

## Threads of the Zoot Suit Riots: How the initial explanations for the riots hold up today

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### Introduction

“‘The cops ain’t got not nothing on me and you know it’ said Hank Reyna. ‘You’re Hank Reyna the zoot suiter. The bitter young gang leader from 38th Street, that’s what they’ve got on you ese’ claimed El Pachuco. ‘And I was supposed to report to the Navy tomorrow’ Reyna stated. El Pachuco then responded ‘Forget the war overseas, your war’s on the Homefront.’”

These are just a few lines of dialogue from the 1981 film/play *Zoot Suit* starring Daniel Valdez and Edward James Olmos. The movie is a fictional retelling of real events that happened 38 years before its release on the streets of downtown Los Angeles. The film is not the subject of this paper. The words spoken by these characters however help demonstrate that L.A. during World War II was not a friendly place for people of Mexican descent. Things like newspaper smear campaigns, police profiling, and segregation were issues that Mexican-Americans had to deal with in 1940’s Los Angeles. Such attitudes were an important factor in leading the city down the path toward one of the biggest riots in its history.

On June 3, 1943, at the height of World War II, members of L.A.’s young Mexican-American community were suddenly, viciously, and repeatedly attacked for nearly a week by U.S. servicemen on leave in the city. Many were beaten half to death, stripped of their clothes, then arrested by the police for vagrancy and rioting. This was all done to them despite the fact that it was the sailors who started the fighting not them. In the years before the war, tensions in Los Angeles toward the city’s young Mexican-American community grew steadily. That damn finally burst when U.S. sailors stationed in the city received news that some of their friends had been attacked by young men wearing zoot suits. A few days later, on June 3, 200 Sailors crammed themselves into twenty taxi cars and drove into downtown L.A. looking to hunt down anyone resembling those who had attacked their comrades, thus beginning the infamous Zoot Suit Riots. The name comes from a popular style of cloths that many young Mexican-Americans wore at the time, called the zoot suit. It is hard to pin down how long the riots truly lasted but overall the main fighting ended on June 9 when the Navy made L.A. off limits to their men. While a few clashes continued for a couple days afterward this is the moment most scholars agree is the point when the riots began to die down significantly. By the end of the riots hundreds of young Mexican-Americans and a few sailors were behind bars, wearing torn clothes as well as many injuries. While the Zoot Suit Riots may not have resulted in any deaths, they still exposed many of the injustices Mexican-American citizens in the city suffered under, such as police brutality, biased news coverage, and widespread racism. Being such a brutal and controversial event naturally people tried to explain why it happened with colorful results.

### Part I: Early Explanations for the Zoot Suit Riots

Throughout the duration of the riots as well as sometime afterward, many Angelenos at the time searched for an explanation. Almost everybody who had access to a printing press or radio voiced their opinion on the riots causation. The different local newspapers that covered the

event, the Los Angeles Police Department, city officials, the Mexican population and even some prominent activists at the time expressed their own ideas about what caused the riots. For the most they usually put the blame for the riots on a single cause. These typically included either the Mexican zoot suiters, society's failure dealing with juvenile delinquency, Nazi's or even each other, but never themselves. In the end they wound up not being completely wrong or right. Thanks to extensive research we know today that the riots were not simply caused by a single factor as many claimed at the time. Instead, there were many separate factors working together over a number of years in a huge causal web that eventually resulted in the Zoot Suit Riots. It is often a problem in society that people choose to accept single, very often biased, answer to a complex issue. This is particularly important today amidst the rise of misinformation in media, the spike in white nationalism and the increasing polarization of the electorate.

### Early Media Explanations

The earliest explanations-or to be more accurate, accusations-of what caused the Zoot Suit Riots were printed in the L.A. newspapers. The coverage the press put out both during and after the riots is considered today to have been very biased. Over the course of its history L.A. has been home to many newspapers. The two biggest newspapers at the time were *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Los Angeles Examiner*. Since the riots occurred in the era before television these two publications were the main source of information for most people in the city. Throughout the Zoot Suit Riots both newspapers were very vocal about who they thought was to blame for the whole ordeal. In the stories they printed both newspapers put accused the zoot suiters of starting the riots with their gangster activities. Most of these stories however were mainly opinion pieces with few truths layered within, disguising them as factual retellings of events. Along with that, in some instances these newspapers used this tragic event as an opportunity to spread their extreme political beliefs.

*The Los Angeles Times*, though one of the biggest newspapers in the city, did not start reporting on the riots until June 7, four days after the riots had already begun.<sup>1</sup> Since they came to the game so late they did not print as many articles about the riots or the rioters as other newspapers like the *Examiner* did. However, in the articles they printed on the riots they put the blame for the violence on the shoulders of the zoot suiters.

They made their view clear in their earliest article about the riots, published while the fighting was still going on, "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen." At this time the zoot suiters had begun to fight back against the attacking sailors, which gave the impression that they, rather than the sailors, were the instigators and not the other way around. The title itself immediately signaled to the reader which side of the riots the newspaper favored. Based on this title alone it is clear that the *Times* was trying to depict the sailors as heroes and the zoot suiters as villains. In the article itself, the *Times* claimed that the zoot suiters were the ones who began the violence when they attacked two servicemen a few days before the riots began and that the sailors were only responding in self-defense.<sup>2</sup> The article attempts to back up this claim by recounting a story provided by a police officer who arrested a truck load of zoot suiters. According to him were on their way to, "Have it out with a bunch of sailors."<sup>3</sup> By printing this

<sup>1</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen," June 7, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen."

<sup>3</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fights with Servicemen."

story, the *Times* made it clear to their readers that the zoot suiters were looking for trouble and that America's fighting men were the ones to give it to them.

The *Times* later articles concerning the riots, while mostly about the riots dying down, continued to falsely accuse the zoot suiters of not only causing the riots but now prolonging the violence as well. After the sailors had been confined to their base the *Times* started printing stories about how the zoot suiters were still attacking helpless citizens or escaping to San Diego to continue their rioting.<sup>4</sup> These stories completely reversed the facts of how the riots transpired since it was the sailors who attacked first, not the zoot suiters. Statements from *Times* journalist years later claimed that they were not trying to be biased during the riots, they were just printing the facts they had been given by their main source, the LAPD. However even if the *Times* did believe that their version of the riots that does not excuse their clear disinterest in hearing about any other opinion but their own. As journalists, they had an obligation to try to print all the facts, which means that for an event as big as this they should have tried to get information from as many sources as they could, not just one.

*The Los Angeles Times* was fiercely committed to its views on the riots even in the face of criticism from the White House. About a week after the Zoot Suit Riots finally ended, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt issued a statement condemning the riots as an act of racial prejudice against the Mexican community in the city.<sup>5</sup> The *Times* took great offence as they did not see the turmoil as a race riot which is reflected in the stories they printed that never identified the zoot suiters by their race, just their clothes. It is unknown if their outrage came from a firm belief that it was not a race riot or fear of their city's reputation being damaged by such a label. Either way a few days later, the *Times* fiercely denounced the First Lady's statement saying that "Mrs. Roosevelt with characteristic lack of understanding has added nasty fuel to a propaganda fire...in twisting the zoot trouble into something it isn't, a race-hatred problem."<sup>6</sup> They strongly argued that race was not a factor in the riots at all, saying that it was the result of sailors getting much deserved revenge on the zoot suiters. Through this response, *Times* showed that they were strongly committed to their version of riots and would ruthlessly rebuke anyone who challenged those views, even powerful and popular figures like Eleanor Roosevelt.

*The Los Angeles Times* was not alone in its condemnation of the zoot suiters, as their main rival at the time the *Los Angeles Examiner* also blamed them for the riots. However, the *Examiner* was different from the *Times* in a few ways. To start, the *Examiner* began reporting on the riots immediately, unlike the *Times*, and placed the blame just as quickly. In their first article about the riots, "Zoot suiters in Hiding as Drive Starts," they openly blamed the zoot suiters. It stated that zoot suiters were on a rampage, attacking numerous servicemen with no provocation other than just because they were gangsters.<sup>7</sup> Later articles, like "Sailors Hunt Zoot-Suiters, 2 in Hospital," or "Downtown Crowds Storm Streets in Zoot Suiter Hunt," printed stories with similar messages. The *Examiners* articles that painted the zoot suiters as bloodthirsty criminal gangsters who instigated the riots and the sailors as the victims who were fighting back in both self-defense as well as to avenge their comrades that were allegedly attacked by zoot suiters.

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<sup>4</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Zooters Escape San Diego Mob," June 10, 1943.

<sup>5</sup> Associated press, "First Lady Traces Zoot Riots to Discrimination," *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1943.

<sup>6</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Mrs. Roosevelt Blindly Stirs Racial Discord," June 18, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> *Los Angeles Examiner*, "Zoot suiters in Hiding a Drive Starts," June 4, 1943.

However, while it looks like the *Examiner* did exactly as the *Times*’ did during the riots, it actually took its argument against the zoot suiters a step further in an article they printed after the riots officially ended called, “Police Must Clean Up L.A. Hoodlumism.” In this article the *Examiner* did not just blame the zoot suiters for the riots they, also claimed that their actions have hurt the city’s reputation greatly. They argued that zoot suiters have overrun the city with their violence, and that in order to repair their image they need to destroy the zoot suit gangs by having the police, “crush the slightest attempts at mobs to exist or collect within the city.”<sup>8</sup> Here not only is the *Examiner* continuing to place blame on the zoot suiters but they are also advocating for prohibition of any kind of assembling of people in the city whether its criminal or not claiming that they were being overrun when in reality the fights were dying down by the time this story was printed and the zoot suit groups were staying off the street for their own safety. Thus, the *Examiner* printed inflammatory articles not only blaming the zoot suiters and painting them as vicious animals but also advocating for the ban of any kind of activity on the streets, even though the riots were over. This article made it clear that the *Examiner*’s stories during and after riots were not just aimed at blaming the zoot suiter. It also used the fear and panic surrounding the event as an opportunity to advocate its political beliefs under the guise of public safety.

