

Cesar and Martin, March '68

Jorge Mariscal

In early 1968, the philosophy of nonviolence was sinking beneath a tidal wave of bloodshed and death. The previous summer, rioting had erupted in major urban centers across the United States. In Detroit, where the worst violence took place, forty-three people died. The Tet Offensive cut a path through the month of February and ended with 2,259 U.S. servicemen and thousands more Vietnamese dead. Since late February, U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh had been under siege from North Vietnamese regulars in what would become the longest battle of the U.S. war in Southeast Asia.

In the California grape fields, the two and a half-year old strike by Filipino, Mexican, and Mexican American workers was under attack from corporate growers and their allies. The violence directed against the picket lines had generated talk among the strikers about retaliation. In order to recommit his organization to the philosophy of nonviolence, on February 15 the 40-year old farm worker organizer Cesar Chavez began what would become a 25-day fast. Reflecting on his philosophy a few years later, Chavez told an interviewer: “Some great nonviolent successes have been achieved in history....The most recent example is Gandhi. To me that’s the most beautiful one....It’s fantastic how he got so many people to do things, which is the whole essence of nonviolent action.”(Fig. 1)¹



Fig. 1: Cesar Chavez in his office, 1968

Where the Mississippi river leaves Tennessee, sanitation workers organized by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1733 walked off the job in Memphis on February 12 when supervisors used inclement weather as an excuse to send African American workers home without pay but kept non-black employees working at full pay. The following day and again two weeks later, police attacked peaceful marches in support of the strikers. Union members adopted the slogan “I Am a Man” and the Memphis-based Reverend James Lawson, who had trained in India in the nonviolent philosophy of Gandhi, became chairman of the strike committee. He asked his longtime friend, 39-year old Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to come to Memphis to support the strike.²

¹ Jacques E. Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 270-271.

² See Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chapter 6.

Moving through the eye of this violent storm in March of 1968 were two men who today are recognized as the most famous American practitioners of Gandhian nonviolence. Both struggled to adhere to the philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience within the turbulence of cresting mass mobilizations deeply rooted in the particular histories and traditions of two distinct communities. Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King never met and probably never communicated except by telegram. In hindsight, their coming together would appear to have been the ultimate black-brown alliance. But in March of '68, conditions on the ground did not allow for such clarity.

My purpose in this essay is less to imagine what might have been than to describe the extremely hostile conditions through which both men moved. In this way, we can begin to sharpen our understanding of the philosophy and organizing practices of two key black and brown social movements and how they overlapped at a critical juncture in the revolutionary Sixties. In order to unpack the many reasons why a King-Chavez alliance never took place, we need to disabuse ourselves of over forty years of hagiography and cooptation. In other words, the contemporary stature of both men as the object of holidays and postage stamps ought not be inserted back in time if we are to avoid distorting the historical record. In 1968, both men were known but not yet beatified. More important, each was fully immersed in a complex social movement at a perilous moment in that movement's development; each was aware of the other's actions but the complex series of contacts and maneuvers that more than likely would have led them to collaborate had only just begun.

On February 23, President Lyndon Johnson issued a statement in response to the recommendations just released by the Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs. He concluded by stating, "With this report of progress and action, we have begun the journey toward full opportunity for the Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Spanish-speaking people of our land."³ Less than one week later on March 1, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, issued its report. Johnson had charged the commission to analyze the social causes of the urban riots that had taken place in the summer of '67 and that had led to a total of eighty-four deaths nationwide. Among the report's conclusions was the statement: "It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens – urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group."⁴

Dr. King called the Kerner Report "a physician's warning of approaching death, with a prescription for life," and added, "the duty of every American is to administer the remedy without regard for the cost and without delay."⁵ In contrast to his rhetoric earlier in the civil rights struggle, King's language now was becoming increasingly apocalyptic. In a telegram sent to Kerner Commission member Roy Wilkins, he wrote, "My only hope is that white America and our national government

³ Lyndon B. Johnson, Statement by the President Summarizing Actions on the Recommendations of the Inter-Agency Committee on Mexican American Affairs; John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters, *The American Presidency Project* (Santa Barbara, CA: University of California (hosted), Gerhard Peters (database)), available at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29391> (accessed March 31, 2009).

⁴ "Our Nation Is Moving Toward Two Societies, One Black, One White – Separate and Unequal," excerpts from the Kerner Report, *History Matters*, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6545/> (accessed April 4, 2009).

⁵ Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Findings in the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/research> (accessed April 4, 2009).

will heed your warnings and implement your recommendations. By ignoring them we will sink inevitably into a nightmarish racial doomsday. God grant that your excellent report will educate the nation and lead to action before it is too late.”⁶ Although the report sold almost three-quarter of a million copies in the first week of March and created an uneasy wave of optimism among activists, the election of Richard Nixon in November and the continuation of the war in Southeast Asia meant that there would be minimal follow up to any of its policy recommendations. Race relations in the United States seemed to be headed off a cliff and so did the U.S. military adventure in Viet Nam. While King speculated about the potential for racial conflict, on February 27 the most authoritative voice in the U.S. media, Walter Cronkite of CBS News, delivered an editorial predicting that a military victory in Vietnam would never come.⁷ One of the war’s primary architects, Robert McNamara, had expressed his doubts to President Johnson as early as October of the previous year. On March 1, he relinquished his post to a new Secretary of Defense.

A few days after the release of the Kerner Report, Mexican American high school students, frustrated by their school board’s refusal to address their demands regarding conditions in the schools, streamed out of several high schools in East Los Angeles. The first phase of the “Blowouts” or walkouts lasted from March 5-8 and marked the acceleration of youth militancy in Mexican American communities across the Southwest. During the next few months, African American students joined with Chicano/a students to engage in nonviolent protest designed to call attention to the dilapidated condition of their schools, racist teachers, Eurocentric curricula, and tracking that channeled them towards vocational training and the military and away from higher education.⁸ Inspired by the on-going actions of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, many of the student activists went on to participate in antiwar and electoral politics. Some joined the farmworkers, while others met with Robert Kennedy during a March campaign caravan organized by long-time Chicano organizer Bert Corona of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). Kennedy’s motorcade moved slowly across a long section of Los Angeles county stretching from Long Beach to Compton, through East Los Angeles, and ending at the heart of Mexican L.A. – La Placita on Olvera Street where enthusiastic supporters mobbed him (Fig. 2).

