americans not only in the United States but also in Mexico. The anti-Americanism of most revolutionaries—in many cases peons resentful of the privileges Díaz had granted foreign capitalists—made such dangers all the more acute. One American who fell into the hands of a rival faction in Coahuila was allegedly burned at the stake. A different account told of another captive having his American passport pinned to his chest and fired at as a target.13 The defacement of the U.S. flag that accompanied the murder of John B. McManus in Mexico City—in addition to other similar deeds—confirmed to authorities that these incidents represented deliberate targeting of Americans, not random acts of violence.14 By the end of 1915, according to one report, a total of 123 Americans had lost their lives in Mexico since the start of the revolution.15

As such incidents mounted, President Wilson and many other Americans condemned their neighbors to the south. The idealistic Wilson even refused to grant Huerta official recognition as president of Mexico following the overthrow of Madero, and then worked to bring down the former general. In April 1914, the White House pointed to the mistaken arrest of several American sailors and their commanding officer by Huerta's troops in Tampico, using what should have been a relatively minor incident as an excuse to intervene in Mexican affairs. The sailors' commander demanded a formal apology and a twenty-one-gun salute to the U.S. flag despite the immediate release of the prisoners. In response to Huerta's refusal, Wilson ordered American troops to occupy the port of Veracruz, where Mexican soldiers resisted fiercely for two days. In the end, the downfall of Huerta that Wilson so badly wanted transpired, but the seizure of Veracruz and its bloody aftermath only increased the bitterness between the United States and Mexico.16

II

While the fighting raged south of the border, Texas was undergoing a revolution of its own. With the arrival of the railroad, commercial farming, or agribusiness, replaced ranching as the major industry in many parts of the state—including those with large Mexican populations. The switch altered more than just the economy, influencing how Anglos and Tejanos would interact for many years to come.

The iron rail had first arrived in Texas prior to the Civil War, but railroad construction exploded in the late nineteenth century. Faster, cheaper, and more reliable than wagon freighting, the railroad signaled progress and prosperity to most Texans. Farmers and mine owners seeking previously inaccessible markets for their raw materials undertook a vigorous campaign to lure railroad companies into their state, knowing that this new invention could link even the crudest backwater with major commercial centers worldwide. Some towns offered cash bonuses, while other cities and counties relied primarily on land grants to acquire rail lines. The state eventually handed over approximately thirty-two million acres of public land—an area about the size of Alabama—to the railroad companies. By 1904, Texas boasted ten thousand miles of track.17

Some wound up in traditionally Mexican towns. Of these, San Antonio was the first recipient of a rail line, with the Southern Pacific reaching it in 1875. Laredo saw the arrival of the Texas-Mexican Railway and the International and Great Northern in 1881, by which time El Paso had received no less than four railroads—the Southern Pacific; the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe; the Texas and Pacific; and the Galveston, Harrisburg, and San Antonio. Business boomed
in each of these towns, and their infrastructures expanded. Most impressively, El Paso went from an isolated West Texas village consisting mostly of a few Tejanos and even fewer Anglos into a hub of railroad, mining, and ranching activity.

Amid this flurry of railroad construction, agribusiness proliferated throughout the state. The days of subsistence farming, wherein crops were raised for personal consumption and sold at market only occasionally, were gradually coming to an end. And so were those of the legendary cowboy, as overgrazing, overproduction, droughts, quarantine laws in the North, and the closing of the cattle trails had taken a deadly toll on the ranching industry. To keep afloat, desperate ranchers often found it necessary to sell off portions of their landholdings. Enterprising farmers from the Midwest and the South pounced on huge tracts of these lands, convinced that the latest irrigation systems and dry farming techniques, as well as the new rail lines in the state, now made intensive farming possible even in the hottest parts of Texas. By 1880, Texans were producing a cotton crop valued at $39 million, and, by the early twentieth century, bumper crops of citrus fruits were making commercial farmers in South Texas a tidy fortune.

The combination of the railroad and the agricultural revolution led to the first great influx of Anglo Americans into Tejano strongholds. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, for example, entire towns with predominantly Anglo populations sprouted overnight. "As if by magic," marveled La Crónica on April 9, 1910, "the towns of Mercedes, San Benito, Chapin, Raymondville, San Juan, Mission and other places have risen in the lower Rio Grande." In 1915, the Houston Chronicle also made a note of this transformation, arguing that the recent arrivals' introduction of waterworks, ice plants, electricity, and other elements of "civilized life" into South Texas had made the region "one of the most progressive sections of Texas, and this, too, despite the handicap of a large and ignorant Mexican population."

In time, the politics of the region made the newcomers resent the Mexican population. The newcomers sought publicly financed roads, irrigation projects, and other improvements necessary for intensive farming, but faced steadfast opposition from political bosses and ranching interests, who opposed any measures that would raise taxes for ventures that offered them little direct benefit. As the wrangling intensified, disgruntled farmers denounced political machines and their largely Mexican American electorate, saving their most heated vitriol for the Tejanos who, in their view, served as "ignorant tools in the hands of bosses." Lacking any real understanding of the history or political motivations of these Mexican voters, the Anglo newcomers concluded that the willingness of Tejanos to "attach themselves to any one who may have shown them a kindness" made them a "political menace" that needed containment. Eventually, their wealth and numbers translated into greater influence in the political arena, giving the recent arrivals the means necessary to enact poll taxes, "white primaries," and other discriminatory voting laws. In the process, they effectively disenfranchised Tejanos and secured their place atop the political hierarchy of the state.

The anti-Mexican sentiment engendered by the politics of the region soon carried over into other aspects of society. Between 1907 and 1912, to cite one example, Texas Rangers and other law officers in Cameron and Hidalgo counties killed sixteen Mexicans, whom they invariably accused of resisting arrest; Tejanos, for their part, blamed the officers themselves and argued that the deaths were the result of recklessness and bigotry. Not as sensational but no less cruel was the segregation Mexicans now faced in restaurants, picture shows, and other public places, which increasingly reserved admittance for "whites only." Even the Mexican elite—ever proud of its "Spanish" lineage—was not spared this indignity. To the newcomers, a Mexican—no matter how wealthy or well-connected—was still a Mexican and thus subject to the same treatment as his less prosperous counterparts. Not surprisingly, the new order embittered many of these privileged Tejanos, accustomed as they were to receiving at least some credit for their European roots from the Anglos of the region. "Since the coming of the 'white trash' from the north and middle west we felt the change," noted one. "They made us feel for the first time that we were Mexicans and that they considered themselves our superiors."