While this kind of coverage may seem like a thing of the past, it unfortunately is still a serious problem in society today with the increase of conspiracy theories, racism and political bias in a number of news outlets countless people rely on for objective information.

Today some of the biggest examples of bias in the modern media comes from Fox News, one of the biggest news networks in the country. Fox News is known throughout the country for showing a great deal of favoritism toward right-wing politicians, such as current President Donald Trump. Fox News has a habit of letting their political bias get in the way of reporting the actual news. One of the most recent examples of this happened earlier this year when FBI special counsel Robert Mueller filed the first charges in his investigation of Russia meddling in the 2016 election.<sup>9</sup> While other news stations began broadcasting this event with vigor, Fox News did very little coverage about it. The little coverage they had asserted that these indictments proved that President Trump did not collude with Russians to win the election. This was odd considering that the indictments were against Russian nationals who may have illegally paid for election ads and had nothing to do with Trump or his campaign. Despite that Fox correspondent Sean Hannity went as far to say that the indictments vindicated Trump. Put simply on the day that official charges were brought up that suggested that foreign powers directly interfered in our democracy, Fox New was interested in talking about how it affected Trump. Fox News deliberately ignored an important implication of this story so that they could express their support for Trump instead. This action was met with widespread criticism. Many called their coverage appalling and very misleading to the public. This showed that Fox News was clearly very biased when it came to stories about Trump or Russia. While this event was nowhere near as violent or as significant, the way Fox News covered Mueller’s indictments showed some parallels to the way the *Times* and the *Examiner* reported the riots. Like them, Fox deliberately

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<sup>8</sup> *Los Angeles Examiner*, "Police Must Clean Up L.A. Hoodlumism," June 10, 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Hans A. von Spakovsky, "The latest Mueller indictment does not show Russian collusion by the Trump campaign," *Fox News*, February 16, 2018.

subverted or ignored acts in order to make their version of the story look better than more truthful interpretations.

Even though the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Examiner* were bitter rivals, the Zoot Suit Riots clearly showed that they had some common ground in terms of bias. They printed stories with damning accusations with little evidence and no additional viewpoints beyond their own or the LAPD's. The only real difference between the two was that the *Examiner* used their stories as an excuse to advocate for their political belief that the zoot suiters were disgraceful delinquents that needed to be cleaned up swiftly and brutally.<sup>10</sup> The *Times* also printed their own biased version of the truth. However, while they did not push any political beliefs, they did aggressively refute anyone who claimed that race was a factor in riots. Though slightly different, both newspapers used methods of distorting the truth of the riots in their articles. Taking all of that into account the articles these newspapers printed about the riots bear some similarities to the bias and misleading news stories people have to deal with today.

### Explanations from Los Angeles Institutions

After the city's major newspapers expressed their opinions, the institutions of the city voiced their views on the riots as well, though not always in a direct manner. The Los Angeles Police Department, Mayor of Los Angeles Fletcher Bowron and the Los Angeles City Council all had their own views on what caused the riots. Mayor Bowron, along with two LAPD officials expressed their views during a radio broadcast as the riots died down. The City Council did not make a public statement regarding the riots. They expressed their views of the riots through a measure they passed in response. Once again, the word opinion is used here because the views they expressed were not so much detailed explanations, rather self-justified finger pointing. These officials did their very best to make sure the public knew that the riots were not their fault and that the blame fell on others. For the most part they all agreed that the zoot suiters were the ones who began the riots. However, while they may have agreed on that, they deviated from each other when they accused other people and factors for helping to cause the riots.

The city organization that had the greatest involvement with the riots was the Los Angeles Police Department. The LAPD was directly involved in the riots as they were the ones whose job it was to break up the fighting. In a radio broadcast organized by Mayor Fletcher Bowron on June 9, 1943, both Deputy Chief E.W. Lester and Chief of Police C. B. Horrall made statements about what they believed to be the cause of the riots.

First, Deputy Chief Lester stated in his address that, "It is definitely wrong to blame the law enforcement agencies for the present situation." While this claim came later in his address it was very clearly his main argument as the rest of his paper has him asserting that almost everyone from the zoot suiters, the city, to even society itself for the riots.

To start, Lester argued that the zoot suiters had instigated the riots, because they wanted more attention in the newspapers. He claimed that, their leaders precipitated the violence so that the press would be forced to cover it. To clarify their position, he asserted, "These youths had at long last gained a desire that is fundamental in all human beings, the desire for recognition..."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> von Spakovsky, "The latest Mueller indictment does not show Russian collusion by the Trump campaign,".

<sup>11</sup> Mayor Fletcher Bowron, "Of 4512 Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs: Los Angeles "Zoot Suit" Situation 1943," *President's Official Files, 1933-1945*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, New York. **From** Roger Bruns, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 2014. 140.

He then claimed that the communities that these young men came from should be blamed for their behavior and therefore the riots. He argued that most of the young men who rioted came from neighborhoods where the standards of social conduct were poor and gangster activity was normal behavior. By claiming this he asserted that their communities were socially and morally a fault. Considering how the majority of zoot suiters were Mexican-Americans, that meant that the communities he was condemning were also Mexican, thus adding a racial component to his argument. By blaming the Mexican communities, he was essentially blaming all of the Mexican people in the city for the riots. Therefore, his statement revealed a deeper strain of prejudice toward Mexicans at the heart of the LAPD.

Lester then went on to put some of the blame on society itself. He accused society of not doing enough to deal with the problem of juvenile behavior. Claiming that in recent years Juvenile Courts had been too lenient in their rulings; that they have just been returning delinquents to their homes over and over again in an endless cycle without any real punishment. He declared that it was because of this leniency that the riots occurred. He suggested that the zoot suiters rioted because they thought they would not receive any substantial punishment from the Juvenile Court. Lester argued that more corrective punishment was needed to be enforced on juveniles in order to fix the problem of zoot suit gangs. By blaming the zoot suiters, the Mexican neighborhoods, and society, he made his case for his argument. And in the end, he concluded that law enforcement should not only be exonerated for the riots, but that they should intensify their methods of dealing with juveniles like the zoot suiters to finally get them off the streets.

After Lester, his superior Chief Horrall, took a more matter of fact approach by not openly blaming anyone for the riots. In a subtle way, however he implied that the sailors and the press were responsible for the riots. While he did not say it outright, when describing how the riots began he stated that after a few servicemen were injured in a fight with zoot suiters, other sailors, “thru the publicity that was given them, they took it upon themselves to retaliate.”<sup>12</sup> Even though he was blaming the sailors for the riots at the same time he also defended them by saying that it was natural for them to retaliate since they were soldiers and that was what they were trained for. Along with that he also blamed the press for riling up the sailors with their inflammatory coverage. He stated later in the broadcast that that same kind of coverage made the riots worse by spurring more sailors to fight in them, as well as attracting crowds which he claimed made it hard for the police to break up fights. Further, he made sure to assure the public that the police were not to blame. During the riots they had acted in an impartial manner arresting zoot suiters, civilians and sailors alike. In his statement Horrall displayed a bit more objectivity than his deputy did, yet still provided excuses that diverged from the facts. He admitted that the sailors began the riots but instead blamed the press for their inflammatory coverage which he claimed riled up both sailors and citizens alike. Even though he was more objective; like Lester he made sure to point out that the police were not to blame at all, going as far to say that the police did everything they could to quell the riots and were totally unbiased during them.

During that same radio broadcast and again in a newspaper interview, Mayor Fletcher Bowron gave his explanations for the violence that consumed his city for a week. Like the police department officials, Bowron asserted his belief that the sailors who attacked should not be blamed since they were simply retaliating against the zoot suiters for past fights. He stated that

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<sup>12</sup> Bowron, Zoot Suit Situation Radio Broadcast, from Bruns, Zoot Suit Riots. 141.

because they were attacking the zoot suiters in response to previous assaults done onto them, it made their actions, “Entirely understandable and largely excusable.”<sup>13</sup> Along with that he strongly argued that the riots should not be viewed as the result of racial prejudice on the part of the sailors. He asserted both in this broadcast and in a newspaper interview that the sailors were targeting people based on their zoot suits, and not their race.<sup>14</sup> However, he displayed his true feelings and contradicted himself when he talked about how mostly young Mexicans wore zoot suits and how it was unfortunate that some Mexicans were attacked regardless of whether they wore, “zoot suits or not.”<sup>15</sup> Thus he inadvertently confirmed that zoot suiters were mostly of Mexican descent and that the sailors were targeting based on both their race and style. Toward the end of his statement he advocated, “The gangs of young men must be broken up. They are a menace to the community and are affording excellent training for young criminals.”<sup>16</sup> Unlike his Chief and Deputy Chief of police who tried very hard to not give away their prejudice, Mayor Bowron did very little to disguise his racial bias. He stated clearly that he not only believed the zoot suiters were to blame, but also knew that most of them were Mexican. This suggested that the riots did have a racial component despite his claim.

The Los Angeles City Council also responded to the riots. Unlike the police and the Mayor, the City Council did not give their opinions on the riots in interviews but in a measure that they passed. On the same day the Mayor and police officials spoke on the radio, the City Council addressed the riots as well as the zoot suiters. The wearing of zoot suits was referred to by a Council member as having, “Caused the inciting of riots, bloodshed and destruction of property.”<sup>17</sup> This statement made it clear that the Council had rejected the other explanations made at the time and came up with their own. Unlike the other city officials, the Council believed that the wearing of suits themselves were to blame for the starting the riots. Despite how far-fetched this theory may seem they took it seriously and declared that the zoot suit style was not only a danger to the public but to the wearer as well. To curb this, at the end of the meeting they voted on and approved a “City-wide Ordinance Banning the Wearing of Zoot suits within the City of Los Angeles,” indefinitely.<sup>18</sup>

Just as the newspapers did, the main leaders of Los Angeles primarily accused the zoot suiters for the riots that had plagued the city. However, unlike the newspapers these officials did not solely blame them for the riots, some of them also pointed their fingers toward other factors as well. Deputy Chief Lester claimed that the zoot suiters behavior was a result of society failing to adequately deal with juveniles. Alternatively Chief Horrall placed some of the blame on the sailors but primarily blamed the press for stoking tensions between sailors and zoot suiters. The Mayor blamed the zoot suiters entirely while also advocating for the zoot suit gangs being broken up permanently. Lastly the city council ended up going a completely different route, by blaming not only the zoot suiters but also the suits themselves resulting in banning that style of clothing from the city altogether. Despite these slight differences, it appears clear that the

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<sup>13</sup> Bowron, Zoot Suit Situation Radio Broadcast, from Bruns, Zoot Suit Riots. 140.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times*, “Not A Race Issue Mayor Says,” June 10, 1943.