⁶ Quoted in Roy Wilkins, *Standing fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 328.

⁷ A video clip of Cronkite’s editorial can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdOb_183d1o (accessed March 16, 2009). For a general overview of 1968, see the documentary *1968: The Year that Shaped a Generation* (Oregon Public Broadcasting Corporation, 1998), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vVZP2T60wI&NR=1> (accessed May 1, 2009).

⁸ See Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity, Power: The Chicano Movement, Revised and Expanded Edition* (London: Verso, 2007); Ian F. Haney López, *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).



Fig. 2: Bobby Kennedy at Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles, 1968 (L.A. Public Library)

On March 5, Martin Luther King sent a telegram addressed to “Cesar Chaves [sic], United Farm Workers, P.O. Box 120, Delano, Calif.” “I am deeply moved by your courage in fasting as your personal sacrifice for justice through nonviolence,” King wrote, “Your past and present commitment is eloquent testimony to the constructive power of nonviolent action and the destructive impotence of violent reprisal. You stand today as a living example of the Gandhian tradition with its great force for social progress and its healing spiritual powers. My colleagues and I commend you for your bravery, salute you for your indefatigable work against poverty and injustice, and pray for your health and your continuing service as one of the outstanding men of America. The plight of your people and ours is so grave that we all desperately need the inspiring example and effective leadership you have given.” Ten years later, Chavez recalled, “I was profoundly moved that someone facing such a tremendous struggle himself would take the time to worry about a struggle taking place on the other side of the continent.”⁹ Looking back, King’s message would

⁹ “Lessons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.” <http://www.ufw.org/> (accessed March 31, 2009). An earlier telegram from King to Chavez was sent on September 22, 1966, shortly after the UFW merged with the AFL-CIO: “As brothers in the fight for equality, I extend the hand of fellowship and good will and wish continuing success to you and your members. The fight for equality must be fought on many fronts – in the urban slums, in the sweatshops of the factories and fields. Our separate struggles are really one – a struggle for freedom, for dignity, and for humanity. You and your valiant fellow workers have demonstrated your commitment to righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people. We are together with you in spirit and in determination that our dreams for a better tomorrow will be realized.” Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 246.

seem to be a discreet follow-up to an invitation to Chavez to take part in the Poor People's Campaign scheduled for summer. Andrew Young, one of King's closest aides, had visited Chavez in Delano in February to deliver the personal request from Dr. King. According to Young, "We were happily surprised at the positive response from Cesar Chavez and the California Farm Workers." Although Chavez never participated directly in the Campaign, a UFW representative was present at the March 14 planning meeting at King's Atlanta office.¹⁰ Chavez later told an interviewer that at one point he had spoken with King by telephone but the timing of the call remains unclear and those closest to Chavez wonder why, if in fact Chavez had received a call from King, he never mentioned it.¹¹ LeRoy Chatfield, for example, when asked about the call responded, "Had you asked me straight out, I would have said 'no,' they never talked. I have no reason to contradict Cesar about this, but I would offer the opinion that such a conversation had to be in the nature of a 'courtesy' call because Cesar, to my knowledge, never made it a topic of conversation or the subject of a meeting."¹²

On Sunday, March 10, Chavez ended his fast at an open air Mass held at Delano Memorial Park. The fast had begun on February 15 when Chavez left Filipino Hall and walked the three miles to the old adobe gas station at Forty Acres. In third year of the Delano Grape strike, an elevated sense of violence permeated the California fields. Some strikers had been shot at or physically threatened and there were rumblings about some of them burning sheds and throwing stones at strikebreakers. Chavez hoped to use the fast as an opportunity to reflect on the true meaning of nonviolence and the ethical values of the farm workers' movement. In an announcement to union members, he noted that because the nation was experiencing a period of great violence it was important to show that violence was morally wrong and counterproductive. He emphasized that what he wanted to do was not a hunger strike because a strike would be a form of coercion and therefore not truly nonviolent. UFW attorney Jerry Cohen would later say that at that point in the grape strike, when internal divisions had begun to surface, the fast was "the glue that held the union together." Other volunteers were less sanguine. Former Catholic priest John Duggan, for example, even in later years referred to the fast as "religious spectacle engineered by propagandists (however well intentioned)."¹³

At the mass celebrating the end of the fast, Father Mark Day presided over clergy from several different faiths and denominations. Three hundred loaves of bread were distributed to over 4,000

¹⁰ Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 445. According to Reies López Tijerina, Dr. King had sent him a telegram on March 5 as well inviting the New Mexico land grant movement leader to a planning meeting for the Poor People's Campaign. Reies López Tijerina with José Angel Gutiérrez, *They Called Me "King Tiger": My Struggle for the Land and Our Rights* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2001), 101.

¹¹ Chavez told Jacques Levy: "Although I met some of the people that were working with King and saw him on television, I never talked with him except on the phone." Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 289. There is some confusion in the historiography regarding the Chavez-King relationship. Although the evidence is overwhelming that two men never met, Michael Honey incorrectly writes that King briefly met Chavez. See Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 290.

¹² LeRoy Chatfield, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, "Cesar Chavez and His Farmworker Movement," Interview with Professor Paul Henggeler, Question 15, <http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays.shtml> (accessed March 31, 2009).