Those old enough to remember the upheaval following the Texas Revolution and the U.S.-Mexican War would have found it impossible to miss its similarity to current events. After all, besides losing social and political status, Tejanos again faced the threat of dispossession. The problems that plagued their community in the past resurfaced. For one thing, property disputes with farmers often resulted in long, drawn-out court cases, meaning that, even when Tejanos won their legal battles, they were usually compelled to part with at least some portions of their landholdings to defray their legal bills. In other cases, the newcomers simply forced landowners off their property, but, more often than not, it was the changes in the local economy that proved the most harmful to Tejanos. With prop-
CHAPTER ONE  8

Property values skyrocketing because of the new rail lines, taxes turned into an insurmountable financial burden for many, leading to widespread foreclosures and even more sell-offs.24 To some extent, the repercussions of these Tejanos’ dispossession also coincided with those of their forebears. Many of them, for example, wound up working for the same individuals responsible for their financial difficulties. Yet, whereas the old-timers had simply transferred their duties and skills as vaqueros (cowboys) from their own ranches onto those of their new employers, they more often than not found themselves in the unfamiliar—and detested—role of farm laborers. Low-paying, repetitive, and backbreaking, farm work required hour upon hour of hoeing and picking crops. And since one’s meager wages depended on the total harvest, pacing oneself was a luxury that few could ever afford. Gone were the days when vaqueros and ranch hands could take pride in their horsemanship and stock-handling skills, or, at the very least, when multiple tasks reduced boredom on the job. Now many Tejanos were forced to work in whatever jobs were available, and for people who, in many cases, considered them little more than a source of cheap labor.27

III

It was at this time, when deteriorating race relations and foreign and domestic instability were wreaking havoc with their daily lives, that some Tejanos grew restless enough to lend their support to a separatist and irredentist movement known as the Plan of San Diego Rebellion. As a result, the Lower Rio Grande Valley soon became the stage for one of the bloodiest episodes of racial violence in American history.

A revolutionary manifesto of unknown authorship datelined in the small Texas town of San Diego in Duval County, the “Plan of San Diego” called for an all-out war against the United States. As part of its provisions, a “Liberating Army for Races and Peoples” composed of Mexicans, blacks, and Japanese were to execute all Anglo males over the age of sixteen in order to reclaim Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California, which the plan alleged had been “robed in a most perfidious manner by North American imperialism.” After securing the Southwest for Mexican Americans, Asians would be liberated, the ancestral homelands of the American Indians would be returned, and six states contiguous to the region would be taken to serve as an independent republic for blacks.28

Either out of fear of reprisals or concern that Mexican Americans would renege on their promises, few blacks and Japanese actually participated in the rebellion, but the rhetoric and apolitical nature of the revolt made it especially attractive to many Tejanos. At a time when the factional warfare of the revolution had created deep fissures among Mexicans on both sides of the border, the plan invited all Mexicans, regardless of political allegiance or citizenship, to unite behind a common cause. Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike could forget their differences and instead focus on avenging “Yankee tyranny.” What was more, despite the ostensible goal of territorial reclamation, the movement eventually became more of a fight against Anglo oppression and a reaffirmation of the dignity of the Mexican people. “Enough of tolerance!” insisted the rebels in a subsequent manifesto known as the “¡Ya Basta!” handbill. “Enough of suffering insults and contempt! We are men, conscious of our acts, and who know how to think as well as they, the ‘Gringos,’ and who can and will be free; and we are sufficiently well educated and strong enough to elect our own governors, and we will do so.”29

In the end, of course, the rebels failed in their objectives, but, for several months in the summer and fall of 1915, their actions paralyzed the Valley. The approximately one thousand to three thousand Mexican and Mexican Americans who pledged to the Plan of San Diego, usually organized in paramilitary companies of twenty-five to a hundred men on horseback, destroyed railroad bridges and tracks, killed farmers and their families, and clashed with local posses before making their getaway across the Rio Grande. In many ways, their raids were similar to those that had plagued the border since the start of the revolution, except for the deliberate targeting of farmers and the railroads, the bane of Tejanos in the early twentieth century. From early July to late October in 1915, and then again briefly in June of the following year, the rebels, known among Tejanos as the sediciosos (seditionists), destroyed property worth thousands of dollars, shattered the regional economy, and killed or wounded about sixty Anglos.30

The racial violence and the discovery of the plan sent shock waves throughout the state. Rep. John Nance “Cactus Jack” Garner, the witty and colorful congressman and future vice president from the South Texas town of Uvalde, was dead serious in his call for a declaration of martial law.31 No less rattled, the new governor of the state, James “Farmer Jim” Ferguson, quickly fired off requests for more American troops along the border. “I am daily receiving information of acts of theft, robbery and murder all along our border,” Ferguson informed President Wilson in an unsuccessful appeal for
an increased Texas Ranger force. “It has been only a few weeks since two of our rangers and one of your river guards were killed by Mexican bandits in the line of action on our territory.” Terror struck the farmers of the region. A few days following the first attacks, many of them left the rural areas for nearby towns, where they felt there was security in numbers. There, they organized home guards and patrolled their areas nightly. By August, though, their inability to curtail the raids led many to quit the Valley. Some fled north to Corpus Christi at the mouth of the Nueces River, whereas others left the Lone Star State altogether, opting instead to return to their native soil in the North and Midwest.

To some extent, though, the fears were overblown. Despite the enormous property damage and disruption of day-to-day life that the sediciosos caused, the human cost they inflicted on their enemies was hardly staggering. Ultimately, and lamentably, their quixotic mission wound up triggering a terrible wave of violence against persons of Mexican descent, with Anglo panic translating into a murderous backlash by Rangers, local officers, and civilians whose death toll far exceeded anything the rebellion had theretofore wrought.

The killings commenced a few days after the first Plan of San Diego raids. On July 24, in the small town of Mercedes, sheriff’s deputies shot two suspected raiders for “resisting arrest,” the traditional standby for trigger-happy law officers. Less than a week later, outside of nearby San Benito, armed men lynched another Tejano, in this case seizing the suspect by force from two Texas Rangers who were transporting him to a Brownsville jail to await trial. When neither incident elicited criminal charges for the murderers or disciplinary action for the Rangers, vigilantes crawled out of the proverbial woodwork. They were bolstered in their enterprise by English-language papers, such as the San Antonio Express, which decried the use of “half-way methods” to pacify the border, as well as the Lyford Courant, which actually went so far as describing lynch law as “never a pleasant thing to contemplate” but “sometimes the only means of administering justice.” By September, the Express was reporting that “the finding of dead bodies of Mexicans, suspected for various reasons of being connected with the troubles, has reached a point that where it creates little or no interest.”

In reality, no one of Mexican ethnicity, regardless of whether or not he or she was a real suspect, was safe from the backlash. Relatives of suspects, persons whose names sounded similar to known raiders, and even those who simply lived near the site of raids all fell to assassins’ bullets or mob rule. Although officials reported only about one hundred Tejano deaths, the discovery of buried skeletons with bullet holes in their skulls years later suggests that some scholars’ estimates of a number in the vicinity of five thousand is more accurate.

As a result of these atrocities, many Tejanos were torn about the Plan of San Diego. Whereas some took pleasure in seeing Anglos suffer for a change, they nonetheless lamented that it was the innocent and defenseless members of the Tejano community who bore the brunt of the gringos’ retribution. Interestingly, some actually attempted to absolve Mexican Americans of any participation in the rebellion and laid the blame for the violence entirely on “true-born” Mexicans, as in the following corrido (folk ballad) called “Los Sediciosos” (The Seditious):

In this place called Norias, it really got hot for them;
A great many bullets rained down on those cursed rinchos
[Texas Rangers]

Now the fuse is lit by the true-born Mexicans,
And it will be the Texas-Mexicans who will have to pay the price.