<sup>15</sup> Bowron, Zoot Suit Situation Radio Broadcast, from Bruns, Zoot Suit Riots. 140.

<sup>16</sup> Bowron, Zoot Suit Situation Radio Broadcast, from Bruns, Zoot Suit Riots. 140.

<sup>17</sup> City Council, No. 15079: Proposal by Police and Fire Committee for Adopting a Resolution for a city-wide Ordinance Banning the Wearing of Zoot suits within the City of Los Angeles, *City Council Meeting Minutes*, June 9, 1943. L.A. City Clerk Online Archive. <http://clkrep.lacity.org/oldcfidocs/>.

<sup>18</sup> City Council, No. 15079.

majority of the city's leaders along with the newspapers all agreed that the ones responsible for the Zoot Suit Riots were the zoot suiters themselves.

### Explanations from Mexican American

Next comes the perspective that was typically pushed aside back then, the Mexican American perspective. It was known before and during the riots that the vast majority of zoot suiters were young Mexican Americans. Therefore, Mexican Americans who were part of the riots or had witnessed them held different viewpoints about the riots origins. Unfortunately, most major newspapers in Los Angeles at the time did not acquire statements from anyone of Mexican descent for their coverage of the riots. Luckily the L.A. Spanish language newspaper *La Opinion* covered the event. This newspaper was run by Mexican-Americans and printed in Spanish therefore it was targeted almost entirely toward Spanish speaking people in the city. The opinions they voiced better depicted the views of Latino citizens in the city. In step with the pro-zoot suit narrative of *La Opinion*, interviews were done years later with Mexican-Americans who were living in Los Angeles at the time of riots. One interview in particular, Louis Duran's, not only described his life growing up in America, but also talked about his immediate community's experience of the riots.

To begin, *La Opinion* began reporting on the riots as soon as they broke out on June 3. Their first article on the riots was, "Alarm in Mexican Barrio." While the article was mostly just giving information did reveal something more than just facts. The article's described how the "sailors were continuing their war," on the Mexican American Pachuco gangs in the barrios.<sup>19</sup> This wording in the article showed that *La Opinion* believed that the sailors were the instigators of riots instead of the zoot suiters. Not only that but considering this was their first article on the riots their words also suggest that they saw the sailors actions were a continuation of past violence between the two groups. Along with that however, they also referred to the Mexican-Americans as Pachucos, which was the name given to those who wore zoot suits and joined gangs. That meant they did not completely side with the zoot suiters either, they just did not believe that they were responsible for the attacks. While the paper appeared to blame on the sailors for the riots, by calling attention to the fact that the zoot suiters may have been gangsters means that *La Opinion* had not yet mad up its mind on who was responsible. Considering how other newspapers strongly judged the zoot suiters as the riot's main initiators, *La Opinion's* view was very neutral and unique by comparison.

Towards the end of the riots *La Opinion* became a place where other prominent Mexicans could vocalize their views on the event as well. In one of their final articles on the riots, "Battle Between Sailors and Pachucos," they published the contents of a telegram, sent from Eduardo Quevedo, the President of the Coordinating Council of the Young People of Latin America, to numerous governmental officials including President Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>20</sup> Quevedo believed that the sailors were the ones who instigated the riots by attacking, "Mexican zoot suiters throughout the city of Los Angeles."<sup>21</sup> Quevedo also testified that the sailor's actions were supported by the local press as well as by local law enforcement since the sailors were able to walk the streets without fear of being arrested, unlike the zoot suiters. He argued that the riots would cause racial tensions in the city to increase greatly. The views on the riots given by Mr.

<sup>19</sup> *La Opinion*, "Alarma en el Barrio Mexicano," June 5, 1943.

<sup>20</sup> *La Opinion*, "Por la Guerra de Marineros y Pachucos," June 9, 1943.

<sup>21</sup> *La Opinion*, "Por la Guerra de Marineros y Pachucos."



Quevedo were a radical departure from the opinions given by other important people in the city. While most made sure to praise the police and blame the zoot suiters in their articles, he did the opposite. And the fact that no other newspaper in the city printed this telegram shows that *La Opinion* was more interested in hearing the Mexican opinions of the riots than they were. Along with that given that he was an important Mexican man and his telegram was printed in a Spanish newspaper, it may be safe to assume that his opinions were listened to by a great many Mexicans in the city. Mr. Quevedo along with *La Opinion* were more willing to get the other side of the story rather than be content with the mainstream version of events.

Viewpoints on the riots from a Mexican-American perspective were limited to newspapers like *La Opinion*. Average Latino Americans also talked about the riots. Much of this testimony came years after the riots had happened, since there were few interviews done at the time with this population. In an Interview for UCLA's Z: Orphans collection, Louis Duran talked about his childhood growing up in Los Angeles as a young Mexican-American in the 30's and 40's. About half way through the interview they asked him about the riots and he explained that he did not partake in the riots but did witness them. When his interviewer Virginia Espino mentioned the Zoot Suit Riots he quickly and assertively corrected her, claiming that they were actually, "The Sailor Riots."<sup>22</sup> This simple correction was powerful. By calling the event the "Sailor Riots" Duran revealed that he blamed and still did blame the U.S. sailors for the riots not the zoot suiters. Louis Duran was an average kid who lived in an average neighborhood at the time of the riots. And his view on the riots matched that of the biggest Spanish newspaper at the time as well as a prominent Mexican like Eduardo Quevedo. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that his opinion was shared with many other Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles at the time.

Unfortunately, there is not much more than this that is widely available to look at or listen to when it comes to early Mexican-American views on the riots. What is available either in the form of Spanish language newspapers or interviews done years later, showed that their general view of the riots was that they blamed the sailors for the whole thing and mostly exonerated the zoot suiters. They believed this to the point where many, like Duran do not even call them the Zoot Suit Riots, to people like him they were the Sailors Riots and nothing more. What little is available is welcome and more should be uncovered because an event as controversial as this cannot simply be looked at from just one viewpoint, all sides must be acknowledged.

#### Explanations from Activists

The group of people who had some of the most passionate reactions to the riots and openly challenged the other opinions at the time were the activists. Both before and after the riots there were activists as well as activist groups in Los Angeles who spoke out against segregation and discrimination in the city. Groups like the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee and the American Unity Committee were among the most vocal in their denunciation of the violence and in offering alternative explanations for the riots. Among both groups one activist, Carey McWilliams, felt so strongly about the riots that he wrote a chapter of his book *North from Mexico*, about them. All of these activists were in agreement that the zoot suiters were innocent

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<sup>22</sup> Louis Duran, "Virginia Espino interviews Louie Duran," *Z: Orphan Interviews after 1999*, UCLA Oral History Collection. (January 12, 2009).

of starting the riots, which they believed were the result of racism toward Mexican-Americans. However, despite that agreement they still had slightly different views on what they thought started the riots.

The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee was a group formed in the aftermath of the Sleepy Lagoon trial. This was a case where about 17 young Mexican-Americans were wrongfully tried and convicted for the murder of Jose Diaz. The committee was created afterward with the goal to fight for the civil rights of the defendants and get their sentences appealed, which they eventually accomplished in 1944. Before that they witnessed the Zoot suit riots and they had some strong opinions about it. In an open letter to the people of Los Angeles the SLDC denounced the riots as, “attacks against the Mexican youth by organized civilian hoodlums and army and navy forces.”<sup>23</sup> Through this letter they asserted their belief that the cause of the riots was racism. Later in the letter they made much bolder claims. They argued that the riots had also resulted from, “a well-thought-out Axis plan, carried out most successfully by Axis agents in our midst.” Here they presented a very unique belief that the riots were the result of Nazi saboteurs. They stated that that riots happened because Axis agents were spreading Hitler’s beliefs about race across America and that that caused white people to view non-whites in an increasingly negative fashion. While this theory may have no evidence to support, it showed the lengths they were willing to go to exonerate the zoot suiters for the riots were just as strong as the ones trying to do the opposite.

Journalist Carey McWilliams was a member of the Sleepy Lagoon Committee and a well-known civil rights activist at the time, as such he had strong views on who caused the Zoot Suit Riots. In his 1949 book, *North from Mexico*, he argued that the newspapers were the ones responsible for causing the Zoot Suit Riots. He claimed that the coverage before and during the riots was designed to deliberately whip up anger against Mexican Americans. McWilliams supported his argument by citing articles from the start of the Sleepy Lagoon Case up to the riots, by newspapers like the *Examiner*, the *Herald Express*, and the *Daily News*. He argued that the coverage of the Sleepy Lagoon Case helped spread the notion of a Mexican Zoot Suit crime wave. This alleged crime wave would reappear in newspapers all the way up to the riots. McWilliams drew upon the biased newspaper articles to reveal public sentiment. After the first day of the riots, a suburban newspaper gleefully called the Zoot Suiters “roughnecks” and the attacking sailors a “task force.”<sup>24</sup> McWilliams claimed that because they kept printing articles like that the riots continued for a whole week before it was ended. The newspapers printed headlines like “Zooters Planning to attack More Servicemen.” McWilliams also claimed they published false stories that the Mexican youth were planning a mass retaliation and even pointed out when and where they thought it was going to happen.<sup>25</sup> In effect these news stories were announcing a riot and invited public retaliation. To McWilliams these newspapers were prejudiced against the Mexican Americans; they were deliberately distorting the facts to fuel the racial tensions that were already at a boiling point. To him these newspapers were instrumental in the start and escalation of the Zoot Suit Riots.