¹³ The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Jerry Cohen/UFW Legal Department 1967-1980, audio interview: Jerry Cohen Discussion About Cesar Chavez and the UFW, Part I; The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Panel Discussion: "Cesar Chavez 1968 Fast for Nonviolence," 2008, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history (accessed March 31, 2009); The Farm Worker Documentation Project, John Duggan Autobiography, p. 46, <http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays> (accessed March 31, 2009).

people (8,000 according to some participants). The bread was *pan de semita*, the round anise-flavored bread said to be based on the recipe for matzo used by crypto-Jewish Spaniards in the 17th century. Jim Drake of the California Migrant Ministry read a statement prepared for Chavez by Drake and Chris Hartmire. The statement included the sentence, “We are poor, but we have something the rich do not own – our bodies and our spirits and the justice of our cause.”¹⁴

Throughout the fast Robert Kennedy had stayed in contact with union members and at one point wrote to Chavez urging him to monitor his health carefully. As the fast came to an end, an invitation was extended for Kennedy to attend the mass. One of the senator’s advisors pointed out that his support of Chavez in 1966 had caused a wave of red baiting messages and that meeting with Chavez now might cost Kennedy much needed votes in the California primary should he decide to enter the presidential race. “I know,” Kennedy replied, “but I like Cesar.”¹⁵ Kennedy had met Chavez for the first time in 1959 in Los Angeles where Chavez was organizing voter registration drives. They met again on March 16, 1966, in the first year of the Grape Strike, when Kennedy accompanied Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and others to the Delano vineyards, the picket lines, and Filipino Hall where the senator spoke to union members. Kennedy then joined Senators Harrison Williams of New Jersey and George Murphy of California at the local high school to conduct hearings on migrant farm labor. At an earlier session of these hearings, Chavez ended his testimony with an oblique reference to the Watts riots of the previous summer, saying “I am hoping we don’t have to go as far as the Negro revolution and its resulting bloodshed to prove that farm workers are tired of occupational discrimination and that we are ready for our freedom.” Kennedy and Chavez would meet again briefly in late 1967 at a fundraiser in Marin County, California.¹⁶

Senator Kennedy decided to attend and flew from an appearance in Des Moines, Iowa, to California. Jerry Cohen and Jim Drake met Kennedy at the airport and drove him and his aide from Bakersfield to Delano. Cohen recalls that the senator looked nervous and later in the day Kennedy told Dolores Huerta and Mack Lyons that he had seen a man in the crowd carrying a gun. Union members surrounded Kennedy in a protective circle as he left the rally.¹⁷ Kennedy’s official statement released to reporters read:

This is a historic occasion. We have come here out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time – Cesar Chavez. But I also come here to congratulate all of you, you who are locked with Cesar in the struggle for justice for the farm worker, and the struggle for justice for the Spanish-speaking American....The world must know that the migrant farm worker, the Mexican American, is coming into his own right....And when your children and grandchildren take their place in American – going to high school, and college, and taking good jobs at good pay—when you look

¹⁴ *El Malcriado* (March 15, 1968); Mark Day, *Forty Acres: Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers* (New York: Praeger, 1971), especially Chapter 3.

¹⁵ The most complete study of Kennedy’s relationship with Chavez is Steven W. Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2008). See also, Thurston Clarke, *The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2008), p. 36.

¹⁶ Oral History Interview with Cesar Chavez (with Dennis J. O’Brien), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Part I, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history; The Farm Worker Documentation Project, A. V. Krebs, “La Causa: The World Made Flesh,” <http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/> (both accessed March 31, 2009).

¹⁷ The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Jerry Cohen/UFW Legal Department 1967-1980, audio interview: Jerry Cohen Discussion About Cesar Chavez and the UFW, Part II; Clarke, 115-116

at them, you will say, “I did this. I was there, at the point of difficulty and danger.” And though you may be old and bent from many years of labor, no man will stand taller than you when you say, “I marched with Cesar.”

As he was about to leave, Kennedy suddenly climbed on to the top of his car and began to speak to the farm workers in a Spanish so badly mangled that many of those cheering had no idea what he was saying. According to Chavez, Kennedy looked over at him and said “I’m murdering the language, Cesar, is that right?” Chavez smiled and answered, “Yes.” Kennedy departed a short time later.¹⁸

The Kennedy visit provided the farm workers’ movement with the kind of national exposure it had hope for but never anticipated. One thing could that might have added to the media frenzy was the presence of Martin Luther King. Although some observers have raised the issue of whether or not King was invited to attend the rally and Mass, Chavez confidante LeRoy Chatfield said, “I am not aware that we gave any consideration to inviting Martin Luther King, Jr. to Delano to celebrate the end of the fast. At that point in time, I’m not sure we saw Dr. King as a future national holiday figure but rather as one leader, competing, and cooperating, with many others to advance the cause of blacks.”¹⁹ It should not surprise us that Chavez and his associates, so focused on the mechanics of a prolonged strike that in March ’68 seemed very far from victory, were not particularly concerned with extending invitations to civil rights leaders engaged in their own separate albeit related struggles.

According to one of his closest advisors, Cesar had adopted a “cautious, wary, and detached” stance towards King, primarily because of King’s strong public denunciation of Johnson administration policy in Viet Nam. Although Chavez and the rest of the UFW leadership opposed the war, their allies in the AFL-CIO, Seafarers, and other unions supported the war policy of the Democratic president. As late as 1970, construction unions paid workers in New York City to stage pro-war rallies and attack antiwar demonstrators. George Meany, the head of the AFL-CIO was particularly hawkish, and in 1972 refused to support the antiwar candidate George McGovern. However, when the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers pulled out of the AFL-CIO in mid-1969, large sectors of organized labor slowly began to voice opposition to the war.²⁰

In March ’68, Chavez could not risk a dramatic break with the large unions that supported him over the issue of Vietnam. At the same time, many of the UFW rank and file considered it unpatriotic to oppose a war in which many of its young men were fighting. In a 1970 interview, Chavez explained, “They thought it was being disloyal to be – I think they didn’t want the war, but it was a question of if they speak out, ‘I’m being disloyal,’ and this is very pronounced with the Mexicans, you know.” As volunteers from college campuses mixed with the farm workers, tensions and misunderstandings related to the war and military service increased. Chavez told an interviewer that “some of the

¹⁸ Oral History Interview with Cesar Chavez (with Dennis J. O’Brien), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Part I, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history (accessed March 31, 2009). See also, Wallace Turner, “Head of Farm Workers Union Ends 25-Day Fast in California” and “A Farm-Bred Unionist: Cesar Estrada Chavez,” March 11, 1968

¹⁹ LeRoy Chatfield, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, “Cesar Chavez and His Farmworker Movement,” Interview with Professor Paul Henggeler, Question 18, <http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/essays.shtml> (accessed March 31, 2009). In his question to Chatfield, Henggeler refers to the possible invitation of King as a “small, but curious matter.”

