Robert F. Kennedy and the Farmworkers:
The Formation of Robert F. Kennedy and Cesar Chavez’s Bond

By

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Introduction: Chavez and Kennedy an Unconventional Friendship

At a passing glance it would be difficult to find two people who had less in common.

Robert F. Kennedy’s father was Joseph P. Kennedy, one of the wealthiest Americans of his time.¹ Robert Kennedy attended the most elite New England boarding schools, Harvard University, and the University of Virginia Law School.² As an adult, Robert Kennedy successfully ran his brother’s Senate and Presidential campaigns and was the Attorney General of the United States before becoming a U.S. Senator from New York.³ He was a man who had grown up with power and had the mantle of power himself. Robert Kennedy spent his entire life in urban centers—Boston, New York City, and Washington, D.C.⁴ Furthermore, none of the places that he lived, nor the circles that he travelled in, had a farm worker constituency or even a Latino constituency, aside from the Puerto Rican section of New York, a far cry from the farm workers of Delano, California.⁵

Cesar Chavez on the other hand, grew up in a farm worker family.⁶ By the time he was 15, and in 8th grade, he had dropped out of school because with four brothers and sisters, and a father who was injured on the job with no worker’s compensation, Chavez needed to provide for

¹ Kerry Kennedy, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, New York, NY, April 2, 2017.
³ “Robert F. Kennedy.”
⁴ Kerry Kennedy, interview.
⁵ Kerry Kennedy, interview.
his family.\textsuperscript{7} Chavez went on to work for the Community Services Organization (CSO) where he learned community organizing and was charged with working on voter registration for Latinos, among other issues.\textsuperscript{8} When Chavez and his colleague from the CSO Dolores Huerta decided to resign from their jobs and form a union for farm workers— the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA)— Chavez moved his family out of their middle-class life to a life of abject poverty and unremitting labor in Delano, California.\textsuperscript{9} Chavez knew organizing farm workers would entail sacrifice, not only for him but for his family. While he was on the road, many days, sometimes weeks at a time, his wife Helen cared for their eight young children alone, and after getting them out to school in the morning, went out to work the fields herself, as the only form of income for the family.\textsuperscript{10} This is a far cry from Robert Kennedy’s life where he lived with his wife, Ethel, and their growing brood which would become 11 in a thirteen-bedroom home outside Washington D.C., brimming with chandeliers, sterling silver, and a household full of help.\textsuperscript{11}

Despite their differences, the two men shared much in common. They had both grown up in sprawling Catholic families.\textsuperscript{12} For each of them their faith was not only their source of

\textsuperscript{7} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{8} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”


\textsuperscript{10} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 83.

\textsuperscript{11} Kerry Kennedy, interview.

\textsuperscript{12} Kerry Kennedy, interview.; Paul Chavez, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, March 30, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island.
strength, it also informed their social justice agenda.\textsuperscript{13} They were both men of few words and were painfully shy, hardly natural leaders of a movement, and yet, people were drawn to them, drawn to their compassion, their determination to seek justice, their unwavering courage in the face of oppression, their basic human decency, and their poetry as men.\textsuperscript{14} Both Kennedy and Chavez shared the wisdom forged from unremitting, agonizing, pain and they saw in one another a brotherhood and in their mutual quest for justice they recognized in one another shared souls.

The arguments against Robert Kennedy taking on the work of the farm workers were abundant and crystal-clear. As a senator from New York, it seemed absurd to take on an issue occurring on the opposite coast of the country.\textsuperscript{15} Growers in California, who were aggressively fighting the NFWA, exerted significant political power and were major Democratic Party donors.\textsuperscript{16} No other politicians, including those who were pro-labor and even friends of Chavez, had sided with the farm workers in fear of the political repercussions of crossing the growers.\textsuperscript{17} Additionally, the farm workers, and Latinos more broadly, did not vote in large numbers.\textsuperscript{18} In that Kennedy was likely considering running for president, and California was a key state in securing the Democratic nomination, crossing the growers seemed like political self-sabotage.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{13} Kerry Kennedy, interview.; Paul Chavez, interview.
\textsuperscript{14} Arthur Schlesinger, \textit{Robert Kennedy and His Times} (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1972), 792.
\textsuperscript{15} Marc Grossman, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, March 23, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island.
\textsuperscript{16}Marc Grossman, interview.
\textsuperscript{17} Marc Grossman, interview.
\textsuperscript{18} Marc Grossman, interview.
\textsuperscript{19} Marc Grossman, interview.
The bond, which was intrinsic to their nature, was immediate, iron-clad, and would last the rest of their lives. And yet, once Kennedy had visited Delano, witnessed the deprivation, confronted both the growers and the corruption of the criminal justice system, and met Cesar Chavez, there was nothing he wouldn't do in order to advance “La Causa.” Upon returning to Washington, Kennedy directed his staff to keep in close touch with Chavez and the senator never denied a request from the National Farm Workers Association (which in 1966, became the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, commonly known as the UFW.)