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<sup>23</sup> Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, *Citizens' Committee for the Defense of Mexican American Youth deplore attacks against Mexican youth*, June 1943. <<http://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb3199p1kp/?brand=oac4>>.

<sup>24</sup> Carey McWilliams. *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1949) 245.

<sup>25</sup> McWilliams, *North from Mexico*. 246.

The Los Angeles Committee of American Unity was a civil rights group dedicated to getting justice for non-white people within the city. A few days after the riots the committee sent a special memo to the state attorney general Robert Kenny and to Bishop Joseph McGucken, who was investigating the riots. The committee not only declared the zoot suiters innocent of inciting the violence but also who they thought were responsible for the riots. In the memo they claimed that, "It is the newspapers and police who must bear the principle onus of these outbreaks."<sup>26</sup> Like McWilliams, the LACAU asserted that newspapers like the *Examiner*, *Daily News* and *Times* were responsible for inciting the sailors to attack the zoot suiters. Unlike McWilliams the committee extended their argument to blaming the police as well. In their memo they talked about how the police did little to nothing to stop the sailors from attacking zoot suiters. Instead they claimed that the police actually aided the sailors. They mentioned instances where the police would clear the streets of bystanders in anticipation of rioters then leave. They also stated that some police officers even went as far as to help the sailors beat up the zoot suiters then arrested the victims afterward. The Committee declared these actions were what encouraged the sailors to continue to riot for five days.

These three were some of the loudest voices for fairness and equality in Los Angeles at the time. So, it only made sense that they would declare their own opinions in opposition to popular, very biased opinions of the press. The Sleepy Lagoon Committee claimed that the riots were the result of an Axis plot to bring disunity and chaos to L.A. While that idea may have been one of the more far-fetched ones, the other two looked for more practical and broad explanations for the riots. For instance, Carey McWilliams blamed the press for stirring up both the sailors and public into rioting with their inflammatory articles. The Committee for American Unity not only blamed the newspapers but also the police for allowing the riots to both continue and escalate. Despite their differences however, these organizations were some of the few in Los Angeles at the time who truly believed that the zoot suiters were innocent.

## Part II: Evidence from Today

While McWilliams had some hindsight when he wrote his book, he, along with the newspapers, police, city officials and others, were not wholly correct in their assessment of the Zoot Suit Riots origins. All of their sources fell short because of their own personal prejudices but even more, they all tried to claim that one factor was the primary cause of riots, with any others being brushed off to the side or just ignored. In other words, none of them approached this matter with the sophistication and objectivity it deserved. What these people did not see at the time was that many of the factors they named along with a few they did not know about, did not work alone to cause the event, in truth they worked together to not only make the Zoot Suit Riots happen but also happen the way that they did.

## Racism in Los Angeles

It cannot be ignored that the Zoot Suit Riots were the product of the racial prejudice that was very prevalent in Los Angeles at the time against people with Mexican heritage. As stated by Mayor Bowron himself, most of the zoot suiters who were attacked during the riots were young Mexican-Americans, meaning that this event can be classified as a race riot. While prejudice was not the only cause behind the riots it was none-the-less a huge factor. As stated

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<sup>26</sup> Los Angeles Committee for American Unity, "Investigations of Los Angeles Committee for American Unity," Letter, June 11, 1943. From, *Zoot Suit Riots: Defining Moments* by Kevin Hillstrom. 176

before some at the time like the *Los Angeles Times* and Mayor Bowron argued that the riots had nothing to do with racial prejudices. However, that argument falls flat when one looks at the racial segregation tactics the city enforced against Latino people, both in how their neighborhoods were set up and the city's actions against them in the 1930's.

From 1900 up to the riots in 1943, segregation and discrimination was rampant in many areas of life in Los Angeles. The most prevalent form of segregation in the city was Barrioization. This was a primary mechanism of the city's discrimination, affecting both housing and jobs.<sup>27</sup> People of Mexican descent were gradually confined to low-level, manual labor jobs, and often settled near their workplace. Because of this these neighborhoods gradually became segregated barrios, cut off from Anglo-whites socially, politically, and culturally. Neighborhoods like Chavez Ravine, El Hoyo and Happy Valley were examples of these barrios. From a distance and up close these places looked more like rural villages rather than neighborhoods of a major city. Generally, in these neighborhoods the streets were unpaved with little to no car traffic, the homes looked like run down old shacks with picket fences and chicken pens, and their garbage collection service was not as frequent as it was in white neighborhoods. Overall these barrios gave anyone who traveled through them back then, a sense that they had stepped backward through time. The negligence on behalf of the city toward these neighborhoods put its racist attitudes toward Latinos on display. While whiter neighborhoods in the city enjoyed indoor plumbing and paved streets, the people of places like Chavez Ravine used outhouses and had to walk on dirt roads to their jobs. This level of poverty showcased a city that had serious feelings of resentment and prejudice toward the citizens in these neighborhoods, for no other reason than because they had darker skin than them.

The formation of the barrios as a means to separate Latinos from the rest of the city made racial prejudice against them more convenient. The barrio's isolation reinforced more widespread segregation in public facilities, such as churches, schools, parks, pools, and other public spaces.<sup>28</sup> For example, Duran described his school, Lincoln High school, as being made up mostly of Hispanic students with some African Americans and one or two white kids as well. In the 1920s, five theaters in the adjacent county of Santa Ana, were segregated by confining Mexicans to seats in the balcony. In Orange, another county adjacent to L.A., a public pool on Monday had "Mexican Day," the only day when Mexicans were allowed to swim. City workers drained the pool on Monday evening then cleaned it the following day.<sup>29</sup> Because of these barrios, the divisions between the city's ethnic groups increased greatly, a problem that would resurface in the years preceding the riots.

Unfortunately, the racist attitudes the white people of Los Angeles had toward Latinos in the city would be put on display once again as well as take a dark turn in the 1930s. During the 1920's the city had experienced a huge wave of immigration from Mexico. The population of people of Mexican descent in the city tripled from about 33,600 to 97,000, turning Los Angeles into the new "Mexican capital" of the U.S. – although Mexicans still represented a small portion of the overall population.<sup>30</sup> This expansion came from the huge economic boom that America

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<sup>27</sup> California Office of Historic Preservation, *Latinos in Twentieth Century California*, National Register of Historic Places, California State Parks. 2015. 99.

<sup>28</sup> California Historic Preservation, *Latinos in Twentieth Century California*. 99

<sup>29</sup> California Historic Preservation, *Latinos in Twentieth Century California*. 99.

<sup>30</sup> Becky Nicolaidis, *Latino Los Angeles Historic Context Statement*, City of Los Angeles Department of City Planning Office of Historic Resources, September 15, 2015. 11.

was experiencing during the decade. So naturally in search of employment opportunities many people from Mexico began immigrating to America's big cities like Los Angeles. This influx of Latino people to Los Angeles was not well received by some of the White citizens of the city and unfortunately their attitudes toward Mexicans only got worse once the Great Depression hit in 1929. Unemployment in Los Angeles and the rest of the country began to skyrocket with government offering little help. To combat this in city officials began looking for ways to make more jobs available for Americans. That led social workers around the country proposed mass deportations of Mexican people, immigrant or not, back to their country of origin as a way to free up more jobs for native born white Americans. This plan came to be known as Repatriation. When it was enacted in 1930 many in the city saw it as a good idea, believing that it would help solve the unemployment crisis here. In 1934, Earl E Jensen, the County Superintendent of Charities, claimed that it would not only free up jobs but also save the city \$100,000 annually.<sup>31</sup> Some also supported it because they believed that the Mexicans who were repatriated were getting a good deal since they got to go back to their homeland to work with new skills picked up in America. It was so well supported that the program lasted for years, with the Los Angeles City Council still approving funds to it right up to the end of the decade.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these arguments Repatriation was an obvious act of racial prejudice. This program was implemented on the basis that people of Mexican descent were hugely responsible for the problems people were facing in the Great Depression. So, in response to this supposed offense Los Angeles forcibly sent thousands of Mexican immigrants back to the country they had left hoping for jobs in the so-called land of opportunity. Even worse many of the people who were repatriated were American-born Mexicans. Over the course of 1930's all throughout California, especially in Los Angeles, federal officials along with local police like the LAPD conducted massive raids within Mexican-American communities, resulting in the deportation of thousands of people. The participation of the LAPD in a few of these raids strained the relationship between them and the city's Latino population further. Estimates taken from the 2005 Apology act for the 1930's Repatriation Program put the total number of Mexican-Americans who were repatriated from California alone at about 400,000.<sup>33</sup> This was the largest number of American citizens ever deported from the country and it was all done solely on the basis of their Mexican heritage. Many of them would never be able to return to America, their country of birth. The program was off and on throughout the decade and eventually died out once World War 2 began and America needed all of the workers it could get for war production. Still the U.S. tore thousands of people away from homes they spent years establishing and sent them to a country that most of them didn't know with had no real connection to beyond their heritage and ethnicity.

Based on all of this, it is evident that racial prejudice against Mexicans was a prominent feature of Los Angeles leading up to the riots. The separation of Latino neighborhoods from the city both racially and economically showed that segregation was not only present in Los Angeles but also an overwhelming fact of life. Repatriation showed the true extent of the city's racial prejudice against Mexican Americans. The racial attitudes behind both factors would end up coming back in a big way when the Zoot Suit Riots happen in 1943. All these actions proved that

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<sup>31</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Repatriate Drive Begun," May 31, 1934.

<sup>32</sup> City Council, *Los Angeles City Council Meeting Minutes*, February 7, 1939.