²⁰ See Philip S. Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet-Nam War* (New York: International Publishers, 1989).

volunteers were for ending the Vietnam war above all else, and that shocked the workers because they thought that was unpatriotic.”²¹ Given the complex nature of his coalition, Chavez in 1968 would take a much less public profile against the war than King.

On the morning of March 14 at the Paschal’s Motor Lodge in Atlanta, King convened a meeting of some eighty “non-black” organizers and organization leaders. Billed as the “Minority Group Conference,” the leaders began the preliminary planning for the Poor People’s Campaign. Despite opposition from within his own inner circle with regard to the idea of a broad-based coalition, King was about to attempt on the national level what Chavez was slowly building in Delano in a local context. Several years earlier, Chavez had articulated plans for a broad mobilization of the poor with its origins in the militant particularity of California agricultural workers. “Our goals have to be broader than the traditional goals of unions,” he had stated, “It is more than a union as we know it today that we have to build. It is a movement. It is a movement of the poor.” For King, the multiracial alliance he attempted to create would mark “the day when the bones get back together,” as in the biblical story of Ezekiel.²²

The Minority Group Conference revealed that the depth of knowledge each group had of one another was superficial at best. King’s 28-year old aide, Bernard Lafayette, struggled to explain to him the cultural differences between Chicanos and Puerto Ricans. Bert Corona, however, recalled that King “always exhibited a sensitivity to the needs of *mexicanos*... He was very sympathetic and supportive.” King also made a particularly strong impression on Baldemar Velásquez, the leader of a farm labor organization in Ohio.²³ Representatives from Mexican American and Native American groups and poor white coal miners listened as King described his ideas for the actions planned for that summer in Washington, D.C. According to Reies López Tijerina, King was pressed about the need to foreground the rights of Native Americans. Tijerina lectured black leaders on the complexities of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the land grant issue. Although they had met briefly at the New Politics conference in Chicago the year before, King did not know a great deal about Tijerina. More important, King’s advisors had to deal with the fact that Tijerina’s resumé included an armed clash with New Mexico state authorities; a 1967 “mutual defense treaty” signed with Native American and radical Black militants representing SNCC, the Black Panthers, and Ron Karenga’s United Slaves, among others; and a fiery speech in February at UCLA in which Tijerina vowed to aggressively challenge the federal government.²⁴

²¹ Oral History Interview with Cesar Chavez (with Dennis J. O’Brien), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Part I, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history (accessed March 31, 2009); Levy, 197.

²² Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 295; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 723. The most complete account of the March 14 meeting and of Chicano participation in the Poor People’s Campaign is Gordon Mantler, “Black, Brown, and Poor: Martin Luther King Jr., The Poor People’s Campaign, and its Legacies,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2008).

²³ Bert Corona with Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 216; Gordon K. Mantler, “Grassroots Voices, Memory, and the Poor People’s Campaign,” American Radioworks, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/king/mantler.html> (accessed April 4, 2009); Mantler, “Black, Brown and Poor,” 59-60.

²⁴ Tijerina, *They Called Me “King Tiger,”* 103; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 715 ff.; George Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun: Lessons from the Chicano Movement, 1965-1975* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), especially Chapter 5.

The dialogue among diverse constituencies and their principal leaders lost its primary interlocutor when King left to give a scheduled speech in Michigan that evening. Speaking at the high school in Grosse Pointe near Detroit, King told the audience, "Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, it comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right."²⁵ A heckler in the audience shouted "traitor" while outside the auditorium members of a right-wing militia called the Breakthrough carried signs that read "Beware – King Snake" and "Antichrist Must Go." According to those who drove him to his hotel after the event, King was visibly shaken.

The potential for violence was now palpable inside the immediate circle of both Chavez and King. Not long after his fast, Chavez related to Dolores Huerta his attitude regarding the constant threats against his life. "I've just made up my mind that I know it's going to happen sooner or later," he said, "there's nothing I can do."²⁶ King's associates were no less concerned that their leader was resigned to the dangers that surrounded him. During an impromptu vacation to Mexico with Ralph Abernathy and a small group of advisors, King seemed distracted and morbid. Many of King's associates sensed that something or someone was stalking the civil rights leader. We now know that their fears were well founded. White supremacists and paid hit men were not the only ones tracking King and Chavez. On March 6, Director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover had created a special unit to shadow, and if necessary sabotage, all potential participants in the Poor People's Campaign.²⁷

King was now fully immersed in a whirlwind cross-country tour to promote the Poor People's Campaign and to speak out against the widening war in Vietnam. On March 16, he spoke in Anaheim, California to the California Democratic Council convention. At the unlikely location of the Disneyland Hotel, he stated, "the government is emotionally hostile to the needs of the poor" and called for the Democratic Party to withdraw its support from President Johnson.²⁸ Well aware that Bobby Kennedy had visited Delano the week before, King vowed that in the near future he would conduct a fact-finding tour of migrant labor camps. We can only suppose that a meeting with Chavez would have been the high point of that tour.

Two other decisive events occurred on March 16. In the caucus room of the Old Senate Office Building, Kennedy announced that he would seek the nomination of the Democratic Party. "I am announcing today my candidacy for the presidency of the United States... [in order to] close the gaps that now exist between black and white, between rich and poor, between young and old," he said. Thousands of miles away, a U.S. Army platoon executed between 200 and 500 unarmed civilians at My Lai 4, a cluster of hamlets in northern South Vietnam. The legalized and

²⁵ King's "Two Americas" speech, news reports, and photos of his Grosse Pointe appearance can be viewed at <http://www.gphistorical.org/mlk/index.htm> (accessed April 4, 2009).

²⁶ Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 292. Jacques Levy's research materials related to subsequent assassination plots against Chavez are currently for restricted use only in the Jacques E. Levy Research Collection on Cesar Chavez, Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, WA MSS S-2406, Series X, *Assassination Plot, 1971-1974* (boxes 44-49).

²⁷ Branch, 707. See also Ernesto Vigil, *The Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government's War on Dissent* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 54 ff.

²⁸ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 717; Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations of the U.S. House of Representatives, Findings in the Assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/research> (accessed April 4, 2009).

indiscriminate violence – the foundation of all wars – played itself out in all of its contradictions with some U.S. soldiers committing mass murder and others trying to stop it. This was precisely the kind of senseless violence that Chavez and King had committed their lives to stopping.

