

Thomas G. Palaima
REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

An apology to those who fought and were forgotten

I owe him an apology. But we all owe him and others like him an apology. So here is mine, days later, to one eloquently passionate Chicano Vietnam veteran and the 83,000 other soldados who served our country in Vietnam.

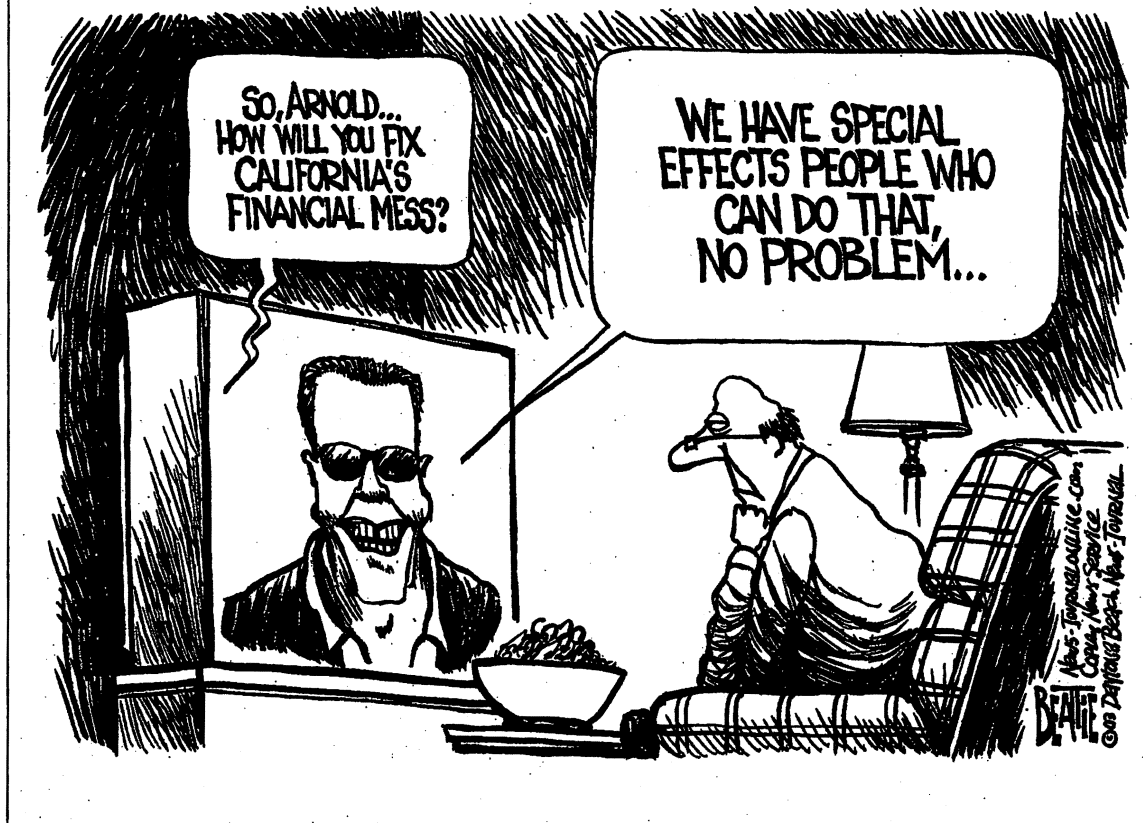


I spent the evening of Aug. 25 in the studio at KLRU on the University of Austin campus where "Austin City Limits" is filmed. The set gives the illusion of our rich, modern metropolis at night. Artificially lighted stars twinkle. The Capitol dome and sleek corporate buildings glow. An ironic setting to preview Charley Trujillo's and Sonya Rhee's documentary film that tells the story of Chicano cotton field workers from Corcoran, Calif., in the 1960s whose only taste of bright lights would soon be the evil beauty of night flares and flashes of artillery fire.

There are no high-rises in "Soldados." Instead we see the modified tents where families lived as they did brutally hard work in the fields, slave work really, a small taste of which as a boy inspired in Lyndon Johnson a lifelong resolve to eradicate poverty and inequality. Consider that child care for one veteran as an infant was his mom dragging him on the long sack into which she put the cotton she picked in the broiling sun.

The event, organized by KLRU, included a lively discussion afterward with commentary from Dee Esparza, a psychiatric mental health specialist in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at our local veterans center; Paul Berdoff of the VA Outpatient Clinic; Anthony B. Moore of the Texas Veterans Commission; Gil Rodriguez, the immediate past state commander of the American GI Forum (founded by Hector P. Garcia after World War II to help Hispanic American veterans try to get their benefits); and Thomas Cruz, who handles veterans' issues in U.S. Rep. Lloyd

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Doggett's office.

The film focuses on five boys — boys (and girls) always fight our wars — who went from "irrigating, chopping, weeding and picking cotton" to wading in rice paddies. Their experience was unique among Vietnam veterans. They were taken away from close-knit families, from strong Roman Catholic upbringings that instilled values of duty and obedience and a strong belief that killing another human being was a mortal sin, from the proud civilian machismo of young Hispanic men coming into their prime, from an overwhelming sense of being low-rung outsiders in an Anglo-dominated society and economy.

Their comments about their war experience have undertones of anger and resentment and resignation about how the world has used them. They also have ironic humor and a deep-sighing middle-aged awareness of the human condition. Their machismo led them again and again to volunteer for the most dangerous assignments. Their deep religious beliefs caused moral pain when they "dropped their

first guy" in combat, and then their second and their third. And with it came guilt about feeling like God, in having such power over life and death. They understood finally that they were farm boys fighting Vietnamese farm boys. And then they were dropped back into civilian life with little support besides their bewildered families.

"Killing is easy, but living with it is hard." "We should have a draft so everyone can do their duty." "Our new second lieutenant had dropped out of a seminary. You don't want a priest leading you unless he's a mean one." "My Vietnam experience prepared me to deal with the daily violence I face as a prison guard [in the Corcoran maximum security prison where Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan are kept]."

One of Trujillo's friends recounts: "Here! You want to see my farm worker permit?" Trujillo plucks out the glass eye that replaced the eye he lost to a shrapnel wound and holds it to the camera. The camera plays the role of the law officer who gave Trujillo a hard time when he was out in the fields

after coming back from Vietnam.

All that pain and all that anger, delivered in easy tones by 55-year-old men with smiles. It was easy to miss. Lourdes Flores, of Texas Rural Legal Aid, and I both complained that such documentaries never show the many completely ruined men and women. And we are right. But all the commentators, except for Esparza, stressed what veterans could get, despite closings of hospitals, despite cutbacks in benefits, despite reams of red tape.

When Tom Cruz spoke of how Doggett was fighting hard to restore benefits to old levels, we should all have risen in mass apology. Where were we when the benefits for these brave men were cut in the first place?

Watch "Soldados" on KLRU at 9 p.m. tonight (replayed Friday at 10 p.m.), and get an education in 26 minutes. I got mine in the brief strong words of a soldado.

Palaima teaches war and violence studies at the University of Texas at Austin. tpalaima@mail.utexas.edu