Now the fuse is lit, in blue and red,
And it will be those on this side who will have to pay the price.

Now the fuse is lit, very nice and red,
And it will be those of us who are blameless who will have to pay the price.

Understanding their vulnerability, many Tejanos aimed to cooperate with Anglos. The residents of the small, predominantly Mexican hamlet of San José, for example, appealed for protection from the U.S. Army on the basis that they were “good Mexicans,” thus distancing themselves from adherents of the Plan of San Diego. Similarly, in San Benito, about one hundred Tejanos voluntarily turned over their arms and ammunition to local officials, an extraordinary move considering that they were leaving themselves virtually defenseless at a time when innocent Mexicans were often targets of vigilante violence. The townsfolk were issued receipts for their rifles, shotguns, and pistols, which were to be stored in a bank until the troubles subsided.

Others simply fled. On September 11, 1915, a little over two months after the first Plan of San Diego raids, the San Antonio Express reported that Mexican families were moving south of the border in droves, an act that, given the upheaval in Mexico, suggested the desperation
of the refugees. Automobile passengers driving into Brownsville, it
noted, told of spotting as many as nine moving families within an
hour's ride. With them, they took "their horses, mules, wagons,
household furniture, farming implements, chickens, cows, and, in
fact, all their effects which could be moved," though out of ne-
necessity leaving behind their lands, houses, and even untended crops.
Eventually, the exodus left entire areas of the region depopulated,
causing a severe labor shortage and leading some farmers to call for:
the importation of African American workers from East Texas and
outside of the state. During September and October, over seven
thousand Mexicans and Mexican Americans evacuated Cameron
and Hidalgo counties—a number amounting to about half of the
ethnic Mexican population of both counties.43

IV

Events in Mexico finally led to the end of the rebellion and its even-
gorier reprisals. But the turmoil along the U.S.-Mexico border was
by no means over. As it happened, one form of unrest was simply
replaced by another.

Since his overthrow of Madero, Huerta had been besieged by chal-
engers from every part of the country. The most serious threat
came from the so-called Constitutionalist Army, a coalition of
northern forces under the leadership of Venustiano Carranza, the
governor of Coahuila. After Huerta's own downfall, the revolution
entered its most chaotic period, as the Constitutionalist Army splin-
tered among the followers of Carranza and the Villistas, who sup-
ported Francisco "Pancho" Villa, a rebel leader from Chihuahua.
With designs on the Mexican presidency, Villa courted the Wilson
administration, even refusing to utter a single word of criticism pub-
licly against its actions in Veracruz. The United States, for its part,
initially supported him against Carranza, with the press depicting
the Chihuahua native as the heroic, horse-riding leader of the down-
trodden masses. Eventually, though, the White House was forced to
switch sides after the Villistas' disastrous defeat by Carranza's forces
at the battle of Celaya in April 1915. On October 19 of that year, with
Villa seeming less and less likely to ever regain his former strength,
Wilson swallowed his pride and recognized Carranza, the only
leader who appeared capable of uniting Mexico and finally bring-
ing peace to the beleaguered country. In return, Carranza obliged
the White House's request to crack down on the sediciosos, who had
always used the northern state of Tamaulipas as a refuge and staging

ground for their attacks. With so many Tejanos having left the Val-
ley to avoid its rampant vigilantism—thus depriving the rebels of
another means of shelter and support—and with Constitutionalist
regulars on their tracks, the rebels were essentially contained by late
in the fall. The backlash petered out shortly thereafter as well, and,
save for one last, unsuccessful rebel uprising in June 1916, the race
war in the Valley had finally ended.44

Soon, though, other parts of the border fell into turmoil. En-
raged by his betrayal at the hands of the American government,
Villa vowed revenge. On January 10, 1916, his forces, under the com-
mand of Col. Pablo López, took action. After stopping a train of the
Mexican North Railway Company near Santa Isabel, Chihuahua,
240 miles south of El Paso, López ordered sixteen American passen-
gers off the train and promptly had them executed.45 A few weeks
later, on March 7, Villa himself led an army of five hundred soldiers
in an attack on Columbus, New Mexico, a small town sixty miles
west of El Paso. Once the smoke had cleared, seventeen Americans,
mostly civilians, lay dead. It had been the first attack by a foreign
army on American soil in over a hundred years.46

Villa's actions sparked a wave of outrage among the American
public. Although only one of the numerous Mexican raids into
American soil since the start of the revolution, the attack on Colum-
bus was deemed especially outrageous because it was comparatively
large and led personally by an important Mexican leader.47 "Villa
must be suppressed," declared the New York Times. "His villainous
activities must be stopped for all time, and we must do it."48 Its cross-
town counterparts were no less irate. "Nothing less than Villa's life
can atone for the outrage at Columbus, N.M.," blustered the World.
"Every drop of American blood shed at Columbus is on his hands."
The Tribune, meanwhile, blamed Wilson almost as much as Villa for
the attack. "The administration," it argued, "has evaded a duty to
Americanism long enough. If our flag, our escutcheon and our dip-
loamy are to mean anything again south of the Rio Grande Villa
and his followers must be rounded up by our troops and made to pay
the penalty of their hideous crimes against American citizens."49

In Texas, no stranger to raids, the outpouring of anger and indigna-
tion paralleled that of the rest of the country. "No self-respecting
nation," wrote the Houston Post, "can endure forever what this na-
tion has endured in Mexico and in our own territory at the hands of
Mexico's outlaws." The San Antonio Express called on Wilson to end
the "long reign of brutality" and take Villa "dead or alive." The Dallas
Morning News concurred: "The time has come . . . when United States
troops should be sent into Mexico and kept there until they have either captured or killed Villa and dispersed his force." If Carranza objected, it stated bluntly, "his protest ought to be disregarded."50

In the face of this rising tide of jingoism, the Wilson administration reluctantly agreed to another Mexican excursion, although opting for a limited intervention instead of Sen. Albert B. Fall's call for an army of a half-million men to occupy Mexico. After reassuring a reticent Carranza that its only objective was to secure Villa, the White House sent a punitive expedition, under the command of Brig. Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing, across the border into Mexico on March 15, less than a week after the Columbus raid.51

As it turned out, nothing went right for the expedition, and within months its actions brought the two countries to the brink of war. The problems began immediately, as Carranza, expecting a few American soldiers, was troubled to learn that the invasion force actually numbered over five thousand men. Pershing and his men quickly grew tired and frustrated with Villa's elusiveness and the hostile reception they received from the locals, but Carranza's worries nonetheless multiplied as their expedition increasingly took on the look of an occupying army with every mile that they penetrated deeper into Mexico and every additional soldier that they received as reinforcement. On April 13, following an encounter between a detachment of American troops and several Mexican soldiers that left several dead on both sides, Carranza finally demanded the withdrawal of the expedition, which Wilson promptly refused.52

