

Cesar Chavez Holiday –Honoring An American Hero

“I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!” –Cesar Chavez

March 31 is an official State holiday in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and is observed in several other States, in honor of the birth on March 31, 1937, of an extraordinary American – Cesar Estrada Chavez, the late co-founder and president of the United Farm Workers of America who became a legend in his own time in the civil rights era.

But there are many Americans today who are unaware there is a Cesar Chavez Day (the major media ignore it), or why there should be a holiday honoring him. There are also malicious myths tainting the life and the memory of Cesar Chavez that need to be repudiated, most particularly the lies that he was not an American but a Mexican national, and that he was a “Communist,” both of which were first promulgated by the John Birch Society. They are utterly false.

I worked with Cesar Chavez for some twenty years, starting in 1973, when I was a long haul trucker participating in a nationwide strike in protest against escalating fuel costs in the so-called “Arab Oil Embargo.”

I was helping coordinate the shutdown at the Triple T Truckstop in Tucson, AZ. Cesar Chavez mentored me in that strike, which remained non-violent because of his demands in mentoring me that “violence is a failure of creative intelligence.”

After that strike was broken, an alliance between the Truckers For Justice and the United Farm Workers of America was

established. During that work, in which we refused to haul non-union (scab) lettuce and grapes, Cesar told me I needed to go to law school as I could do more good as a lawyer. His recommendation got me into law school. I worked with UFW lawyers while in law school, and after graduating and passing the California Bar in 1979, I became one of his lawyers until the day of his death on April 23, 1993, and for the UFW thereafter as called upon. I have remained to this day exclusively a civil rights, workers rights, veterans rights attorney. ([I have written in more detail about experiences with Cesar in an earlier tribute, available here](#))

I can attest based on that long “up close and personal” experience that Cesar Chavez was, in his own way, a true American hero; that there are valuable lessons to be learned from his honorable life; and that he is deserving of recognition by all Americans for his service and sacrifice for others, no matter their race, color, or creed.

However, in order to understand that, it is necessary, first, to overcome the lies and myths which continue to distort the truth of who and what Cesar Chavez was. These are myths by those who hated and maligned him for their own political purposes; and by those who want to exploit who and what he was in order to appropriate him based on race, ethnicity, or nationality for their own political ends.

The most malicious of those myths are, as stated above, first, that he was not an American but a “Mexican” national; and, second, that he was a “Communist.”

These malicious myths were first promulgated, utterly falsely and politically deliberately, by the John Birch Society in the 1960’s. Almost sixty years later, they are repeated to this day.

First, as to nationality, the truth is that Cesar Chavez was a native-born American, not a “Mexican.” While proud of his

Mexican-American heritage, he was a third-generation American, born on his grandfather's small ranch in Arizona in the Yuma area. No matter the indisputability of those facts, Wikipedia, for example, on which many students and others rely, informs even now: "Chavez was born on the Mexico Texas border and therefore has dual citizenship." Utterly false.

Second, Cesar Chavez was no "communist." He was a devoted Catholic Christian. He was attempting, humbly, to live his Christian faith as faithfully as he was able by sacrifice and service for others as taught and exemplified by Jesus the Christ, not Marx the Communist.

Moreover, almost never mentioned by those who hate Cesar Chavez and define him as a "communist" and a "Mexican" rather than an American, is that Cesar Chavez, in 1944 at the age of 17, enlisted in the U.S. Navy in WWII and served for the duration of the war in the Pacific in defense of the country of his birth, the United States of America.

Ironically, those who claim to love Cesar Chavez make themselves accomplices of those who hate him (and them) by obscuring Cesar Chavez' American birth – and by almost never mentioning that he was an American veteran of WWII. They do this not to honor Cesar, but in order to appropriate Cesar Chavez on race or ethnic grounds as a "Mexican," "Chicano," or "Raza" race-based civil rights movement leader rather than as an American hero who should be honored by all Americans – as an *American* hero.

In regard to that, Cesar Chavez, while proud of his ancestral heritage, always identified himself as a "labor" or "union leader," not as a civil rights leader of Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, Hispanics, or La Raza.

In fact, in the some twenty years I worked with him, Cesar never defined himself as a "Mexican," or "Chicano," "Latino," etc., and, regarding the identification "La Raza" ("The Race")

he told me he didn't use it because he considered it racist.

Those who condemn him as a "Mexican" and "Communist," and those who claim a possessory interest in him as a leader of a race-based "Chicano" or "La Raza" civil rights movement, are both wrong: He defined himself as, and acted as, what he was—a "trade union leader," and a devout Catholic Christian.

Cesar Chavez was the moral heart of the American labor movement.

He built the first viable farm workers union in American history, the United Farm Workers of America. As president of the UFW, Cesar Chavez represented *all* farm workers, whatever their race, ethnicity, or nationality.

One example which refutes the myths of both those who hate Chavez and those who appropriate him based on race, and shows the willingness of both to corrupt historical truth to suit their political ends, is Chavez' acts regarding illegal immigration, which was then and remains now at the center of national controversy and division.