<sup>33</sup> California State Assembly Bill (SB) 670. *Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program*. February 22, 2005.

the city was terribly prejudiced against Latino people to the point where they would do everything they could, just short of mass executions, to segregate them out of their lives. Since young Mexican Americans were the primary owners of zoot suits in Los Angeles and other parts of the country, it becomes indisputable that the Zoot Suit riot was in fact a race riot. Thus, the argument of Mayor Bowron, the *Times* and others, that racial prejudice played no part in the riots effectively fails. While there were other factors that helped cause the riots these facts show that race was one of them and a major one at that.

### The Zoot Suit Style

While it may seem silly to consider a style of clothing as a cause, there were some people as well as some evidence that suggested that the zoot suits may have indirectly had a hand in starting the riots. The zoot suit was a style of clothing that became very popular in the years leading up to the riots. This was a men's suit that consisted of high-waisted, wide-legged, tight-cuffed, pegged pants, with a long coat with wide lapels and wide padded shoulders. It is generally believed that the style originated in the jazz scene of black communities sometime in the 1930's-1940's but where and by who, is up for debate.<sup>34</sup> As touched upon earlier, while not all Mexican-Americans who donned zoot suits were gangsters, a good number of them were. Young Mexican-Americans who wore the zoot suit and partook in gang activities were given the unique name of Pachuco. According to historian Octavio Paz, "The pachucos are youths, of Mexican origin, who form gangs in southern cities; they can be identified by their language, their behavior and the clothing they affect."<sup>35</sup> While the suit's origins are unknown, what is known is what the zoot suit style meant to Mexican-Americans, how it was viewed by white people and how the style contributed to the Zoot Suit Riots.

Whatever its origins, eventually the zoot suit style found its way to the Mexican-American population of the country and became very popular, especially in L.A. Hispanic historian Octavio Paz who lived in Los Angeles for a time believed that young Mexicans wore the zoot style as a response to the world around them. In his book length essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, he analyzed the Pachuco's and their behavior in relation to their style of dress. He argued that Mexican-American boys living in L.A. felt ashamed of their Mexican heritage due in large part to the racism in the city. They felt alienated not only by the city but by the culture their parents belonged to because it was looked down upon in the white dominated society. In effect these youths felt like they did not belong to either white society or the Mexican communities, therefore they set out to forge their own identity as Pachucos. Paz stated that as Pachucos, "They were instinctive rebels and North American racism had vented its wrath on them more than once. But Pachucos do not try to vindicate their race or nationality of their forbearers... this will assert nothing specific except their determination...not to be like those around them."<sup>36</sup> This desire to be different led the Pachucos to act out in a rebellious fashion by staying out late, smoking, drinking, getting into fights, committing petty crimes, and of course forming zoot suit gangs.

Historian Stuart Cosgrove went into further detail in his work *The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare*. In it he agreed with Paz, but Cosgrove went a bit further by explaining the setting that allowed the Pachucos to rise in infamy. He felt that the uptick in zoot suit delinquency resulted

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<sup>34</sup> Alice Gregory, "A Brief History of the Zoot Suit: Unraveling the jazzy life of a snazzy style," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and thought in Mexico*, Grove Press, (New York, 1961), 13.

<sup>36</sup> Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude*, 14.

from the social changes that occurred due to America entering World War II. The recruitment of over 4 million men to the armed services and the subsequent entrance of over five million women into the work force caused changes to family life, particularly in parental control and authority. According to him the large scale and prolonged separation of millions of families caused an increase in juvenile crime and delinquency.<sup>37</sup> By 1943 it was commonplace for teens to be left to their own devices while their parents were off either at war or at work. This was especially true for cities like L.A. as it was a huge center of military and industrial production. Because the zoot suit wearing Pachucos already felt on their own this separation gave them even more freedom to partake in rebellious activities. This caused attitudes toward them to sour and tensions in the city to rise.

For the white population in Los Angeles neither the zoot suit nor the Pachucos who wore them were looked upon in a positive light. By the time of the riots the zoot suit had become a uniform for delinquency and criminal behavior. Even though the Pachuco gangs only committed petty larceny and had brawls in clubs or bars, their suits became a symbol for juvenile delinquency. The L.A. press had a hand in shaping this image, since several of their stories about Pachuco crimes pointed out that they wore zoot suits.<sup>38</sup> Thanks to that the zoot suit began to represent, to whites, a type of person who refused normative behavior, was devoid of morals and was therefore not entitled to fair judgement. While some people at the time did not believe all zoot suiters were delinquents, this idea became very popular among white citizens.<sup>39</sup> And since most zoot suiters were of Mexican heritage, white people in the city began to merge the two groups together in their minds.

This distaste for the zoot suits was not just the product of the Pachucos behavior, it was also due to a sense of patriotism. In 1942 the U.S. began putting restrictions on men's clothes to have more material available for the war effort. These restrictions basically forbade zoot suits, leading some to believe that the style would start to disappear.<sup>40</sup> When it did not go away however, the zoot suit began to symbolize anti-patriotism since it flouted the new restrictions. This made anyone who wore a zoot suit an enemy to the war effort and that belief made them prime targets for the people who were most in favor of the war effort, the sailors.

When it came to the riots there is evidence that suggested that the zoot suiter were targeted not just because of their race but also due to their clothes. Al Waxman gave a haunting personal account of what he saw during the riots. During his account he claimed that sailors stopped a street car and yelled at the occupants, "We're Looking for Zoot-Suits to Burn."<sup>41</sup> A number of other accounts and reports of the riots describe a common practice among the sailors, striping victims of their zoot suits before severely beating them. These accounts show clear indication that zoot suits were a kind of tag the sailors were using to help identify their prey. This also showed that sailors had been at least partly influenced by the beliefs about zoot suiters being vicious gangsters. And if that was not enough, towards the end of the riots the Los Angeles City Council passed a measure banning the wearing of zoot suits within the city limits. The Council did this because they believed that the zoot suits were the cause of the riots, and that if outlawed,

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare," *History Workshop*, Oxford University Press, (1984), 79.

<sup>38</sup> William Overend, "The '43 Zoot Suit Riots Reexamined," *Los Angeles Times*, May 9, 1978.

<sup>39</sup> *Science News Letter*, "Zoot-Suit Epidemic," June 13, 1943

<sup>40</sup> *Madera Tribune*, "Zoot Suit Now Thing of Past," October 28, 1942.

<sup>41</sup> Al Waxman in *Eastside Journal*, 1943. **From** Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish Speaking people of the United States*, Greenwood Press, (New York 1968). 248.

the riots would finally end. By doing this they helped solidify the belief that the zoot suits were a uniform of gangsterism. It can be argued that without the zoot suits the sailors would have had a harder time picking their targets.

With all of this in mind a case can be made that the zoot suit style itself played a part in making the Zoot Suit Riots happen. While there can be no doubt that race was a large factor in how the zoot suiters were targeted in the riots, the suits many of them wore also contributed. While a zoot suit may seem like a harmless style today back then it was symbol that meant different things to different people. To Mexican-American boys it symbolized rebelling against their heritage and the racism in the city. But to the sailors and white citizens of Los Angeles it symbolized delinquency and un-American ideals, which in turn made them resent the boys who wore them. Thus, the zoot suit not only unintentionally helped ferment the tensions that began the riots, but they also became the tag the sailors used to find and attack them. While it may be considered a far-fetched notion, it appears that the Zoot Suit riots were in fact partially caused by the zoot suits themselves.

### Demographics during the Early 1940's

About a year before America entered World War II Los Angeles experienced a serious demographic change came that also played an integral role in the creation of the Zoot Suit Riots. In 1940, before Pearl Harbor, the Los Angeles City Council approved plans by the military to construct a new training school for the Navy called the Naval Reserve Training School or Armory.<sup>42</sup> This would have been a harmless act if they had not decided to build the base in the middle of Chavez Ravine. As mentioned, Chavez Ravine was one of the neighborhoods that was segregated off from the rest of the city due to its non-white racial makeup. That meant that the city placed this new base filled with white staffers and recruits in the middle of an area largely populated by Mexican-Americans. This action led to the birth and escalation of tensions between sailors and zoot suiters that would eventually erupt in the Zoot Suit Riots. The demographics of these neighborhoods, the ways they dealt with racial problems and how the construction of the Naval Reserve Armory affected them, shed some light on these events.

As stated previously, Los Angeles was no stranger to segregation. Despite having a rich history tied to Spanish speaking countries like Mexico, the city did its best to try to hide away people who came from that heritage through the creation of barrios. As mentioned previously, barrios were neighborhoods segregated from the rest of the city, populated mostly by people of Mexican heritage. In Chavez Ravine most of the residents were Mexican with about a third of that population being immigrants from Mexico along with a few European immigrants as well. Most neighborhoods surrounding Chavez Ravine like, Alpine Street had similar racial makeups. But as one moved southward toward downtown they would see those demographics shift in places like Temple Street to show smaller numbers of Hispanics and larger numbers of whites.<sup>43</sup>

Because these neighborhoods were segregated from the city they were also very impoverished. In contrast to whiter neighborhoods, places like Chavez Ravine had unpaved dirt roads with little to no traffic, houses with farm animals, no running water and no regular trash

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<sup>42</sup> City Council, Report on Ordinance to allow construction of Naval base in Chavez Ravine. *City Council Meeting Minutes*. September 23, 1940.