By late May, things had spun completely out of control. Carranza ordered his troops to resist any further American reinforcements and to block the expedition from moving in any direction but northward. Wilson answered by sending warships to both Mexican coasts and calling practically all of the National Guard, a force of about one hundred thousand men, to protect the border. On June 21, tensions erupted in violence yet again after an American party attempted to overpower a Mexican detachment assigned to prevent their advance. Instead of giving way, as the Americans expected, the Mexican troops stood their ground. The melee, later known as "the Carrizal affair" after the town that served as the battleground, left thirteen Americans dead and another twenty-four prisoners; the Mexicans, no less ailing, reported twenty-nine casualties.53

Although a full-blown confrontation seemed imminent, it never came. Neither side truly wanted war. On the one hand, Carranza was well aware that because his countrymen were at each other's throats, Mexico could not effectively resist its more powerful neighbor. And Wilson, for all his belligerence, had never wanted anything other than for the Mexican people to enjoy the blessings of democracy; he had simply been too patronizing to allow them to attain it for themselves and too quick-tempered to disregard even the slightest affront. A few days after the bloodletting at Carrizal, however, the American Union Against Militarism, a pacifist organization, convinced the president to dispatch a delegation to meet with Mexican representatives in El Paso to discuss the recent troubles. The move was a success. On June 26, the United States admitted publicly that American forces had been responsible for Carrizal. Two days later, Carranza reciprocated by releasing the American prisoners taken in the battle. More discussions ensued in the following months, and, on January 19, 1917, the White House finally decided to withdraw the failed punitive expedition. Villa would alas go unpunished for his deeds in New Mexico, but the United States would at least avoid an unnecessary and fruitless conflict.54

Not surprisingly, the antagonism between the two countries had impacted the Tejano community. The huge number of guardsmen stationed along the border had been particularly disconcerting for many Tejanos. Besides erecting tents and digging trenches, the troops had counted among their daily tasks the searching of Mexican homes for hidden weapons.55 While some Tejanos welcomed the protection they offered, others decried their unprofessional behavior, which included shady business dealings and thievery.56 Following the Columbus raid, as well as two others in the Texas towns of Boquillas and Glenn Springs shortly thereafter, racial tensions reached a fevered pitch in the Big Bend area. Many Anglo residents abandoned their homes and sought refuge in nearby settlements as rumors circulated that several of the raiders were members of the Tejano community.57

V

Another motive prompted the removal of Pershing's forces from Mexico. Since 1914, World War I had divided Europe into unprecedentedly large military factions, with Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, the so-called Central Powers, on one side, and Great Britain, France, Russia, and several other countries that called themselves the Allies on the other. In an effort to cut off American supplies to Britain and break the bloody stalemate of the war, the German high command had recently decided to resume its policy of attacking all vessels—neutral or otherwise—in the vicinity
of enemy ports with its deadly new weapon, the U-boat, or submarine. As Britain’s chief trading partner and the harshest critic of unrestricted submarine warfare, the United States decried the move, noting Germany’s recent pledge to suspend such attacks after sinking the British liner \textit{Lusitania} and the French cross-channel ferry \textit{Sussex} while killing or injuring over one hundred innocent American passengers in the process. With the specter of war now looming, Wilson had decided that catching and punishing Villa was no longer as important as preparing his forces for an overseas engagement.  

Mexico soon became entangled in the German-American estrangement. For several years, Germany had been trying to curtail American shipments to the Allies by inciting Mexican leaders against the United States and provoking a Mexican-American war, as such a conflict would likely tie the Americans down in their own hemisphere and reduce their exports of arms and other supplies. Germany’s inability to do so had contributed to its resorting to submarine attacks, but the momentum had swung in German favor after the launching of the punitive expedition. Since Carranza now feared that a war with the United States was not only possible but likely, he had begun to strengthen his ties to Germany as a means of protecting his country.  

The result directly triggered America’s entry into World War I. Cognizant that its naval policies would probably drive the United States to the Allied cause, German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmerman sent a telegram offering Mexico the lost territories of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if it took up arms against its neighbor to the north.  

Intercepted by the British in January 1917 and made public to the world a few weeks later, the Zimmerman note created a nationwide uproar. The issue of unrestricted submarine warfare, with its debates about neutral rights and freedom of the seas, was one thing; for most Americans, a great many of whom had never even set eyes on a seacoast, this was now proof positive that Germany was not only antagonistic and lawless, but also intent upon attacking them directly. If the country until then had largely been against involvement in European conflicts, the mood had changed perceptibly.  

“The issue shifts,” stated the \textit{Omaha World Herald}, “from Germany against Great Britain to Germany against the United States.” For its part, the \textit{Sacramento Bee} inveighed against Germany’s “treacherous enmity” and “underhanded, nasty intriguing.” Even the \textit{New Republic}, hardly the organ of firebrands and warmongers, now vilified Germany, calling its war against the Allies “a war against the civilization of which we are a part.”  

In Texas, editorial condemnations of German “lawlessness,” “brutality,” and “inhumanity” proliferated in the days following the discovery of the note. Echoing the sentiments of the \textit{Republic}, the \textit{Dallas Morning News} called the German government the “blight on the world’s civilization” and referred to its offer to Mexico as the final “unprovoked act of aggression” against the United States. But Germany was not the only target of the Texas press. Despite Carranza’s assurances to the contrary and the reluctance of the White House to challenge him publicly, the \textit{Houston Post} speculated that Mexico was most likely a willing accomplice in this high-stakes game of international intrigue. “We may find an enemy closer to us than any European power,” wrote the newspaper in an editorial that surely made its readers of Mexican descent cringe with discomfort. “War upon the fields of Texas is not beyond the powers of the imagination. Home guards may be needed.”  

The gauntlet had been tossed. Despite much deliberation, the president unsurprisingly agreed to ask Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. On April 2, 1917, a somber Wilson addressed a joint session on Capitol Hill. “The world must be made safe for democracy,” he pronounced, elevating the significance of his country’s quarrel with Germany. “We shall fight for the things that we have always carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free.” On April 4, the Senate approved the war resolution by the overwhelming margin of 82 to 6. Two days later, the House of Representatives responded with a vote of 373 to 50. The president signed the resolution the following day, making it official that America was now at war.  

In the wake of the declaration of war, the Spanish-language press joined its English-language counterpart in supporting the Allied cause, though its conformity appears to have been, at least in part, a means of deflecting the charges of disloyalty and lawlessness that editorials such as those of the \textit{Houston Post} were sure to bring. Its about-face was dramatic. Immediately following the discovery of the Zimmerman note, the Laredo daily, \textit{Evolución}, which was owned and edited by Nicasio Idar’s son Clemente and similar to \textit{La
CHAPTER ONE 18

Crónica in political orientation, had derided the “vacuous” patriotism of many Americans and their often hallucinogenic Germanophobia, alleging that “the German is now the ghost writer of any calamity in America.” By early April, however, the imminence of a declaration of war had the Laredo paper unquestioningly praising all things American—a stance that would prevail for the duration of the war—and calling for more amicable ties between the United States and Mexico.69 Similarly, San Antonio’s La Prensa, a Mexican exile daily belonging to middle-class immigrant Ignacio E. Lozano, first labeled the news stories of German-Mexican collusion in the American press as yellow journalism, but in the weeks leading up to the war adopted a pro-Allied stance and went about portraying Mexico as the innocent recipient of aggressive German overtures. With story after story detailing the extent of German deviousness and headlines like “Germany Won’t Rest until It Makes Mexico Its Ally,” it likely hoped to save the Mexican people of the Lone Star State from a xenophobic backlash.70

VI

The years leading up to America’s entry into World War I were thus years of volatility for the Tejano community. With the advent of commercial farming, Tejanos again faced dispossession, political disenfranchisement, and racial violence—travails that paralleled almost identically those of their antecedents in the mid-nineteenth century. Not only that, they found themselves in a precarious position as the violent byproducts of the Mexican Revolution led to tense diplomacy and saber rattling between the United States and Mexico. Due to a recent influx of Mexican immigrants, the Tejano community was as large and diverse as ever. As the United States prepared for war in Europe, it stood to reason that this heterogeneity, as well as the events of the last few years, would affect this community’s wartime actions. How exactly remained to be seen.