The two leaders that today are most identified as leaders of “race-based” social movements were also deeply implicated in the labor struggles of their time. In 1968, the issue of worker’s rights melded seamlessly into the struggle for equal rights for communities of color. Increasingly, the category of race was morphing into the intellectual category and organizing principle of racialized class. Despite the relative racial and ethnic homogeneity of the communities for which they spoke, King and Chavez did not practice a narrow “identity politics,” as that term came to be defined at a later moment. By March ’68 especially, their agendas were tightly focused on the economic conditions of their constituents as well as their racialized status.

The plight of exploited labor had always been Cesar Chavez’s focus, and he considered himself first and foremost a community organizer. It was not until the early 1970s that he recognized the ways in which the UFW had influenced and contributed to the broader mobilization of Mexican American communities across a wide range of issues ranging from educational reform to the war in Southeast Asia. The Chicano Movement in all of its variations was at its base an ethnic pride or ethnic “nationalist” movement insofar as it attempted to mobilize a racialized and politically disenfranchised Mexican American community. While in the late 1960s Chavez was still wary of the “Brown Power” activists, the growth of Chicano militancy was unthinkable without the example of the farm workers struggle.²⁹

By 1968, Dr. King had moved increasingly toward an economic analysis of the situation confronting African Americans. On February 18, King had told his parishioners at Ebenezer Baptist Church, “Until mankind rises above race and class and nations, we will destroy ourselves by the misuse of our own power and instruments.” In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, published the year before, he had written, “The displaced are flowing into proliferating service occupations. These enterprises are traditionally unorganized and provide low wage scales with longer hours. The Negroes pressed into these services need union protection, and the union movement needs their membership to maintain its relative strength in the whole society....To play our role fully as Negroes we will have to strive for enhanced representation and influence in the labor movement. Our young people need to think of union careers as earnestly as they do of business careers and professions.” In contrast to the suspicion King had displayed around unions early in his career, especially those unions that promoted racist practices, King now embraced unions as key allies in the struggle.³⁰

The decision to make repeated forays into the charged environment surrounding the Memphis sanitation workers was the kind of gamble King had to make if he wanted to transform the African American civil rights movement into a pan-ethnic coalition of workers and the poor. In *Where Do We Go From Here*, he had argued that “In a multi-racial society no group can make it alone. It is a myth to believe that the Irish, Italians, and the Jews....rose to power through separatism....Their

²⁹ Mariscal, *Brown-Eyed Children of the Sun*, Chapter 4; Peter Matthiessen, *Sal Si Puedes (Escape If You Can): Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

³⁰ Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 696; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1986), 601-602.

group unity was always enlarged by joining in alliances with other groups such as political machines and trade unions.” The sanitation workers’ strike melded issues of race and class in ways so stark that they perhaps were not seen quite so clearly again until the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

On March 18, King travelled to Memphis to speak to a rally of some 20,000 (FBI estimate 9,000-12,000) at the Bishop Charles Mason Temple. “You are demanding that this city will respect the dignity of labor,” he stated, “so often we overlook the work and the significance of those who are not in professional jobs, of those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to you tonight that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity and is for the building of humanity, it has dignity and it has worth.”³¹ This same message could just have easily applied to the farm workers. This language resonated with what Chavez had said since at least the beginning of the Grape Strike in 1965 and what he would articulate most succinctly one year after his fast in a letter to a corporate grower who opposed the union. In that letter, Chavez wrote, “we are men and women who have suffered and endured much, and not only because of our abject poverty but because we have been kept poor. The color of our skin, the language of our cultural and native origins, the lack of formal education, the exclusion from the democratic process, the numbers of our men slain in recent wars—all these burdens generation after generation have sought to demoralize us, to break our human spirit. But God knows that we are not beasts of burden, agricultural implements, or rented slaves; we are men.”³²

In Memphis, the flyer announcing a “March for Justice and Jobs” reflected the philosophy of Gandhian nonviolence that marked the careers of both King and Chavez. “This will be a march of dignity,” King stated, adding, “the only force we will use is soul-force which is peaceful, loving, courageous, yet militant.”³³ On March 28, King marched with the sanitation workers and their supporters. Provocateurs began to break windows and police moved into the crowd with nightsticks, mace, tear gas, and gunfire. Police arrested two hundred and eighty people and sixty were injured. Police shot 16-year-old Larry Payne to death. As supporters whisked King away from the mayhem, he must have wondered how a mass mobilization in Washington, D.C. could possibly succeed if he could not avoid violence in Memphis. He considered starting a fast as Gandhi and Cesar Chavez had done (Fig. 3).³⁴

³¹ Full speech available at AFSCME Memphis Sanitation Strike, March 18, 1968, <http://www.afscme.org/about/1550.cfm>. See also the AFSCME-produced short film “I Am A Man: Dr. King & the Memphis Sanitation Strike”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBDgH435oaU&feature=related>

³² Cesar Chavez, “Letter from Delano” (Good Friday 1969), <http://farmworkermovement.org/essays/> (accessed March 31, 2009).

³³ Douglas Perry, “Court Documents Related to MLK, Jr and Memphis Sanitation Workers,” ERIC # ED462357 (Washington, D.C., National Archives and Records Administration, 2000), <http://www.eric.ed.gov:80> (accessed April 4, 2009).

³⁴ Nick Kotz, *Judgment Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 403; Stewart Burns, *To the Mountaintop: Martin Luther King Jr.’s Mission to Save America 1955-1968* (San Francisco: Harper, 2004), 430.



