

The Nation

The War for Latinos  
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Jessica Sanchez poses an urgent threat to the US military. For a Pentagon stretched by stagnating enlistments and an Administration bent on waging a "global war on terror," the question of whether this four-foot-eleven Mexican-born legal resident and others like her will decide to join the military has enormous geopolitical implications.

The Pentagon is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to find out whatever it can about Sanchez and other young Latinos: what they wear, where they hang out, what kinds of groups they form, what they read, what they watch on TV, their grades, their dreams. Members of the military's numerous and well-funded recruiting commands use sophisticated Geographic Information Systems maps, souped-up recruiting Hummers and other resources to establish strategic positions in the minds, pocketbooks and neighborhoods of young Latinos like Sanchez.

Recruiters are devising new and often unexpected ways to penetrate daily Latino life. "I went to a birthday celebration at Chuck E. Cheese's," says Sanchez, a 25-year-old single mom from San Marcos, California, just outside San Diego. "We were watching a puppet show when all of a sudden a military song is playing in the background. I thought that was weird but kept watching. A couple of minutes later, all of us were looking at pictures on a TV screen of people in the Army giving food and supplies to kids in Iraq. My friends and I thought that was really weird--and got out."

The bad news for Pentagon planners is not just Sanchez's negative reaction to the puppet show, or even her eventual decision not to join the Navy. It's that she and other Latinos who are rejecting the military's overtures are turning around and organizing a grassroots movement against recruitment in their community.

>From the northernmost corner of Washington State to the southernmost beaches of south Florida, veteran Latino counterrecruiters and younger activists are facing off against thousands of military recruiters in a battle that will determine whether Latino youth continue echoing the "Yo soy el Army" and other Pentagon PR slogans or instead adopt the "Yo estoy en contra del Army" slogan taken up by Sanchez. The counterrecruitment movement, spearheaded by scores of Latinos in Chicago, El Paso, Tucson and other cities, suburbs and rural communities, is largely occurring beneath the radar of the mostly white antiwar movement, despite its potential to alter the course of Iraq and future US wars.

"Latinos are very important to the national security of the United States," says Larry Korb, former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, Reserve Affairs, Installations and Logistics in the Reagan Administration Defense Department, where he administered about 70 percent of the largest line items in the federal budget. "A decrease in Latino enlistment numbers would make things very difficult for the armed forces, because they are the fastest-growing [minority] group in the country and they have a very distinguished record of service in the military. If I were Donald Rumsfeld, I would be very worried about the possibility of decreasing Latino numbers. I'd be thinking

about how to make do with smaller numbers of troops or with further lowering standards for aptitude, age, education and other factors."

The centrality of Latinos to the military enterprise can be seen in statements by Pentagon officials like John McLaurin, Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army for Human Resources, who stated that in order to meet recruitment goals, Latino enlistments must grow to 22 percent by the year 2025, when one in four Americans will be Latino. Two factors add to the urgency. One is that while Latinos make up only 13 percent of the active-duty forces, they also make up a fast-growing 16 percent of the 17- to 21-year-old population. In the eyes of Pentagon planners, this rapidly growing, relatively poor population is prime recruiting material. Latinos already in the military are concentrated in the low ranks of the Marines and the Army, serving in the high-casualty, high-risk jobs of front-line troops urgently needed in Iraq. The second factor driving the Latinization of the Pentagon's recruitment strategy is the decrease in African-American and women recruits. Since 2000 the percentage of African-American recruits has dropped from 23.5 percent to less than 14 percent, thanks to the widespread disaffection with the Iraq War--and good organizing--among parents and students in the black community.

And some preliminary indicators show that the Pentagon's efforts are paying off. Latino enlistment increased from 10.4 percent of new recruits in 2000 to 13 percent in 2004. According to University of Maryland military sociologist David Segal, however, the jury is still out on whether the Latino enlistment campaign will solve the Defense Department's recruitment problem in the mid to long term. A drop in Latino numbers could, Segal says, "plunge the military into an even deeper crisis. They will have to learn how to better recruit whites." He adds that "when antiwar efforts focus on recruitment, they're denying recruiters major access they desperately need."

The Bush adventure in Iraq has done much to foster anti-recruitment sentiment and create the "Latino unity" activists have dreamed of for decades. Beyond the anonymous, individualistic rejection of the war measured in recent polls of Latinos, a more vocal and active rejection of war and recruitment is taking hold on the ground, tapping into several currents of Latino political tradition. Vietnam veteran and University of San Diego professor Jorge Mariscal is among those working feverishly to cut Pentagon strings they feel yank young Latinos further and further into imperial entanglements. "We are trying to show the historical continuity of Latino protest against the exploitation of other Latinos in US wars of aggression," says Mariscal, considered by many to be the dean of Latino counterrecruitment efforts.