CHAPTER TWO

The Call to Arms

The call to arms that followed the declaration of war against Germany elicited varied responses from the Tejano community. Like other citizens, Mexican Americans demonstrated patriotism, but also disloyalty. The Mexican nationals who lived among them were no less divided. While some joined the American colors voluntarily or at least submitted willingly to the mandates of the Selective Service Act, thousands of others—even many who qualified for draft exemptions—fled across the Rio Grande to avoid military duty.

I

The Mexican Exodus, as the Texas press called this development, commenced soon after the start of the war. By mid-April, Brownsville authorities were counting daily an average of eight to twelve wagons loaded with Mexican citizens heading south of the border. One area farmer reported losing fourteen of his Mexican laborers in one day.1 Similar reports surfaced in Laredo, where officials identified their border town as a major exit point for Mexicans who had been working in the interior of the state and the areas between Webb and Nueces counties. By early May, U.S. immigration officers in Brownsville had reported the departure of approximately three hundred Mexican families. According to their accounts, one man even transferred his entire house—a small, two-bedroom abode—across the international bridge.2

Around the same time, however, many others in the Tejano community were rallying in support of the war effort. On April 9, 1917, a volunteer corps consisting of over one hundred young Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Kingsville, forty miles southwest of Corpus Christi, offered its services to the American military during a local Loyalty Day parade. In its report on the festivities, La Prensa noted approvingly that the youngsters “stood ready to battle for the American flag.”3 Many of their counterparts in other towns also volunteered early. In fact, two days before the Kingsville parade, a committee consisting of both Tejanos and Anglo-Americans from nearby San Benito had written President Wilson for authorization
CHAPTER TWO

20

to organize a regiment from among its many Tejano volunteers. "Our Mexican-American people have smarted for several years under the suspicion as to their loyalty," read its message, alluding no doubt to the Plan of San Diego and the recent hostilities between the United States and Mexico. "We appeal to you to secure this privilege for our young men to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States Government."34

It is unknown whether the committee ever received an answer to its request, but a similar case in Duval County may suggest how Wilson would have replied. There, widespread volunteering among its Mexican people prompted a wealthy rancher and justice of the peace named Felipe García to borrow a page from his neighbors in San Benito. On April 30, he telegraphed General Pershing, whom the White House had recently appointed to lead the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) in the war overseas, to request permission to organize the young men into Spanish-speaking companies. In response, Pershing's office thanked García for his patriotic gesture, but informed him that the army would not be accepting volunteer units.5

Ethnic prejudice likely played little, if any, part in García's rejection. Indeed, the White House had only recently turned down a similar proposal from former Pres. Theodore Roosevelt. Hoping to recapture the glory days of the Spanish-American War, the leader of the legendary Rough Riders had sought to assemble and lead a division of volunteers into the battlefields of France. Political reasons had much to do with Wilson's reluctance to grant his still formidable rival such a glamorous assignment, but the recent efforts of the American military to attain the level of sophistication of European armed forces also figured into his decision. Many high-ranking officers now regarded amateur "political" generals and volunteer units as too unreliable and a hindrance to these modernization efforts.6

Wilson and Secretary of War Newton D. Baker remained steadfast against volunteer forces even though the military could hardly afford to turn away any willing, able-bodied men in a time of war. (At a mere two hundred thousand troops, for example, the U.S. Army paled in comparison to many of its European rivals.) Determined to fill the ranks of the army without compromising its efficiency, Wilson and Baker insisted that volunteers serve in the Regular Army, which would be enlarged by the creation of twenty divisions to accommodate the new arrivals. Integrated among the regulars, they reasoned, the recruits would profit from the leadership and training of experienced soldiers and officers. Meanwhile, a military draft—the first since the Civil War—would offset any potential shortfall of volunteers caused by the new policy.7

Not surprisingly, the implementation of the draft turned out to be the most difficult part of their plan. In Kansas City, police arrested two men for attempting to obtain an injunction to prevent the governor, mayor, and other public officials from enforcing the draft. A similar antidraft measure arose—and failed—in California. In Congress, the president's draft bill faced opposition from states-rights advocates, isolationists, pacifists, and a host of other dissidents. Sen. Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin, its most vehement opponent, resented the mere presence of such legislation on the Senate floor. "Never in all my years of experience in the House and in the Senate," he remarked, "have I heard so much democracy preached and so little practiced as during the last few months."8 To make the bill more palatable to critics like La Follette, its authors eliminated some of the most antidemocratic elements of the Civil War draft measure of 1863—iniquities such as bounties, substitutes, and purchased exemptions—and guaranteed that draftees would serve for the extent of the war. Partly as a result, the controversial measure eventually won approval in both houses. On May 19, 1917, the Selective Service Act was officially passed.9

Texas, along with the rest of the country, immediately felt the reverberations of the bill's passage. On May 22, authorities in Snyder arrested seven supposed members of the Farmers' and Laborers' Protective Association (FLPA) for allegedly "planning to resist conscription by force." At about the same time, an Abilene man with purported connections to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) fell into police custody for antidraft activities.10 As the month neared its end, the areas along the Rio Grande made national headlines as officials in border towns like Laredo reportedly began nabbing daily between twenty and twenty-five Anglo-American draft dodgers from places as far away as Maine and New Hampshire. Most of the young detainees denied any attempts to escape conscription and instead cited pressing business concerns in the Mexican mining and oil industries as their reason for traveling out of the country.11

Regardless of such distractions, the government held three registrations during the course of the war. The first required all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one years to report to their local draft board in June 1917. The second, a two-part event held the following June and August, enrolled those men who had turned twenty-one since the previous summer. Finally, in September of that
year, the third registration extended the age limits to eighteen and forty-five years inclusive.12

Aliens were also required to register, but only a few were subject to the draft. During the first year of the war, the military conscripted only declarants—aliens who had already applied for American citizenship—from noneomy countries. However, in July 1918, Congress agreed to exempt declarants from neutral countries like Mexico, as well. The decision left declarants from friendly countries as the sole group of conscriptable aliens during the last few months of the conflict.13