Fig. 3: MLK and Ralph Abernathy in Memphis, 1968

On March 31, Cesar Chavez celebrated his 41st birthday in California. Dr. King, speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., reiterated his opposition to the war in Vietnam and announced the final plans for the Poor People's Campaign. "We are coming to ask America to be true to the huge promissory note that it signed years ago. And we are coming to engage in dramatic nonviolent action, to call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment; to make the invisible visible," he stated during the speech. In Vietnam, the month ended with 1,764 U.S. and thousands of Vietnamese fatalities. At the conclusion of a nationally televised address on the war, President Johnson made the unexpected announcement that he would withdraw from the presidential race because "There is division in the American house now. There is divisiveness among us all tonight. And holding the trust that is mine, as President of all the people, I cannot disregard the peril to the progress of the American people....So, I would ask all Americans, whatever their personal interests or concern, to guard against divisiveness and all its ugly consequences."³⁵

Thus March '68 ended with Chavez weakened by his prolonged fast, King increasingly overtaxed and exhausted, continuing violence in Southeast Asia, and the downfall of a President. The potential for a powerful coalition led by Cesar and Martin, the pre-eminent representatives of their respective communities was never realized. We can only imagine what they might have

³⁵ *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1968-69*, Volume I, entry 170, pp. 469-476. Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1970. The speech can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-FibDxpkb0> (accessed March 31, 2009)

accomplished together. What is clear is that in March '68 both men were navigating the same treacherous waters of race and class, poverty and war, multi-racial coalitions and narrow ethnic nationalisms in the fragile vessel of militant nonviolence. Forty years later, how can we best understand the Chavez-King relationship?

As we totalize the complex moment of March '68 in order to better understand its conditions of possibility, it becomes clear that this month was not composed of linear structures in which one leader passively followed the example of the other but rather that both men independently selected specific tactics would be potentially useful to their cause. Chavez had been struck by the use of the boycott by civil rights activists in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But as one of Chavez's closest advisors explained in an interview, "The last thing that Cesar wanted was to be considered a farm worker version of a Martin Luther King, Jr."³⁶ As the two telegrams sent by King to Chavez suggest, King recognized the logical affinities between the two movements although he had only a superficial knowledge of the conditions faced by California farm workers. In short, the militant and nonviolent tactics of both leaders resulted from a shared historical context and mutual influences, not because one leader copied the other.

The misconception among some historians that Chavez's actions simply imitated those of Dr. King, especially with regard to the religious practices and iconography that framed Chavez's actions, betrays an ignorance of the genealogy of Mexican and Mexican American insurgencies. In particular, the use of the fast, the pilgrimage, and the Catholic mass as tools for mobilizing communities is relatively commonplace in the history of Latin American social movements. Moreover, as Dr. King's second message noted, Chavez operated fully within a second tradition – the militant pacifism inspired by Gandhi – from which King too had found inspiration. In effect, both men were linked through agendas that reflected corresponding social critiques and practical goals within a context of analogous conditions, especially racialized communities, second-class citizenship, and the exploitation of labor.

The farm worker and the Memphis sanitation worker mobilizations foregrounded labor struggles even as they negated U.S. capitalism's denial of the worker's basic humanity. The "I Am a Man" slogan captured the essence of not only the struggle for racial equality but also for humane working conditions. As Andrew Young remarked years later, "The civil rights movement up until 1968 anyway, was really a middle-class movement...Cesar Chavez and George Wiley had poor people's movements."³⁷ The farm worker campaign mobilized workers around the demand for decent working conditions and an implicit rejection of anti-Mexican racism in the Southwest; the Memphis strike opposed both the exploitation of labor and racism in the South. In both cases, it was the paradoxical combination of militant pacifism and the violent reaction of state authorities that led to aggrieved and racialized groups in local contexts becoming part of a serial chain of disparate social movements today known as the Sixties.

On that stormy evening of April 3, the night before he died, Dr. King had told a standing-room only crowd in Memphis "The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?'... 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That's the question." As the speech that would become known as the "I've been to the mountaintop" address

³⁶ LeRoy Chatfield, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, "Cesar Chavez and His Farmworker Movement," Interview with Professor Paul Henggeler, Question 7.

³⁷ Quoted in Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 184.

rose to a crescendo, he warned, “the nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around....It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it’s nonviolence or nonexistence.” The next day, King spent the morning in meetings with his staff and a group of young black activists who questioned the effectiveness of nonviolence, placed a call to his mother, phoned in the title of his upcoming sermon to his staff in Atlanta, took a short nap, and around six o’clock stepped out on the balcony of his motel on his way to have dinner with friends. Towards the end of the CBS evening news broadcast, Walter Cronkite announced that King had been murdered. In California, Cesar Chavez was scheduled to speak at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Sacramento. Chavez later told an interviewer, “Martin Luther King definitely influenced me, and much more after his death. The spirit doesn’t die, the ideas remain.” The title of Dr. King’s undelivered sermon was “Why America May Go to Hell.”³⁸

It is not at all clear what a King-Chavez alliance might have produced. It would be utopian to believe that a SCLC-UFW coalition, assuming it had survived government disruption of the Poor People’s Campaign, could have swelled the ranks of a nation-wide mobilization led by two charismatic followers of Gandhian nonviolence. After all, black and Chicano youth were beginning to move towards a confrontational form of ethnic nationalism more associated with the early Malcolm X. As Stokely Carmichael famously said after the murder of Dr. King, “White America just killed nonviolence.”³⁹ In March of 1969, Mexican American youth from across the Southwest met in Denver to declare the principles of the new Chicano Movement while the Puerto Rican Young Lords and the Black Panther Party slowly increased their membership rolls. Add to this shift away from what was perceived as ineffectual pacificism, the intensification of law enforcement operations aimed at disrupting progressive groups, and the election of Richard Nixon on a “law and order” platform and one begins to sense that a King-Chavez partnership would have been lost in a storm of centrifugal interests and organizations. By the mid-1970s, as we are just now learning, serious internal dissension produced by changes in Chavez’s leadership style would weaken the United Farm Workers.⁴⁰ The dream of a unified black/brown liberation movement spanning the entire nation and launching a strong critique of the economic order was (is?) probably always only a dream.

President Johnson had spent April 4, 1968, at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City with his daughter Luci and the 5,000 people who had gathered for the installation of Terence Cooke as archbishop of New York. Later that evening in the White House, he learned of King’s murder and hurriedly prepared an address to the nation. “America is shocked and saddened by the brutal slaying tonight of Dr. Martin Luther King,” he said. “I ask every citizen to reject the blind violence that has struck Dr. King, who lived by nonviolence.” The following day in a meeting with civil rights leaders, Johnson said, “If I were a kid in Harlem, I know what I’d be thinking right now: I’d be

³⁸ King in Washington, ed., 285, 280; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 759-766; Burns, *To the Mountaintop*, 447; Levy, *Cesar Chavez*, 289. The CBS Evening News broadcast of April 4, 1968 can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmOBbxgxKvo> (accessed April 4, 2009).

