

The Yardstick: Catholic Tests of a Social Order 1971

By

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Ralph de Toledano On Cesar Chavez

Ralph de Toledano, a Washington-based reporter, political biographer, and syndicated columnist, has just come out with a new paperback entitled “Little Cesar”—an obvious take-off on one of Edward G. Robinson’s more celebrated roles. The book is a pot-boiler if I ever saw one.

Published by Anthem Books (a poorly camouflaged front for and a wholly owned subsidiary of the National Right to Work Committee), it’s a low-grade, mean-spirited hatchet job on Cesar Chavez, Director of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee.

Frankly, it isn’t worth the inexpensive butcher paper it’s printed on, but since it is obviously aimed at a mass market, and within a matter of days, will probably be on sale in great quantities at newsstands and magazine racks all over the country, it can’t be completely ignored.

To review, it adequately, by verse and by chapter, and to correct all of its half-truths, sly innuendoes, irresponsible gossip, and out-right inaccuracies, one would need at least a dozen columns of this length. Since that’s out of the question, however, all that I propose to do in this release and in a follow-up column next week is to comment briefly on a sampling of the author’s more outrageous howlers.

Before getting down to particulars, let me make three general comments on the book.

In the first place, I do not for a moment question Mr. de Toledano’s right to go after Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and to do so as fiercely as his own reading of the facts might seem to warrant.

In other words, objective criticism of Chavez and UFWOC is perfectly in order. Unfortunately, however, Mr. de Toledano’s criticism, by and large, is anything but objective. To the contrary, much of it is demonstrably false and, worse than that, is almost pathologically venomous and vindictive in tone.

Secondly, it should be noted that, while Mr. de Toledano is hell-bent on destroying the reputation of Cesar Chavez as an individual, he seems to have had in mind a much larger purpose than that in writing “Little Cesar.” I think what he really set out to do, in addition to knifing Chavez, was to try to persuade his readers, by dint of sheet repetition, that not only the closed shop but the union ship as well “runs directly counter to the First, Fifth and Ninth Amendments to the Constitution.”

If he says this once in the course of his unfortunate little tract, he says it at least a half-dozen times. So be it. He is clearly entitled to his own opinion about this matter, and if he can persuade the Supreme Court of the United States to see it his way—well, bully for him. If not, of course, he will just have to grit his teeth and learn to grin and bear it.

Thirdly, it should be noted that Mr. de Toledano makes much of the fact that he traveled to California six times to investigate the farm labor dispute in the State. He has my sympathy in this regard. Having made the same trip, for the same purpose, some 23 times during the past 14 months, I know that this kind of leg work can be rather tiring.

Be that as it may, there is not a single shred of evidence in “Little Cesar” that Mr. de Toledano, in the course of his safaris to the Coast, ever talked to Chavez or to any of his top associates. I don’t think I am being unfair to Mr. De Toledano when I say that this certainly doesn’t speak very well for his objectivity as a reporter.

I think that Mr. de Toledano’s readers might also be interested to learn that, while he takes a number of hefty jabs and a number of potshots at certain clerical “agitators” and, more specifically, at the Bishops Committee on Farm Labor, he has never, to the best of my knowledge, talked to any of these clerics or to any member of the Committee’s staff.

I am sorry about that—more for his sake, of course, than for the sake of the Committee. If he had made even a single phone call to the Committee, we could have told him a number of things about the farm labor dispute in California which he obviously doesn’t know and could also have told him that some of the things he thinks he knows about this dispute are contrary to fact.

Even more importantly, from his point of view, we might have been able to spare him the embarrassment of getting caught red-handed at the sordid little game of reporting scurrilous and absolute false rumors about Chavez and the Bishops Committee.

Let me cite but one example with reference to the latter point. Mr. de Toledano, in clear violation of the ethics of his own craft, cleverly manages to plant the impression with his readers—by the sleazy device of repeating, without comment, an outlandish rumor handed on to him by one of his California informants—that Chavez is turning over to the Church certain funds which the growers are required by contract to contribute to UFWOC in support of the union’s Economic Development Program. The second part of this

preposterous little exercise in rumor mongering says that Chavez is doing this as a kind of under the table pay-off to the Committee for favors allegedly rendered to the union.

I seriously doubt that Mr. de Toledano really puts any stock in this filthy little rumor. He is much too smart and much too sophisticated to fall for this kind of hair-brained gossip. Why, then, did he stoop so low as to give it a certain credibility by repeating it without comment?

Well, as he says himself, in another context, by way of criticizing the press for having printed what he regards as erroneous information about the pesticide issue in the grape dispute: “The press evidently printed these ‘statistics’ without bothering to ask where they came from. There was, after all, no pint in killing a good story.” That’s a classic example, if I ever saw one, of a very smudgy pot calling the kettle black.

In any event, so it goes repeatedly throughout Mr. de Toledano’s miserable diatribe against Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. He simply can’t bear to kill a good story—even if it’s totally unfounded.

In summary, though he likes to think of himself as being first and foremost the completely objective reporter, and is so billed by his publisher, he comes through, in this book at least, looking not all like an independent journalist, but rather like an old-style Sunday supplement gossip monger and, even more the point, like a professional propagandist for the National Right to Work Committee. Next week’s column will document this charge in greater detail.

April 12, 1971