Eventually, a total of twenty-four million citizens and noncitizens registered for the draft, allowing the military to amass a wartime contingent of roughly 3.5 million men—a force consisting of about 2.8 million conscripts and over seven hundred thousand volunteers. In Texas, the rallying call found a ready audience. By the end of the war, almost one million men, including about eighty thousand Mexican citizens and thirty thousand Spanish-surnamed natives, had registered in the state. Altogether, 197,000 residents of the Lone Star State served in the military during the war. Of these, approximately five thousand possessed Spanish surnames.14

The recruitment effort was a rousing success for the White House. More specifically, it was a coup for the judge advocate general, Enoch Herbert Crowder, whom Wilson had appointed as provost marshal general and placed in charge of the Selective Service System soon after the passage of the draft bill. Long a student of wartime conscription, General Crowder had resolved to avoid the mistakes of the disastrous Civil War draft, whose inefficiency and corruption had set off widespread, even riotous, protests. In 1920, he could boast—albeit with a touch of overgeneralization—of having successfully transformed “conscription in America” from a “drafting of the unwilling” into a practice in which the “citizens themselves had willingly come forward and pledged their service.”15

His overarching strategy had been simple but effective: remove conscription’s image as an imposition of an autocratic military by tying the long-reviled procedure to traditional American ideals of loyalty to country and civic duty. Toward that end, his agency entrusted civilian volunteers with full responsibility for the management of draft boards. It also obtained the enthusiastic support of state and municipal organizations, local chambers of commerce, and private citizens from all walks of life. Together, they relentlessly promoted the draft as a barometer of American patriotism.16

Their efforts paid off. On June 5, 1917, the first registration day, Americans all across the country celebrated as though they were observing a national holiday. Some towns hired bands to regale their registrants; others held parades. Everywhere, townfolk cheered on their young “patriots.” It was, in the words of draft expert John Chambers, “one of the first successful exercises in mass compliance through propaganda, hoopla, and peer pressure.”17

Despite—or, perhaps more accurately, because of—these efforts at social control, Tejanos participated eagerly in both the duties and the merriment of registration day. Laredo attorney Juan V. Benavides, son of Civil War veteran Col. Santos Benavides, the highest-ranking Mexican American to serve the Confederacy, served as chairman of the Webb County Draft Board. Meanwhile, in several precincts in El Paso County, Tejanos served as chief registrants, clerks, and interpreters. Their community also contributed a Mexican American band to the El Paso registration day parade. Under the direction of Reynaldo S. Gonzales, the musical group marched behind the El Paso Women’s and Girls’ Rifle Club and ahead of the display of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The most gripping story of the day, however, came from Brownsville. There, a patriotic oration by Brig. Gen. Charles G. Morton compelled an elderly Tejano to cross the international border into Matamoros, Mexico, to retrieve his two draft-dodging sons and have them register.18

The following day, La Prensa issued a proclamation titled “To the Line of Fire, Mexican-Texans!” Its author, former mayor Amador Sánchez of Laredo, exhorted the Tejano community to contribute men to what he called a “holy war in defense of the liberty and welfare of the entire globe.” It was an impassioned message. “If the enemy is ferocious and cruel,” the eloquent Sánchez argued, “it shall be a greater triumph to defeat them, for it is more of an honor to fight with lions than with lambs.” A master motivator, Sánchez appealed not only to his readers’ courage but also to their filial piety. Discussions about the country’s manpower needs segued neatly into paeans to wives, children, and mothers with “gray, sacred manes.” He concluded with a reference to history. “The future,” he predicted, “will know that we fulfilled our obligation, that we sacrificed everything we could on behalf of our country and our fellow man.”19

The war enthusiasm of Tejanos like Sánchez persisted for the duration of the conflict. In fact, many of their stories were featured in the Texas press, which likely hoped to inspire similar patriotism in other Mexican Americans. The Corpus Christi Caller and Daily Herald, for instance, ran an article on Francisco Hernández Jr. of San Diego, who contributed all three of his sons to the war effort. As the paper
CHAPTER TWO

noted, the three Hernández boys were continuing a military tradition in their family begun by their grandfather, Francisco Hernández Sr., a veteran of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{20} Likewise, Oligario Rodríguez’s
gusto landed him on the pages of the \textit{Laredo Weekly Times}. After members of the draft board in his native Laredo informed him
that he had been called mistakenly, Rodríguez reportedly brushed off the
error and volunteered to serve. “You might as well take me now,” the
\textit{Times} quoted the young Tejano as saying. “I am willing to fight
for my country and am willing to put on a uniform right now. Let me
take the place of someone whose mother would cry for him—I have
no mother.” The next day, he presented his letter of recommendation
from the board to the commander at nearby Fort McIntosh and
formally enlisted in the army.\textsuperscript{21}

Another subject for these pieces was that of the privileged young-
ster who was willing to leave behind his comfortable surroundings
to fight for his country. Perhaps the most celebrated of such cases
belonged to José Antonio Navarro, who was profiled in both the \textit{San
Antonio Express} and the \textit{Laredo Weekly Times}. A member of one of
the most distinguished Mexican American families in Texas, Nav-
arro was a graduate of the University of Texas and held the posi-
tion of city auditor in San Antonio at the time of his enlistment in
the 1st Texas Infantry. Both newspapers waxed poetically about the
young Tejano’s patriotism and compared it to that of his “illustri-
ous” grandfather of the same name, who eight decades before had
been one of only three Mexicans to sign the Texas Declaration of
Independence. The younger Navarro, wrote the \textit{Express}, was “eager
to don the khaki and to fight for the State and nation for which his
ancestors sacrificed, fought and suffered.”\textsuperscript{22}

In addition, newspapers were seemingly eager to highlight in-
stances in which Mexican citizens volunteered to fight on behalf
of their adopted homeland. On May 6, 1917, the \textit{Laredo Weekly Times}
recounted a dramatic encounter that had occurred the previous af-
fternoon between a Mexican volunteer and Webb County Deputy
Sheriff M. G. Benavides. “Are you registering men for the United
States army service?” the young man reportedly asked. “Yes,” replied
“I came from Mexico, but I want to join the army when the soldiers
are enlisted in Laredo.” After Benavides reminded him of the serious-
ness of such a move, he countered, “The best way for a man to gain
citizenship in a country is to fight for the flag of that country. Put me
down on the list and notify me when my services are wanted.” In a
later article on Martín Castillo, another Mexican citizen who vol-
unteered for military duty, the \textit{Times} declared, “These are the kind
of men that the United States army wants—volunteers of that type
who will make good loyal fighters and be entitled to recognition as a
good American citizen [sic].”\textsuperscript{23}

The patriotic fervor made an impression even on some of the
youngest Tejanos. In a 1976 interview, Luis O. Varela, who was
nine years old when the United States declared war on Germany,
remembered proudly how his immigrant father supported the war
effort and remained in the country to register for Selective Service—
unlike many other Mexicans in their West Texas hometown of Clint.
Almost sixty years after the end of the war, he still kept as a memento
the card his father received from the board, a certificate given to all
registrants to serve as proof of their compliance with the draft laws.
Another young Tejano, Conrado Mendóza of El Paso, tried to regis-
ister on June 5, 1917, despite being underage. Although told that the
military “had little need for children,” Mendóza harbored no ill feel-
ings about his rejection, as a few months later a German submarine
torpedoed a troop transport carrying many of his older and newly
inducted friends, none of whom survived.\textsuperscript{24}