³⁹ Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribners, 2003), 658.

⁴⁰ Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 21st Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Frank Bardacke, “Cesar’s Ghost: Decline and Fall of the U.F.W.,” *The Nation* (January 21, 2006), <http://www.thenation.com/doc/19930726/bardacke> (accessed March 31, 2009).

thinking that the whites have declared open season on my people, and they're going to pick us off one by one unless I get a gun and pick them off first."⁴¹

In Indianapolis on the campaign trail, Bobby Kennedy announced King's death and told the mostly African American audience, "We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we've had difficult times in the past; we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder."⁴² Within days, rioting had broken out across the country and National Guard troops patrolled the streets around the White House. Less than two months later, the nation would learn that this moment indeed was "not the end of violence" when gunmen assassinated Kennedy in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

On April 8 in Memphis, Coretta Scott King joined marchers in the demonstration that Dr. King had hoped to lead. Among the participants was a delegation from the United Farm Workers union that included Dolores Huerta, Frances Ryan, and other volunteers from the New York City UFW boycott committee. Ryan recalled,

I had been following Martin Luther King's recent actions closely because he was helping another union, that of the sanitation workers, in Memphis. Just before a big planned sanitation workers march, King was killed. The New York Labor Council paid for a charter plane to send supporters to the march that King was supposed to have led. So our New York farm workers' group flew to Memphis and were well received that evening at several African-American churches, where we talked about the UFW organizing efforts to standing room-only crowds. On the big day of the march, we joined the other thousands on the streets. It was truly intimidating to march past the oversized armored personnel carriers that were strung along the route. Nearby, the National Guardsmen looked young and scared. Once again, when I needed it, Dolores Huerta boosted my spirits. She had brought along an oversized "Huelga" flag and enlisted us in helping to keep it unfurled so it would make a good TV shot.⁴³

On April 9, King was buried in Atlanta. Among those in attendance were Reies López Tijerina, Corky Gonzales, Stokely Carmichael, Bobby Kennedy, Richard Nixon, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey. After the post-funeral procession arrived at Morehouse College, its president Benjamin Mays said of King, "He would probably say that, if death had to come, I'm sure there was no greater cause to die for than fighting to get a just wage for garbage collectors."⁴⁴ The April 15 issue of the United Farm Worker's newspaper, *El Malcriado*, showed a drawing of Dr. King in front of the Memphis sanitation workers with their "I Am a Man" signs and the caption "Killed helping workers to organize" (Fig. 4).

⁴¹ Clay Risen, *A Nation on Fire: America in the Wake of the King Assassination* (New York: Wiley, 2009), 89. See also Risen, "The Unmaking of the President," *Smithsonian Magazine* (April 2008), <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/president-lbj.html> (accessed April 4, 2009).

⁴² Kennedy's remarks to the stunned crowd can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyCWV_N0EsM (accessed April 4, 2009).

⁴³ Farm Worker Documentation Project, Frances Ryan, <http://www.farmworkermovement.org/essays/> (accessed March 31, 2009).

⁴⁴ Risen, *A Nation on Fire*, 212.



