

March 31: Cesar Chavez Day: Honoring an American Hero



by Rees Lloyd, Attorney

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“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

Cesar Chavez Day is an official State holiday in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and is observed in several other States (including Colorado, Michigan, Nevada, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin) on the anniversary of his birth on March 31, 1927, 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.

In his honor, his headquarters for the UFW, which he named “La Paz” (“The Peace”), in the Tehachapi Mountains in Keene, CA, on Highway 58 between Bakersfield and Tehachapi, is now officially the U.S. Cesar Chavez National Monument, established by the federal government.

The U.S. Navy, of which he was a WWII veteran, has named a ship for him.

He was posthumously awarded the highest civilian award for service to America, the Medal of Freedom, which was accepted by his widow, Helen Chavez.

Many States, counties, cities, towns, villages, have named streets, schools, libraries and other public buildings in his honor.

But there are many Americans today who are unaware that 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 had the honor of working with Cesar Chavez for some twenty years, starting in 1973, when I was a young long haul trucker participating in a nationwide strike of some 100,000 independent truckers in protest against escalating fuel costs—and escalating profits of the big oil companies—in the so-called "Arab Oil Embargo."

I was helping coordinate the truckers' nationwide "Shutdown" at the Triple T Truckstop in Tucson, AZ, as a member of the steering committee of the "Truckers For Justice."

Cesar Chavez mentored me in that strike. It remained non-violent because of Cesar Chavez' demands in mentoring me that there should be no violence. "Rees, if there is violence, it is your fault," Cesar Chavez admonished me, insisting: "Violence is a failure of creative intelligence; 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 Cesar Chavez' 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 Chavez 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. Over 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,

informed: "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.

Perhaps the best proof, although none should be needed, that Cesar Chavez was not a Communist but a devoted Catholic Christian living his faith, is the fact that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), in its U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults, which is taught to all adults seeking to become members of the Catholic Church, chose as the exemplar of living a "life in Christ" and "the principles of the Christian moral life"—Cesar E. Chavez. (See, USCCB Catholic Catechism for Adults, Chapter 24, "Life In Christ-Part Two," pages 233-234).

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.

Thus, 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 most importantly, a devout Catholic Christian living his faith.

In truth, Cesar Chavez, as he lived his Catholic Christian faith, was the inspiring 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 "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 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.

Among other things, 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 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 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 not only many Americans, including 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 renown, Cesar Chavez never sought personal fame, wealth, or celebrity. It was all about "La Causa," the cause, 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 in la causa.

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.

There were more than a hundred attempts to organize migrant farmworkers by major international unions with money, members, and paid full time organizers. All 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 succeeded by touching the hearts of Americans by his non-violent “boycotts” and exposure of the dangerous and miserable working conditions of farm workers.

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 went back to working in the fields. He married his sweetheart, Helen, also a farm worker, in Delano, CA. Together they worked the fields, ultimately having 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 if working conditions were to be improved. 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.



It was Jesus Christ whom Cesar Chavez worshipped, followed, and humbly attempted to emulate by service to others through living his Catholic Christian faith.

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

May the God he so faithfully served bless and keep him. May the country he so faithfully served, always remember and honor him.

<- Cesar Chavez and Rees Lloyd are shown at a press conference in Tucson, AZ, announcing the establishment of an Alliance of the United Farm Workers of America and the Truckers For Justice during a nationwide truckers' shutdown opposing huge increases in the costs of fuel –and oil company profits–during the so-called “Arab Oil Embargo” in 1973.

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