Although the draft functioned smoothly for the most part, prob-
lems were not altogether uncommon. For instance, a mishap with
the mail translated into jail time for Hermenegildo Domínguez,
who registered for the draft in his hometown of Rockdale in Cen-
tral Texas but moved soon afterward to nearby Calvin in search of
employment. Because the post office delivered his draft summons
to his former residence, Domínguez never knew of his conscription
until authorities arrested him as a draft dodger in October 1917.\textsuperscript{25}
The aforementioned José de la Luz Saenz, who also moved shortly
after registering, faced a comparable ordeal despite having provided
his new address not only to the post office but also to the sheriff and
county judge in his native Comal County. After waiting fruitlessly
for a draft call, Saenz wrote Washington directly to offer his services,
which prompted a polite but stern reply informing him that the
Selective Service System had already issued him a draft summons
months earlier. Only the foresight he displayed in notifying more
than one office of his change of residence spared him from the legal
hassles of draft delinquency.\textsuperscript{26}

Sometimes, however, blunders carried more than legal conse-
quences. Such was the case with Florencio Heras, a railroad worker
from the small South Texas town of Alfred. Early one morning in
1917, officials apprehended Heras at his home, confusing him with
a draft dodger of the same name who had recently fled the neigh-
boring town of Benavides. Despite Heras's claims to the contrary, his captors remained convinced of his draft dodging and insisted that he register immediately. At only nineteen years of age, Heras was technically ineligible for the draft, but relented to their demands after his employer threatened to dismiss him from his job. Never able to prove his true identity, the youngster eventually found himself in the U.S. military, which sent him across the Atlantic toward the trenches of France in February 1918. Sadly, he never completed the voyage, as his troop transport fell victim to a German submarine.

Maximiliano González of Martindale in western Caldwell County suffered a fate no less unjust. Seventy years of age, poor, and nearly blind, González was living with his sons Filomeno and Simón—his only caregivers—at the time of the United States' entry into the war. Not long after the conscription of Filomeno, another letter from the Selective Service System arrived at the González household, this time a draft summons for Simón. The elder González beseeched the local draft board to exempt his younger son on grounds of dependency and severe hardship, but his requests, however well founded, fell on deaf ears. Undaunted, he took his case directly to Simón's superior officers, whom he surprised one afternoon by showing up at Camp Travis in San Antonio, the last fifty cents in his pocket having gone to the young boy who served as his guide. Again rebuffed, the determined septuagenarian nonetheless persisted in his efforts for several months, but ultimately succumbed to hunger and neglect. Not long afterward, the tragedy was made twofold by Simón's death in France.

While Saenz, who knew the Gonzálezes personally, attributed their troubles to ethnic prejudice, calling Martindale "one of those towns that is most unjust to our people," it is just as likely that Simón's denial of an exemption by the Caldwell County draft board stemmed from legitimate, though nonetheless unfair, grounds. This presumption is based on responses the elder González allegedly elicited from board members, who, according to Saenz, dismissed the old man by telling him that his son would be better able to provide for him with a military salary than with the meager earnings of a day laborer. As historian Jeanette Keith has pointed out, in July 1917 General Crowder attempted to lessen the number of draft deferments awarded on the basis of dependency by deeming as unqualified those draftees whose pay as servicemen would suffice to support their dependents. In so doing, the general made it all but impossible for most poor Southerners like Simón to obtain exemptions, as few earned the one dollar a day or more necessary to match the thirty dollars minimum monthly salary of a serviceman. Since most Mexicans and Mexican Americans in Texas worked in relatively unprofitable occupations like farm work and day laboring, it is thus probable that this portion of the draft laws played just as much—if not more—of a role than bigotry in scuttling many of their applications for dependency-based exemptions.

Through most of the war, the presence of large numbers of nondeclarant aliens from Mexico also created problems for the residents of the state. Because the Selective Service System based quotas on total population, citizens and declarant aliens in places with many nondeclarants were forced to supply a disproportionately high quantity of draftees. Some, like the editorial staff of the Laredo Weekly Times, vented their frustration over this injustice at the government. "The fault of the whole affair does not lie with . . . exemption board[s]," it argued, "but with the lack of the reasoning faculty on the part of some of the federal officials."

Others, however, misdirected their anger at Mexican nondeclarants, in some cases classifying them intentionally as Class I-A, the category most subject to the draft. One misclassified nondeclarant, a resident of Fort Bend County by the name of Angel Pérez, was assigned to the same ill-fated troop transport as Florencio Heras and, like his fellow conscript, destined to perish before even reaching France because of a German submarine (see chapter 6 for more on this episode).

In any case, the Tejano community, like other ethnic groups across the country, earned praise for its contribution of manpower to the war effort. "A gratifying feature of the entire campaign for recruits is the response of the . . . young men of Texas birth and Mexican descent," editorialized the Laredo Weekly Times, which invoked the memory of the Civil War in its eulogy. "They have lived up to the traditions of their fathers and grandfathers who responded so gallantly . . . in the sixties, and there is no question that they will be among the men whom we shall delight to honor when the war is over." The paper also acknowledged the contributions of Mexican citizens. Many of these immigrants "offered their services," it claimed, "feeling that they owed a duty to the country where they have been living for years past, and to the liberty which is the watchword of their own country."

Of course, Mexican citizens had other reasons for volunteering. As demonstrated by Deputy Sheriff Benavides's interviewee, some aliens joined the military to prove their worthiness for American citizenship. In other cases, however, their motives were not unique to unnaturalized immigrants. Young men of all sorts of
CHAPTER TWO  28

backgrounds—citizens and aliens, whites and nonwhites alike—entered the military out of a sincere belief in the righteousness of President Wilson's mission to spread democracy across the globe, as well as love and gratitude toward the United States— their native or adopted homeland.  

The war also offered an opportunity for adventure and a hero's return home. To a young Tejano like Pete Leyva, an impetuous teenager who had never wandered far beyond his native Presidio in West Texas, joining the navy seemed like the perfect way to find excitement and see other parts of the world. "I volunteered," he remembered years later. "I was just big enough and old enough to go. I went over there [to his local recruitment office] and says [sic], 'I want to go, and I'm going to war,' because I liked it; I wanted to go some place."  

For his part, Frank Delagoo of San Antonio resigned from a well-paying job as a telegraph operator to help "lick the Kaiser," indicating that American propaganda likely played as much of a role as straightforward thrill seeking in his decision to enlist in the army.  