El Malcriado

THE VOICE OF THE FARM WORKER

10¢

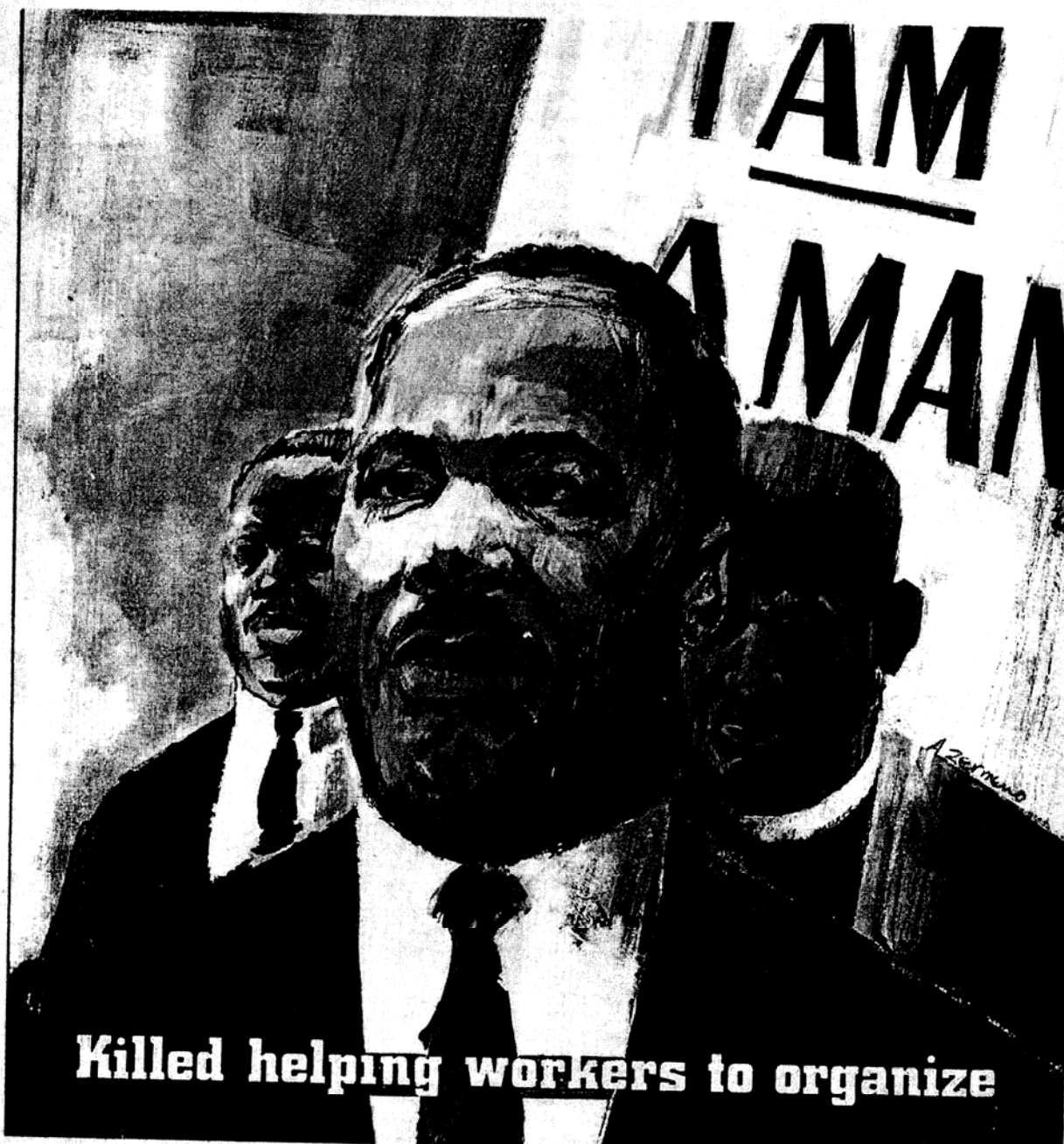
IN ENGLISH

Monday, April 15, 1968

Delano, California



Volume I, No. 4



Killed helping workers to organize

Fig. 4: UFW newspaper “El Malcriado,” April 15, 1968

Inside the paper was the text of King’s 1963 “I have a dream” speech, the 1968 telegram King sent to Chavez, and the telegram Chavez sent to Coretta Scott King after Dr. King’s assassination. “We owe so much to Dr. Martin Luther King that words alone cannot express our gratefulness,” Chavez wrote, “his non-violence was that of action – not that of one contemplating action.”⁴⁵ In the article entitled “Who killed King,” the author argued that it was not a lone madman who had acted alone but an agent of American racism writ large. “He acted for every member of Congress who ever allowed this nation to withhold the natural rights of a man because he was poor or black or brown. He acted for every employer who ever drew a penny of profit by exploiting the group differences between men,” the author stated.⁴⁶ Chavez, still weakened from his fast and suffering various physical ailments even as he attended to the daily details of managing a labor strike, would not travel to Atlanta for King’s funeral or to Washington, D.C., for the Poor People’s Campaign despite several entreaties from Ralph Abernathy and others.⁴⁷

On June 4, the California presidential primary began to shape up as a decisive battle in the struggle for the Democratic Party nomination. Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy both competed for the antiwar vote against Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Before his death, King had not made a public endorsement but Chavez and the farm workers called a temporary halt to all strike activities and began to mobilize on behalf of Kennedy. Kennedy advisor Frank Mankiewicz was amazed by the intensity and the effectiveness of the union’s get out the vote drive. “Our turnout was tremendous,” he noted, “we were getting 90-95 percent turnouts. And in some of the Mexican areas we had 100 percent turnout by 4 or 5 o’clock in the afternoon. I mean Chavez’ guys went around to precincts to say, ‘Cesar Chavez says today’s the day to vote for Robert Kennedy,’ that was the line. And by 4 and 5 o’clock in the afternoon they were phoning back in and saying we had 100 percent turnout. I couldn’t believe it!”⁴⁸

In reality, it was not that Chavez dictated to Mexican American voters but that the union enjoyed tremendous support in the barrios. Chavez himself remembers the effort this way: “We used to say, ‘I’m from Delano with the farm workers.’ ‘Oh, the farm workers!’ Just like that. ‘Yes,’ in Spanish. And we’d say, ‘We’re going to ask you to work for Kennedy,’ ‘Oh, wonderful. Sure. Sure.’”⁴⁹ As the results poured in, Kennedy chided civil rights activist John Lewis, telling him “You let me down today. More Mexican Americans voted for me than Negroes.” By midnight it was clear that Kennedy had narrowly won the primary with 46% to Eugene McCarthy’s 42%. From the podium in the Embassy ballroom at the Ambassador Hotel, he thanked “Cesar Chavez and Bert Corona...and Dolores Huerta who is an old friend of mine.”⁵⁰ As he moved off the stage on his way to a press conference, Kennedy was shot three times at close range. He died the following day.

⁴⁵ *El Malcriado*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (April 15, 1968), 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁷ Mantler, “Black, Brown, and Poor,” 183.

⁴⁸ Frank Mankiewicz Oral History Interview – RFK #9, December 16, 1969 ; <http://www.jfklibrary.org/>

⁴⁹ Oral History Interview with Cesar Chavez (with Dennis J. O’Brien), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Part II, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history

⁵⁰ John Lewis and Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 415. Kennedy’s final speech on June 5, 1968 can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXuHcQ1Mrqs&feature> (accessed June 5, 2009).

Too exhausted to stay for the victory celebration, Chavez had hitched a ride to his lodgings with Father John Luce, an Episcopalian priest with deep ties to the Chicano community. At a brief stop at Assemblyman Richard Calderon's election headquarters, they learned of the shooting.⁵¹ During the CBS coverage, reporter Mike Wallace reflected on the murders of Malcolm X, John Kennedy, Dr. King, and Bobby Kennedy. He posed the stunning question "What kind of curious strain of violence is there in the American people?" For the Chicano community, the words written by attorney and novelist Oscar Zeta Acosta captured the moment: "We drive and listen to the live broadcast from the Ambassador Hotel. The reports make it pretty clear that Kennedy has only a few hours of life left....I drive in the darkness and I know, I can feel it in my bones, that the ante has been upped."⁵² Senator Kennedy would survive some twenty-four hours longer, bullet fragments dispersed throughout his brain. He was declared dead at 1:44 a.m. on June 6th. That evening in the California grape fields near Delano, farm workers attended a mass in his honor.

⁵¹ Oral History Interview with Cesar Chavez (with Dennis J. O'Brien), Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program of the Kennedy Library, The Farm Worker Documentation Project, Part II, http://farmworkermovement.org/media/oral_history (accessed March 31, 2009).

⁵² Mike Wallace televised comments on June 5, 1968 can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qu3t3QosGFI&feature=related> (accessed June 5, 2009); Oscar Zeta Acosta, *Revolt of the Cockroach People* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 64.

Author's Note: On the morning of March 5, 1968, the author accompanied his parents, Ralph and Irene Mariscal, to the Greyhound bus station in Long Beach, California. That afternoon he was inducted into the U.S. Army and transported to Fort Ord, California, for basic training. He spent 1969 in South Vietnam.