<sup>43</sup> United State Census Bureau, Demographic profiles of Chavez Ravine and surrounding neighborhoods, *16th Census of the United States*, 1940. UCLA library.



collection. Almost none of the houses had central heating, and about a quarter of the homes needed repairs. Along with that most of the residents were employed as farm laborers, domestics, craftsmen, and machine operators. Many did not finish elementary school, with the average number of completed years being only a little over 7.<sup>44</sup> Just as the neighborhoods grew whiter as they got closer to downtown L.A. their affluence also increased. Alpine Street for instance, while a predominantly Mexican neighborhood, had paved roads, regular trash pickup, and homes with most modern amenities. Temple Street the neighborhood closest to downtown, was a very prosperous place. It was filled with small businesses like bars, tattoo shops, markets and all-night movie theaters, many of which were run by Mexican-Americans, and many of which were visited by sailors during World War 2 once the base was opened.<sup>45</sup>

Segregation had a large impact on neighborhoods besides their separation from the city. As historian Eduardo Pagán put it, “Segregation cut a deep swath through Los Angeles, disfiguring how residents interacted with one another and divided areas of town, employment, recreational sites, cultural production, and even material consumption along racialized rules.”<sup>46</sup> Though impoverished, young Mexican Americans identified themselves with streets and neighborhoods like Chavez Ravine, Alpine St, and Temple St. As discussed before, many of the barrio’s youth crafted their own identity in response to the discrimination, called the Pachuco. An identity which involved forming zoot suit gangs, that were closely associated with the neighborhoods. These gangs frequently got into fights with each other as a way of socializing and earning status among their peers.<sup>47</sup>

These neighborhoods were deeply affected by the changes that came to L.A. during the war years. The change that affected Mexican neighborhoods the most was construction of the Naval Reserve Training School in the middle of Chavez Ravine. While the facility was designed with Spanish style architecture, this new 1.3-million-dollar building stood out like a sore thumb in a neighborhood filled with rundown houses.<sup>48</sup> The base’s construction also led to an influx of white people into the neighborhood since it staffed and housed recruits who were mostly young white men. By dropping thousands of white sailors in the middle of Chavez Ravine, the new base disrupted not only the demographics but also the social status of the surrounding Mexican neighborhoods.

Due to segregation and the economic state of their neighborhoods, Mexican American residents lived in a very different world than the white, middle-class officers who staffed the training school. Their conflicting cultures caused violent encounters between the young Mexican residents and the sailors outside the facility to gradually increase. These white sailor’s saw the streets as public venues and acted on the assumption that they were entitled to a free and open access to all of Los Angeles including the Hispanic blocks.<sup>49</sup> Young zoot suit wearing Mexican-Americans however saw those parts of the city in a very different way. To them the shops, clubs and theaters they frequently visited were not open to everyone, especially white Navy men. Not only did the young Pachucos see the servicemen as invaders, they also resented the white

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<sup>44</sup> United State Census Bureau, Demographic profiles of Chavez Ravine and surrounding neighborhoods.

<sup>45</sup> Eduardo Obregón Pagán. “Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riot 1943,” *Social Science History*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2000). 230.

<sup>46</sup> Pagán. “Los Angeles Geopolitics and the Zoot Suit Riot 1943,” 230.

<sup>47</sup> Duran, Virginia Espino Interviews Louie Duran.

<sup>48</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, “Navy Presented \$1,350,000 Armory in Chavez Ravine,” October 24, 1940.

<sup>49</sup> Pagán, Los Angeles Geopolitics, 234.

privilege they represented. For them this was not just an invasion of another ethnic group but of a social class more privileged than theirs. At first the servicemen did not think much of the Mexican zoot suiters from the nearby neighborhoods. However, that changed quickly as the Mexican American began to aggressively resist their unwelcomed presence. Eduardo Pagán wrote about a few incidents. In one a Mexican-American man threatened a white sailor who walked into the Tip Toe Inn in East Los Angeles telling him that it was, “Unhealthy... to eat there.”<sup>50</sup> Constant harassment and violent attacks on sailors by the zoot suit wearing Mexican youth caused considerable resentment to build up between the two groups, especially in the months before the riots. These violent encounters would continue until one day in late May, when a story spread through the city that a gang of zoot suiters had jumped several servicemen on leave.<sup>51</sup> That fight has been cited as one of the possible events that sparked the riots that came only days later.

Clearly the construction of the Naval Reserve Training School in Chavez Ravine served as one of the major factors causing the zoot suit riots. The demographics of Chavez Ravine as well as surrounding neighborhoods showed that not only were they heavily populated by people of Mexican heritage, but they were also terribly poor. In response the young men of these neighborhoods developed the Pachuco identity and formed gangs with deep links to their home neighborhoods and streets. So, when the city decided to put a navy base in the middle of Chavez Ravine it was seen as invasion by a competing culture. Therefore, the white sailors who staffed the base were seen as invaders and thus treated as such by young zoot suit wearing Mexicans. Leading to tensions that would eventually erupt in the Zoot Suit Riots.

#### Sleepy Lagoon Case

It took a larger event to turn these racial and cultural tensions into a riot and that came when a young man was found murdered at Sleepy Lagoon. In August of 1942 a young Mexican American named Jose Diaz was found dead at Sleepy Lagoon, supposedly after a brawl between two rival Mexican Pachuco gangs. Soon after, the police began arresting hundreds of young Mexican Americans to interrogate and find out who was responsible for Diaz’s death. After days of interrogation, the police charged 22 young zoot suit wearing Mexican-Americans with the murder of Jose Diaz. Then 13 weeks later on January 13, 1943, after a highly controversial trial 17 of the defendants were found guilty and sentenced to prison. While all their convictions would eventually be appealed a few years later, this case and trial had ramifications for Los Angeles. The actions as well as attitudes displayed throughout this case by the press, the court and the police helped raise the tensions within the city, tensions that would eventually erupt during the riots a years later.

As with other factors in this paper, the Los Angeles press had a large presence throughout the Sleepy Lagoon case. The articles they printed on zoot suiters implicated in the case were biased and inflammatory. The first article about the Sleepy Lagoon murder, printed by the *Los Angeles Times*, was titled, “Gangs Warned ‘Kid Gloves are Off’.” The article described the police’s actions toward the Pachuco gangs after the body of Jose Diaz was found at Sleepy Lagoon. Along with that however this article also used inflammatory language when it discussed the zoot suiters suspected murder. For instance, throughout the article the newspaper referred to

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<sup>50</sup> Pagán, *Los Angeles Geopolitics*, 236.

<sup>51</sup> *Los Angeles Examiner*, "Zoot suiters in Hiding a Drive Starts," June 4, 1943.

the zoot suiters as Mexican-boy-gangs, and terror groups.<sup>52</sup> In pointing out that they were Mexican as well as in a gang suggested to the reader that all young boys of that race were criminals as well. Also calling the gangs ‘terror groups’ helped make the Pachucos out to be a larger societal threat. Throughout the story the *Times* heavily implied that they believed the suspects were already guilty. They talked about how the suspected gangs had, “Taken two lives during the last two weeks and seriously injured other...”<sup>53</sup> From this point on the *Times* and other L.A. newspapers began reporting on zoot suiters activities both with increased frequency and increased prejudice all the way up to the riots.

The suspects would end up finding even less support from the law than from the newspapers. It is generally accepted knowledge today that the Sleepy Lagoon trial was fixed against the defendants in a number of ways. For one thing, the defendants were not allowed to shower or change before or any time throughout the trial. This meant that they had to present themselves to a jury wearing dirty zoot suits and unkempt hair. The defendant’s attorney, George Shibley, objected to this in court and accused district attorney Clyde Shoemaker of purposefully denying them these things in order to make them look like, “Mobsters, like disreputable persons, and is trying to exploit the fact they are foreign in appearance.”<sup>54</sup> He claimed that making the defendants present themselves like this in court made them look like the kind of ruthless zoot suit wearing gangsters the jury had most likely read about in newspapers. Shoemaker claimed that the defendant’s clothes and hair were distinctive as well as necessary for the trial but went into no further detail as to why and then blamed the defendants for their poor appearance.

Another example of the trial being fixed against the defendants was the court denying them certain rights. During the trial the defendants were kept from conversing with their lawyer throughout the proceedings. Along with being denied the ability to wash themselves the defendants were also made to sit in a column of seats that was directly across from the jury. Thus, if Shibley wanted to talk to his clients at any time throughout the trial he would have to either walk across the court room or call a recess so that he could talk to them privately. Shibley was understandably upset about this as this not only made his job harder, he also claimed that the seating arrangement was violating his client’s rights. He declared the act of putting the defendants in a few columns of seats made them look like prisoners to the jury who were right across from them, that the purpose of this seating arrangement was to, “Prejudice these defendants in the minds of the jury.”<sup>55</sup> Along with that he asserted that his clients had the right to converse with him during the trial and that the seating arrangement was deliberately preventing him from doing so. Unfortunately, despite Shibley’s objections as well as some applause from the spectators, the court ignored his objections and continued without changing anything. Both the clothes and seating arrangement, showcased a lot of bias toward the defendants from the court, making the guilty verdicts the defendants got not so surprising.

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<sup>52</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Gangs Warned 'Kid Gloves Off!'" August 2, 1942.

<sup>53</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Gangs Warned 'Kid Gloves Off!'"

<sup>54</sup> *The People of the State of California, Plaintiff and Respondent vs. Gus Zammora [sic], et. al Defendants and Appellants: Reporter's Transcript on Appeal*. Volume 2. October 2, 1942, p. 798. Calisphere, University of California.

<http://content.cdlib.org/view?query=&docId=hb6199p2dh&chunk.id=0&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&brand=calisphere&x=28&y=7>.

<sup>55</sup> *People v. Zammora*, p. 2800.

Along with the press and court, the LAPD also showed a great deal of prejudice toward not only the defendants but towards Mexicans as a whole. The only difference is that the LAPD was not afraid to show off their racist beliefs. After the jury had convened the court heard testimony from a number of law enforcement officials including Lieutenant Edward Duran Ayres. In both a written statement and in testimony Ayres laid out a scathing view of the city's Mexican population. In his report he talked about the origins of the criminal element in the Mexican Community. While he recognized that segregation and economics were both factors he claimed that the main reason Mexicans like the defendants acted out in a violent nature was biological. Ayres testified that since Mexicans were descendant from the Aztecs, they were therefore more prone to violence and killing.<sup>56</sup> By implying that their ancestors were blood thirsty savages. In his report he also heavily suggested that Mexicans were, "Oriental in background or at least... shows many of the Oriental characteristics."<sup>57</sup> By biologically linking the Mexican defendants to the Japanese, whom America was at war with at the time, Ayres was not only showed that he was a horrible bigot, but he may also have been doing this to as a way to turn the opinion of the jury against the defendants. With his actions, Ayres solidified the image of the defendants being violent monsters in the minds of both the jury and anyone who read his report.