For other Tejanos, their second-class citizenship provided an additional set of motives, incentive that they shared with other persecuted peoples. Like the multiethnic committee from San Benito, Saenz recognized that many Americans mistrusted anyone of Mexican descent. He too regarded the war as a chance for his people to prove their loyalty to the United States and, in the process, earn their rightful place as full-fledged American citizens. Such plans resembled those of many African Americans—even the most ethnically militant like W. E. B. Du Bois—who also hoped to redeem the respect they gained from wartime contributions into civil rights advancements after the end of the conflict. The plans also bore similarities to those of British colonial subjects. "The gateway to our freedom is situated on French soil," Mohandas K. Gandhi told his fellow Indians, urging them to support the war effort on behalf of the British. "If we could but crowd the battlefields of France with an indomitable army of Home Rulers fighting for victory for the cause of the allies, it would also be a fight for our own cause." Saenz recorded comparable sentiments throughout his diary, but perhaps nowhere else more movingly than in a piece titled and addressed "To Our Government":

Our sacrifice in battle is the ultimate act of protest against a determined group of petty citizens who have never been able to rid themselves of their racial prejudice against our people, and there are many places in Texas where such hostility is deeply marked.

The Call to Arms  29

where we are denied social consideration and good schools for the education of our children.

We firmly believe that the trials of war will change many previously hostile opinions, and God willing this will bring the justice and recognition that we deserve. . . .

As we fall in battle, we only hope for justice. . . .

Ethnic pride also fueled Saenz's desire to fight abroad. The fiercely patriotic schoolteacher believed that the Mexican people belonged to a "warrior race" and hungered to do his part to confirm this to the American public. "It will not be long," he wrote in a stirring farewell letter to his students, "before you hear of me brandishing a rifle in the trenches of France in defense of our racial pride and the honor of our flag." Others felt the same way. In his rallying call in La Prensa, for example, Amador Sánchez warned Tejanos not to tarnish the image of revered Mexican figures such as Pres. Benito Juárez, Miguel Hidalgo, and Cuauhtémoc, the last emperor of the Aztecs. "We Tejanos should be the first in volunteering for the fight, in joining the effort, as we possess a glorious heritage that we must respect," Sánchez insisted, his contention a remarkable blend of American and Mexican nationalism. That heritage, in his opinion, forbade Mexicans from displaying "any sort of weakness or cowardice."  

Of course, not all motives for wanting to participate in the war effort were as seemingly noble as those of Saenz or Sánchez. On the one hand, men often chose military life for reasons as mundane as obtaining a steady wage, good food, and warm clothing. José López of El Paso, on the other hand, sought permission to join the army simply to secure his release from prison.  

Whatever their reasons for joining up, the first recruits began departing for basic training during the late summer and early fall of 1917. In Texas, as throughout the rest of the country, communities organized touching farewell ceremonies to send them off in proper fashion. On September 21, for example, a large gathering of friends, family, and girlfriends gave the first contingent from Maverick County a send-off fit for war heroes, cheering and applauding loudly as their "boys"—many of whom were of Mexican descent—boarded a truck destined for Camp Travis. To the delight of the crowd, the eager youngsters adorned the vehicle with a sign that read, "Eagle Pass Deer Hunters Aiming at the Kaiser." Amid similar pomp and circumstance, the first contingent from Webb County also departed for Camp Travis that same week. Neither the recruits nor their well-wishers allowed the heavy rainstorms to dampen their enthusiasm.
In a procession that included public officials, troops from Fort McIntosh, and the 37th Infantry band, the men trudged through muddy streets waving goodbye to friends and onlookers before arriving at the local train station. According to the Laredo Weekly Times, "the Mexican American boys in the party were the happiest of the group."44

Similar scenes played out throughout the next several months. On February 23 of the following year, the fourth contingent from Webb County—over half of which was Spanish-surnamed—was met at the train station by scores of relatives and friends as it prepared to leave for Camp Travis. The occasion was a merry one despite the absence of a military band and the political speeches that marked the first three send-offs in the county. The Girls Honor Guard of Laredo deserved much of the credit, as its members arrived at the station to present homemade olive drab sweaters to the grateful recruits, each of whom donned the garments immediately upon receipt.45

II

Despite the overwhelming success of the Selective Service System, millions of potential conscripts resisted the draft. According to government officials, some men went as far as procuring jail sentences to avoid military duty. Others scrambled to find marriage partners after the government announced its intention of conscripting single men before husbands, a revelation that produced a matrimonial boom in many parts of the country. Occasionally, as with the so-called Green Corn Rebellion of eastern Oklahoma, opposition even turned violent. During this most famous of antidraft flare-ups, hundreds of poor tenant farmers and sharecroppers aligned with the Socialist Party resisted conscription through force of arms. Protesting that the conflict overseas was a "rich man's war" but a "poor man's fight," the farmers in one case ambushed a posse of law enforcement officers. Although authorities scotched their movement before it could develop fully, the rebels' plans had included destroying railroad bridges and telegraph lines to impede the work of the Selective Service System and then eventually leading a march on Washington—subsisting partially on their wagonloads of green corn, which gave the uprising its name—to force the government to end the war.46

In magnitude, the Green Corn Rebellion dwarfed any resistance that emanated from the Tejano community, but a two-day affair in the small town of Mikeska in Live Oak County rivaled it for sheer intensity. The troubles there began on October 5, 1917, when local sheriff Charles L. Tullis arrived at the home of Serapio Loso to apprehend two of the Mexican citizen's sons on charges of draft dodging. Tullis found the house barricaded, but eventually managed his way inside to confront the family, whereupon a gunfight ensued that left the father of the two boys dead. With the aid of the Losos' landlord, whom the sound of gunfire had drawn to the scene, the sheriff then shot and killed one of the two brothers, the other escaping.

The bloodshed resumed soon afterward. At noon the next day, five miles away from the Losos' home, Tullis and his men found the fugitive accompanied by a third brother. According to the sheriff, his attempt to arrest the draftee incited the other brother to reach for a hidden weapon, which in turn led Deputy Sheriff William James to immediately open fire on the accomplice. Mortally wounded, the brother nonetheless managed to obtain his pistol and return fire on the deputy, who also fell dead.47 As it turned out, the killings had not only been unfortunate but also unnecessary. Both nondeclarant aliens, the boys had qualified for draft deferments and had only needed to submit the required paperwork to secure their discharge from military duty. A few months later, the surviving brother did just that and was promptly released from Camp Travis, where he had been sent after being cleared of any part in the death of Deputy James.48

While nowhere near as extreme, other antidraft activities involving Mexicans and Mexican Americans occurred throughout the rest of the state. In Karnes City, fifty miles southeast of San Antonio, law enforcement officers arrested a Mexican citizen named Manuel Garza for attempting to disrupt the registration of his peers, a situation that turned tragic when Garza jumped out of a squad car and sustained life-threatening injuries.49 In the South Texas town of Aguilares, yet another incident involving the post office led to legal troubles for two Tejanos. On September 29, 1917, authorities arrested and jailed Pablo Navarro and his son Librado on two separate charges—the latter for failing to answer two draft calls summoning him to report for military duty, and the former for knowingly violating the Selective Service Act by neglecting to deliver those summons to his son. The elder Navarro had apparently refused to retrieve these notices from his mailbox during his visits to the local post office.50

Besides conscientious objections and the simple desire to save one's own skin—the most common reasons for draft resistance—loyalty to Mexico and a concomitant antipathy toward its longtime nemesis to the north compelled many in the Tejano community to oppose conscription. Alejandro Balderas of San Antonio, for in-