On this past August 29, Mariscal's organization, the Project on Youth and Non-Military Opportunities (YANO), and dozens of other Latino groups launched a campaign to educate Latino parents and students about military recruitment in schools. A main focus was simply informing people that the No Child Left Behind Act, which allows recruiters access to student contact information, also contains an opt-out provision. The organizers chose to launch the campaign on August 29 because it was the anniversary of the Chicano Moratorium of 1970--the largest, most radical Latino antiwar, antirecruitment mobilization in US history. The campaign draws strength from the antimilitaristic traditions of US-born Latinos (especially Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans) as well as from the anti-militarismo traditions of more recent Latin American immigrants from such countries as El Salvador and the Dominican Republic.

While the war for young Latino hearts rages in all corners of the country, the strategic theater of battle for Latino bodies remains the Southwest, especially Southern California. A 2001 study by the US Army Recruiting Command (USAREC), for example, defined Los Angeles, the rest of Southern California, Phoenix and Sacramento as its top markets for Latino recruits. But California has also become the de facto heart of the nascent movement among US Latinos. Animating it is Fernando Suarez del Solar, a former student activist in Mexico who now lives in Escondido, California. Del Solar traces his struggle against the military to the moment he witnessed Mexican military personnel "push their bayonets into young men--and women" during a 1972 protest in the Zocalo, the central square of Mexico City. "That was my first encounter with militarismo."

Three decades later Del Solar took another, sharper turn against militarismo after his son, Jesus, a marine, died in Iraq in 2003. Since then, his denunciation of the "lies and half-truths" recruiters use on kids like Jesus has been unceasing. Because he can't shake images of how his then-13-year-old boy was first "seduced" by the trinkets, posters and ideas given to him by recruiters at a mall in National City, Del Solar works to educate other parents and students about recruitment and war.

Bemoaning the "lack of leadership among Latinos at the national level," Del Solar and others in the Latino counterrecruitment movement complain that national advocacy groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Council of La Raza are not only silent but complicit in finding fresh Latino bodies to feed the war machine. LULAC and NCLR do accept sponsorships from and provide forums for Pentagon promotion at some of their national conferences and local events. In their determination to meet what recruiting handbooks call "influencers," Marine, Army and other Defense Department personnel can be seen at LULAC and NCLR events either glad-handing or manning the recruitment Hummers, chin-up challenges, inflatable obstacle courses and other props in front of their trinket-stuffed information booths. To fill the void, Del Solar's organization, Guerrero Azteca, and Mariscal's group, YANO, have joined forces. They plan to convene a national meeting of Latino counterrecruitment organizations and leaders to connect the numerous efforts springing up across the country.

But the forces of counterrecruitment face an armada of military recruitment organizations backed by the best civilian, corporate and community alliances our tax dollars can buy. Continuing the Latino recruitment focus that started with the Clinton Administration's Hispanic Access Initiative, the Pentagon has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to turn poor Latino neighborhoods and decrepit, Latino-heavy schools into soldier factories. Last year alone USAREC deployed five brigades, forty-one battalions, 5,648 recruiters and 1,690 recruiting stations. The military won't reveal what share of its recruitment resources is being targeted at Latinos, but it's clearly substantial. For Hispanic Heritage month, the Army is highlighting Hispanic soldiers in a massive ad campaign and a Congressional Medal of Honor tour of high schools across the country.

In Puerto Rico counterrecruiters have fanned out to all 200 of the island's high schools to deliver the antimilitaristic and opt-out messages to thousands of students there. "We are picketing recruitment offices and asking Puerto Rico's Department of Education to give us 'equal time' or 'equal access' so that we can go to the schools to talk to the students against military recruitment," says Jorge Colon, spokesperson for the Coalición Ciudadana en Contra del Militarismo (Citizen's Coalition Against Militarism),

a broad-based network of labor, parent, teacher, student and other groups. Like Mariscal, Colon and other Puerto Ricans link current counterrecruitment efforts to antimilitaristic traditions; much of the energy and momentum of the successful movement to rid the island of Vieques of bombing and other military exercises has been transferred to the counterrecruitment effort.

In the northernmost corner of Washington State, Rosalinda Guillen is also drawing on tradition to combat what she sees as deception in the farmlands of Skagit and Whatcom counties, where recruiters are seeking to harvest new recruits among the Oaxacan and Chiapanecan Indians and Mexican, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan immigrants working the fields. Guillen, a former leader in the United Farm Workers, returned to her hometown to fight for Latino rights, including the right of youth to decline military service. "Recruiters are going into high schools. They're going after our young people and new immigrants," says Guillen, whose organization translates opt-out materials, does educational work and plans larger strategy to fight Latino recruitment.

Like many Latinos I spoke with, Guillen has one message for the larger progressive community, especially those fighting the war and recruitment: "White-led social justice programs and organizations need to do something. They need to make broader strokes to make sure they include Latinos, and they're not right now. All they need to do is help bring the resources and we can do the work like we always have."