While they may appear to be two separate occurrences the Sleepy Lagoon case pushed the city down the path of the riots. The prejudice and injustice shown throughout the ordeal raised tensions in both the white and Mexican communities. The biased coverage of the case put out by the press worsened their image in the eyes of the city's inhabitants. This was not helped by the trial, where the court made it their mission to make the Pachuco defendants look as bad as possible. Ayres inflammatory report also helped damage the defendants case, using racist ideas of Mexicans being genetically murderous and violent. Their actions helped result in the defendant's convictions which in turn helped the press perpetuate their negative view of the Mexican zoot suiters. A view that would increase in popularity leading up to the riots.

#### The Los Angeles Police Department

Other than the rioters the most important group in any riot is the police. The Los Angeles Police Department played a big part both in creating and worsening the Zoot Suit Riots. The LAPD and city officials both believed that the police officers were not to blame for the riots. However activist groups like the Committee for American Unity claimed otherwise. Both however made their claims with very little evidence to support said claim. Evidence today suggests that the LAPD's claim that they were not responsible for the violence to be plainly false.

In 1943 the LAPD had extremely contentious relationship with non-white populations in the city, particularly the Latino community. As mentioned previously, the LAPD had taken part in a number of raids during the 1930's to deport people of Mexican decent to Mexico even if they had been born in America. Over the years since then the relationship between the two groups continued to sour. And while they and others at the time claimed that the police were not to blame for the Zoot Suit Riots, there is evidence that suggests that that was incorrect. Research

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<sup>56</sup> Edward Dura Ayres, "Statistics: The Nature of the Mexican American Criminal," *UCLA Library Special Collections*, Online Archive of California, 1942.

[http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb6m3nb79m&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire\\_text](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=hb6m3nb79m&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text).

<sup>57</sup> Ayres, "Statistics."

into their policies, arrest statistics and personal accounts suggested that the LAPD were biased against the city's Mexican community both before and during the riots. The LAPD's actions toward the young Mexican-Americans in the city before the riots helped increase the hostility between the two groups. After the riots broke out that animosity would return in the form of the police taking a clear side during the violence, allowing it to escalate,

By the start of the 1940's the LAPD were policing the youths of their community much more aggressively. This is evidenced by the arrest statistics in their annual reports, at that time they divided the number of arrests by race. According to the 1940 report the total number of arrests of juvenile Mexicans, both male and female, that year was 1,071, that made up about 15% of the total with white juvenile's arrests at about 72% of total Los Angeles arrests.<sup>58</sup> While this may seem fairly tame within a year that number would skyrocket to 1,408 arrests and making up more than 33% of the total number of juveniles arrested in 1941. By the end of 1943, the year that the riots occurred, that percentage would hold steady, but the number of Mexican juveniles arrested jumped again to 2,804.<sup>59</sup> Considering that the total Hispanic population of Los Angeles at the time was around 61,000, that meant by the time of the riots around 4% of the city's Mexican population had been arrested. While white youths were arrested more in these years, when it came to minorities Mexican youths were arrested more than black, Asian or any other non-white ethnicity. Along with that the number of young Mexicans arrested increased dramatically over just a few years in contrast to the black population of the city whose arrest numbers increased more gradually.

The LAPD clearly had an interest in policing the Mexican community in a biased way. The growing number of arrests led many white people in the city to believe there was a Mexican crime wave going on while there was no such occurrence. While some could argue that the Mexican population simply committed more crimes back then, the opinions disclosed in the Ayres report suggested otherwise. As previously mentioned that report revealed that the LAPD held some very racist views of the Mexican community. Such opinions suggest that the LAPDs prejudice toward people of Mexican heritage was reason behind this sharp increase of youth arrests in their community.

The LAPD's prejudice was not limited to the number of Mexicans they arrested, it was also evident in how they policed Mexican-Americans as well. Higher ups in the police force such as Chief Horrall, with the city council, instituted several policies aimed at dealing with the city's gang problem. For instance, in July of 1942 they instituted a new ordinance that made it unlawful for any juvenile under 21 to carry any kind of weapon. When presenting this ordinance Chief Horrall pointed out that it was applied mainly to, "Persons congregating on street corners or sidewalks... to assist in eliminating present gang problem."<sup>60</sup> Along with that later that year in August, just after the Sleepy Lagoon case had begun, they also established a new curfew ordinance that restricted all minors under 17 from being out late at night.<sup>61</sup> While these may seem vague, recall that Pachucos were being smeared in the press as the source of the gang problem in the city. Along with that they were known to stay out late and congregate on street

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<sup>58</sup> Los Angeles Police Department, *LAPD Annual Reports*, L.A. City Clerk, City Archives and Records Center, 1940-1943.

<sup>59</sup> Los Angeles Police Department, *LAPD Annual Reports*.

<sup>60</sup> Chief Clemence B. Horrall, *Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners Minutes*, Los Angeles, July 28, 1942

<sup>61</sup> City Council, No. 2977: Board of Police Commissioners Report Amending Curfew Ordinance, *City Council Minutes*, August 26, 1942. L.A. City Clerk Online Archive. <http://clkrep.lacity.org/oldcfidocs/>.

corners outside liquor stores. Therefore, it would not be a huge stretch to link these measures with LAPD bias against Mexican zoot suiters in the city.

Along with those policies the officers charged with patrolling the streets also showed a great deal of prejudice toward young Mexican-Americans. According to historian Edward Escobar the actions of the police, “included verbal abuse, sexual harassment, indiscriminate searches, unwarranted arrests and... excessive use of force or police brutality.”<sup>62</sup> This claim is echoed by Louis Duran, who stated in his interview that he witnessed some of these actions while growing up in Los Angeles in the 1940’s. He described how he used to see police officers harass young Mexicans with random searches and verbal abuse. He even recounted a time when he was brought in by the police for questioning at age fourteen. During the interrogation Duran claimed that the questioning officers suggested to him that they were going to hurt him physically after opened up a cabinet in front of him filled with various weapons.<sup>63</sup> The fact that these police officers were willing to use such tactics on a 14 year old Mexican-American boy, serves as a prime example of how prejudiced the LAPD was in the period leading up the riots. The arrests as well as their actions would help perpetuate the idea among the white people in Los Angeles that most young Mexican-Americans were criminals. This idea that would greatly influence the sailors.

When the riots finally broke out on June 3, 1943 the police’s prejudices became fully apparent. While the LAPD did not directly start the riots they however did participate in a big way. Rather than do everything they could to end the riots quickly, the police acted more as accessories to the riots escalation, as they did very little to help the Mexican zoot suiters being attacked by the sailors. A *Time* magazine article stated that, “The police practice was to accompany the servicemen caravans in police cars, watch the beatings and jail the victims.”<sup>64</sup> Most of the officers choose not to arrest any of the rioting sailors and just arrested the zoot suiters. Over six hundred Mexican-American youths as well as 3-5 sailors, ended up getting arrested by the time the riots were over.<sup>65</sup> This led the sailors to believe that they had permission from the police to continue rioting. For the zoot suiters these actions made them realize that they were going to have to defend themselves, since the police were not going to. Therefore, the initial small skirmishes quickly escalated into full blown riots for over a week due in large part to the LAPD’s prejudice against Mexican-Americans.

The actions of the LAPD both before and during the Zoot Suit Riots not only played a large role in instigating them, but also in perpetuating them. The large amount of arrests they made of young Mexican-Americans not only displayed their bias but also led many to believe that there was a Mexican crime wave. This would in turn contribute to the fear and hatred that was already being spread amongst the population thanks to the newspapers, feelings that would influence the sailors when they started to riot. Along with that the constant harassment of the police towards the young Mexican-Americans also proved that they were prejudiced against them. Those same prejudiced feelings would be on full display during the riots, which the police did little to nothing stop choosing instead to just watch their zoot suited enemies get pummeled.

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<sup>62</sup> Edward Escobar. *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Duran, Interview with Espino.

<sup>64</sup> *Time Magazine*, “California: Zoot-Suit War,” June 21. 1943.  
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,766730,00.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Escobar, *Race Police and the Making of a Political Identity*, 237.

Based on this evidence it is clear that the claims made by the CAU are more fact than fiction. The LAPD not only contributed to making the Pachucos hated in the city, but they also helped change the event from couple of small brawls into full blown riots due to their deliberate inaction and their siding with the sailors.

### Los Angeles Newspapers

As mentioned in previous sections the press had a very negative view of the Mexican zoot suiters. A view that affected them in a multitude of ways some of which have already been touched upon. Like how they helped make the zoot suit a symbol of delinquency. But their influence in making the Zoot Suit Riots occur went beyond them just aiding other factors. They played perhaps the largest role, they helped spread fear and hatred throughout Los Angeles toward the city's young zoot suiters. From before the Sleepy Lagoon case up to the riots themselves big newspapers like the *Times* and the *Examiner* printed stories about the zoot suiters that not only got more inflammatory over time but had the clear intention of making them hated and feared in the city.

Before Sleepy Lagoon, newspapers like the *Times* and the *Examiner* had printed a few stories here and there about the activities of the zoot suiters. However, these stories were never much more than small clippings found in the back of the papers. These stories did little more than just briefly recount what happened in the riots and who perpetuated the violence. Despite the short length of these stories newspapers still found a way to make the suspects in them look criminal. In 1938 the *Times* printed an article titled, "Youthful Gangs Arrested in Series of Auto Thefts."<sup>66</sup> At first glance this article appeared to have just been relaying a crime but if one were to look closer they would find some hidden subtext. The fact that the suspects in this article are referred to in the title as a gang can suggest to a reader that they were criminals who have committed crimes before they have actually been convicted of anything. Along with that the article also pointed out that the suspects were Mexican. Mentioning their race as well as gangs in the title connected Mexicans with the image of criminal gangs. This meant readers would be more likely to associate the two groups with each other. Articles like this one not only showed the newspapers prejudice, but also possibly helped sow the seeds of fear and hatred in the city toward Mexican zoot suiters.