In 1969, Cesar Chavez famously led a march from Indio, CA, to the border. It is portrayed today as primarily a march in protest against discrimination by racist growers oppressing Mexican and other Hispanic farmworkers. That is false historical revisionism.

The primary purpose of the 1969 march to the Mexican border was a protest against the federal government's failure to secure the border from importation of illegal immigrants who were being used to keep wages and working conditions down and to break strikes and the farmworkers union entirely. Indeed, as UFW members set up picket lines waving "Huelga" ("Strike") flags, buses would arrive from Mexico to unload strike breakers.

In short, Cesar Chavez' 1969 march to the Mexican border was for the same purpose that the Minutemen later went to the border in the 70's and 80's— to secure the border and demand that the government stop illegal immigration. (It should be noted that the Minutemen were widely condemned as as “racists” for doing just what Cesar Chavez did. Was Cesar Chavez a racist?)

In the 1970's, Cesar Chavez fell out of favor with race-based civil rights groups, white liberals, Leftists including open socialist and communist organizations, and liberal media. He was was criticized because he adopted the position of calling upon and aiding the then-Immigration And Naturalization Service (INS) to deport strikebreakers illegally in the country.

In 1979, ten years after the march from Indio to the border to demand enforcement of the immigration laws, Cesar Chavez testified before Congress about immigration. He testified that illegal immigration had to be stopped, and the border secured, as illegal immigrants were used to hold wages and working conditions down, and to break as strikes, defeating efforts of farmworkers to build a union to improve their wages, hours, working conditions, and lives.

Today, Cesar Chavez' 1969 march from Indio to the border is historically revised to be a protest against racist growers and his 1979 Congressional testimony is rarely cited, to satisfy the political ends of race-based *la raza* groups and non-*raza* liberals who want to transform him from what he was, i.e., a leader of a labor movement to improve the lives of all farmworkers, to what they want him to be, i.e., a race-based political leader..

Meanwhile, many conservatives continue the original wrong and error of the John Birch Society when it falsely slandered and branded Cesar Chavez as a non-American and a “communist.” That continually repeated malicious lie has alienated many Mexican-

American and other Hispanics for whom Cesar Chavez is, rightly, a hero, as he should be for all Americans.

In his lifetime, although he became nationally and internationally renowned, Cesar Chavez never sought personal fame, wealth, or celebrity. It was all about the cause, *la causa*, not about him. Indeed, Cesar Chavez turned down millions of dollars offered for the rights to make a movie of his life. Similarly, he rejected all offers to write an autobiography or for the right to produce an "authorized" biography. All that he would authorize was the "Autobiography of La Causa," by Jaques Levy, who didn't "buy" the right but earned it by working with Chavez in *la causa* for some ten years.

Cesar Chavez' achievement is monumental. Farmworkers, and domestic workers, were exempted from the right to organize into unions provided to all other workers by the National Labor Relations Act. There were no State laws creating a right of farmworkers to support unionization. They could be and were fired and "blacklisted" with impunity by employers who suspected them of supporting a union. Farmworkers were also migrant, moving from employer to employer on the migrant trail during harvesting seasons. Therefore, more than a hundred attempts to organize migrant farmworkers by major international unions with money, members, and paid full time organizers failed. It was thought impossible to organize migrant farmworkers.

Then came Cesar Chavez. He had nothing. No money, no members, no paid staff. Nothing but the belief that the only way to help farmworkers was to build a union in which they could themselves achieve better working conditions, and dignity. He himself had become a migrant farmworker at the age of ten when the ranch of his grandfather on which he was born was lost on foreclosure in the Depression and taken over by the Bruce Church Corp., largest lettuce grower in Arizona. He had little education, attending some fifty different elementary schools

as his family followed the migrant farmworker trail. After his service in the U.S. Navy, he had married his sweetheart, Helen, in Delano, CA. Together they had eight kids.

The story has been told now in many articles, books, documentaries, and a relatively recent movie of how Cesar Chavez, while working as an organizer in Los Angeles, became convinced a union for farmworkers had to be created. He quit his job. He and Helen loaded up their old station wagon with the kids and a mimeograph machine, and headed to Delano. There, they rented a house, set up the mimeograph machine, and sent out a flyer calling for a house meeting, the first step in creating what would become the United Farm Workers of America.

How did Cesar Chavez succeed where all others had failed? By touching the hearts of Americans and the conscience of the nation by exposing the true working conditions of migrant farmworkers through creative, non-violent acts and actions, including his fasts and boycotts, and by his manifest personal selfless service and sacrifice.

Cesar Chavez did not merely say: *"I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness, is to sacrifice for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!"*

He lived it.

By doing so, he succeeded where so many others failed. He



achieved what was thought impossible. He inspired and taught by his example, humbly serving and sacrificing for others, and thereby has enriched the lives not only of farmworkers, but the lives of millions of Americans, of all races, all colors, all creeds, including my own life.

I am greatly indebted to Cesar Chavez, especially for the example of his selfless life in service for others. I will always walk in his shadow.

CESAR CHAVEZ AND REES LLOYD At Press Conference during truckers strike in Tucson, AZ, in 1973, announcing alliance of Truckers For Justice and United Farm Workers of America (UFW)

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