However, those kinds of articles were harmless compared to the ones that came out in the wake of the Sleepy Lagoon case. After the murder of Jose Diaz was reported, suddenly the city seemed to be plagued by horrible zoot suit gang warfare, at least according to the press. Stories from the *Examiner* printed just after Sleepy Lagoon began reporting how gangs of Mexican zoot suiters were terrorizing the city with murder and other kinds of violence. One article in particular mentioned how the police arrested a group of zoot suiters in the midst of what they described as, "marijuana orgies."<sup>67</sup> The *Times*, was also very inflammatory months after Sleepy Lagoon had started. For instance, they printed stories with titles such as, "New Zoot Gangster Attacks Result in Arrest of 100."<sup>68</sup> This article stated very clearly with the title that they thought all zoot suiters were gangsters. The article went on to report how zoot suiters had attacked citizens of the city and they were bound to do so again. Articles like these helped create as well as popularize not only fear but also hatred toward Mexican-American zoot suiters in the city. According to the

<sup>66</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Youthful Gang Arrested In Series of Auto Thefts," December 20, 1938.

<sup>67</sup> *Los Angeles Examiner*, "150 Rounded Up in Killing Gang Terror," August 4, 1942.

<sup>68</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "New Zoot Gangster Attacks Result in Arrest of 100," October 27, 1942.

commanding officer of the Naval Training School Captain Heim, the ideas spread by the press influenced his sailors decision to riot.<sup>69</sup> These articles showcased how in the wake of Sleepy Lagoon the press decided to kick the publication of negative stories toward Mexican zoot suiters into high gear. This kind of coverage would continue all the way through the riots.

The coverage during the riots was no better than before. As mentioned previously throughout the event the big newspapers of the city blamed the zoot suiters for the riots and praised the sailors for their actions. These kinds of articles did little more than inflame the situation by reassuring the sailors that what they were doing was right and showing the zoot suiters that they were going to have to defend themselves as it appeared no else was going to. However, their articles sometimes went beyond just placing blame or praising the sailors, sometimes their stories seemed as if they were trying to escalate the riots. One article in the *Examiner*, talked about how civilians were joining the sailors in their hunt for zoot suiters.<sup>70</sup> This article did not at any point try to say that what they were doing was wrong or try to dissuade others from doing the same. In fact, the articles seemed to imply the newspaper supported their actions since they referred to the sailor's hunt in a positive manner. Along with that the article also casually mentioned where people were gathering as if they were deliberately trying to get more civilians involved in the riots. The *Times* joined that trend in an article they printed near the end of the riots. In the article they declared that some zoot suiters were trying to infiltrate to San Diego and seemed to imply encouragement for the police to crack down hard to the zoot suiters in that city.<sup>71</sup>

It is clear that the newspapers of Los Angeles were instrumental in spreading the fear and hatred that created the riots. Their negative coverage of Mexican zoot suiters both before and after Sleepy Lagoon helped craft a negative image in the minds of the city's citizens, that they were vicious criminals to feared but despised. During the riots their coverage not only blamed the Mexican zoot suiters for the violence but they also helped escalate the event as well with their constant support for the sailors and their hidden advocacy for public involvement. Those who claimed that the press' coverage had a hand in causing the riots were not wrong. There can be no doubt that the newspapers, who constantly blamed the zoot suiters, were themselves more responsible for the riots than the zoot suiters were.

#### United States Sailors

Finally, there were the ones who started the riots directly with their sudden attack on the city's Mexican zoot suiter population, the U.S. sailors. When the war in the Pacific began and the training facility in Chavez Ravine opened, thousands of American men from all over the country were sent to the facility either to be trained, await deployment, or relax in L.A. on shore leave. Their presence caused tensions in the city, particularly the barrios, to rise dramatically. For a while this animosity did not cause much more than some minor harassment but after several sailors were allegedly assaulted by a gang of zoot suiters, many of the servicemen decided that it was the last straw. Soon after, 200 hundred of them drove downtown and started attacking anyone who fit the description of wearing a zoot suit and being of Mexican heritage. The tensions on the sailor's side that helped result in the riots mainly came from many of the factors

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<sup>69</sup> Captain Heim to Admiral Bagley, Telephone Conversation, June 11, 1943. From, Mauricio Mazon, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*, Appendix F. (University of Texas Press, 1988). 133

<sup>70</sup> *Los Angeles Examiner*, "Downtown Crowds Storm Streets in Zoot Suiter Hunt," June 8, 1943.

<sup>71</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, "Zooters Escape San Diego Mob," June 10, 1943.



that have been laid out in this paper. These included the effects of building the Naval training base in Chavez Ravine, and their frustrations with military life. Along with that their actions during the riots were also affected by newspapers and police as mentioned earlier.

The sailor's animosity came largely from the fallout of the construction of the Naval Reserve Training School in the heart of Chavez Ravine. As stated before, Chavez Ravine was one of many neighborhoods that was segregated off from the rest of the L.A. due to its large Mexican population. When the base was built many young Mexican residents saw the influx of the white sailors as an encroachment on to their territory of the city and felt like they were being invaded by an enemy. This was important to many of youths, since Pachuco gangs generally identified themselves with the street they lived on.<sup>72</sup> Considering how deeply segregation affected their neighborhoods, the young boy was greatly offended that these young sailors would drive onto their streets, hang out at their spots, all the while displaying their white privilege. As a result, many of the young Pachucos of these neighborhoods began harassing the sailors in various forms, such as taunting and fighting. This in turn caused the sailors to return the favor. Thus, the construction of the base helped lay the ground work for the tensions between the two groups to get increasingly worse until they would eventually erupt in riots.

Aside from geopolitics, there were psychological reasons for the sailor's actions as well. As argued by historian Mauricio Mazón, the sailors rioted not only because of anti-Mexican hysteria but from pent up frustration. That stemmed from the humiliation they received during basic training as well as the feeling of being inferior due to the low ranks many of them had. Along with that many were eager to go out and start fighting in the war and the waiting was starting to get on their nerves. This caused the servicemen to want to go out and inflict the same kind of humiliation on someone else in order to regain their sense of masculinity. The service men desperately wanted to release their frustrations as well as feel superior to something or someone. This opportunity came when they started hearing stories about a Mexican crime wave in Los Angeles. These sailors, according to Mazón were, "predominantly white, single, in their teens or early twenties, trained for combat and depressed by excess training and restraints of military life...who decided on their own to start a second front here at home against the zoot suiters in L.A."<sup>73</sup>

Throughout the riots the sailors were able to feel very sure of their actions thanks in large part to the large amount of support received. The servicemen were able to riot for almost a whole week thanks in part to support of the public, and the press, who cheered on the sailors throughout the whole ordeal.<sup>74</sup> This made them feel like what they were doing was right. The servicemen also got a great deal of support from the LAPD who did virtually nothing to stop their rioting. This led the sailors to think that what they were doing was not only right but also lawful since so few were being arrested. Therefore, their attacks persisted on the city's Mexican zoot suiter population for over 5 days. The violence only ceased when the commanding officer of the Naval Training School ruled that Los Angeles was off limits to servicemen.

It is important to understand that the sailors did not decide to riot against the Mexican zoot suiters out of nowhere. They had been influenced by a number of different factors working

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<sup>72</sup> Duran, Virginia Espino Interviews Louie Duran.

<sup>73</sup> Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984). 29.

<sup>74</sup> Captain Heim to Admiral Bagley, "Telephone Conversation." From, Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots*, 133.

together over a number of years. Such as the newspapers negative coverage of the Pachucos, along with the clashes between both groups, led the sailors to develop the viewpoint that they were under attack from a hostile group of people who did not look, act or dress like them. Further, the large amount of arrests the LAPD carried out on the city's Mexican-American population manufactured the idea that there was a Mexican crime wave going on that had to be addressed. That coupled with the frustrations they had to endure as part of their military life made it easy for them to decide to let those feeling out by rioting. Even after they started rioting they felt safe in their actions since many in the city were on their side. From all of this evidence it appears clear that the Mexican-American community was correct in their assessment of who started the 'Sailor Riots'. The sailor's actions during the riots in many ways, originated from all of the factors previously mentioned in this paper coming together to influence them into igniting the Zoot Suit Riots.

### Conclusion

Whenever a tragic event happens, people who were around at the time always try to look for something to blame for it. The Zoot Suit Riots were no exception as a number of different people and organization tried to argue their own ideas for what caused the affair. However, that is not the case for the Zoot Suit Riots. The claims made by the media, police, city officials and activists at the time ranged from blaming the zoot suiters, the sailors, the press, the LAPD, society and even the Nazi's. Since each of them tried to argue that their theory was the correct one their arguments ended up being flawed. Their claims were also weakened further because they had inaccurate information or because they were biased against the Mexican-American victims.

The evidence provided, through extensive research strongly suggested that the Zoot Suit Riots were not the result of a single cause but multiple different influences over many years. Influences such as the city's methods of segregation along with the Repatriation movement of the 1930's, clashes of culture from the zoot suit style, the changes to the demographics of the Barrios due to World War II, the LAPD's harsh treatment of Mexican minorities, the city press' unfair coverage of the zoot suiters, the Sleepy Lagoon case, and the Sailors who attacked the zoot suiters.

Many of the issues that caused the Zoot Suit Riots are still being dealt with today. Issues such as police brutality, biased or false media coverage, and racism from public officials are still prevalent. Knowing how separate factors can result in a terrible event can help people today who want to prevent something similar from happening. And the best way to accomplish that is to address these issues the right way before they have the chance to cause a riot or something worse.

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