In Delano, farm workers were growing impatient with the slow lack of change and many talking about resorting to violence. In response, Chavez started to fast in penance for the anger and the advocacy of violence among his people and as a personal sacrifice in that he felt that he had failed as a leader. Chavez’s inner circle became deeply concerned about his health and turned to Kennedy, asking the senator to break bread with Chavez to help end the fast.

Kennedy, deeply moved by Chavez’s commitment, flew to Delano to break bread with Chavez at a mass. Six days later, Kennedy announced his campaign for President of the United States and in response Chavez and the UFW took the extraordinary step of suspending their


21 Marc Grossman, interview.

22 Paul Chavez, interview.


24 Peter Edelman, interview.
union efforts in order to assure victory in the crucial state of California.\textsuperscript{25} Chavez left his family and home for 19 days in a row to organize Latinos across the state on behalf of Kennedy.\textsuperscript{26} Their bond reached far beyond any mere political expediency, or even that of allies in a mutual fight. They were men who found in one another a reflection of the very best in themselves.

\textbf{Historiography}

Much has been written on Robert F. Kennedy and Cesar Chavez. However, little has been written solely devoted to the topic of the work Chavez and Kennedy did together and even less has been written about their relationship. This is due to the lack of public knowledge around the work they did together, the limited time they had to work together, and that there were few tangible outcomes of the work they did together. Writing on Chavez and Kennedy’s collaborations has largely been written about from lenses that are focused on one of the two people. Authors writing about Cesar Chavez write about the work Robert F. Kennedy did for the farm workers, and explain how Kennedy’s work contributed to the farm worker movement. In portraying Kennedy’s contribution to the movement, these authors isolate his actions, and in neglecting to connect them, they do not develop an understanding of Kennedy’s relationship to the farm workers, nor do they study Chavez and Kennedy’s relationship with any depth. Writing focused on Robert F. Kennedy tends to touch upon his work with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers but does not go into great detail on the topic. These pieces mainly focus on the Senate hearings of 1966 in which Kennedy participated and Kennedy’s presidential campaign of 1968, \textsuperscript{25} “UFW Chronology,” United Farm Workers, http://ufw.org/_page.php?menu=research&inc=_page.php?menu=research&inc=history/01.html

and place Kennedy’s work with Cesar Chavez as a bullet point within a larger argument. Both types of literature do not fully explore Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship, nor do they look into their work together as a unique topic in and of itself.

The study of Kennedy and Chavez’s work together as a unique topic has been explored in the book *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity*, by Steven Bender. The first third of *One Night in America* summarizes the work Kennedy and Chavez did together through exploring key events, but does not include many details within each of the events. Bender focuses on defining Kennedy and Chavez’s goals and how they are unrealized today, citing various political issues during the second two thirds of the novel. The book does not present a new in-depth analysis of their relationship or its formation, but rather, focuses on how their lessons are applicable to relevant issues today.

Within the realm of secondary sources, a few arguments are made and repeated about Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship. Historians have pointed out that their working together was unique in that they came from different backgrounds, assert that they both made strong impressions on one another, and argue that it was characteristic of Kennedy to take on the cause of an oppressed people, and uncharacteristic of Chavez to trust a politician as he did Kennedy. These authors point out that the two men were similar in that Kennedy and Chavez were both committed to the idea of pursuing social justice issues. The argument which I lay out differs from these assertions in that it approaches the question of how they developed a unique relationship, and what the nature of that relationship was—that of mutual trust and understanding. This argument was made possible through the pursuit of new research, most importantly in the form of doing oral histories.
Research Plan and Methodology

The research plan I devised began with reading and analyzing secondary sources on Cesar Chavez and Robert F. Kennedy so as to understand the two as individuals. I read secondary literature on the history and rise of the farm worker movement, to garner a better understanding of what was at stake in the 1960’s. I then did more focused secondary research on the work Chavez and Kennedy did together and about their relationship so as to provide a foundation for understanding the topic matter and relevant arguments. I then delved into farm worker and Robert F. Kennedy archives to retrieve and analyze new information in an effort to add detail and fill remaining informational gaps. Lastly, I conducted oral histories in order to find answers to my more specific questions and gain new insights pertaining to the topic—the relationship between Robert Kennedy and Cesar Chavez.

I read a range of biographies on Kennedy and Chavez by both authors who portrayed the men in positive lights—depicting them as saintly figures—and by those who portrayed them in negative lights—representing them as power-hungry, opportunistic individuals. I read both viewpoints in order to grasp the range of arguments made about the two men. Throughout this research, I was particularly focused on looking closely at the work they did together, and how this fit in with the broader argument the author was making. I read more contemporary secondary sources covering the work Kennedy and Chavez did together, which was mostly available in the form of brief articles. Like other secondary sources, the majority of these articles were focused on one of the two individuals, and therefore did not reveal a great deal about the development of their relationship over time.
After completing my secondary research, I had formed an outline for a background section of the thesis, had an understanding of what the work Kennedy and Chavez did together meant to each side of the relationship, and most importantly, had identified specific events and aspects pertinent to the topic which I wanted to explore in greater depth. These events included the Senate hearings of 1966, the issues which arose following the Senate hearings which Kennedy and Chavez worked on together, the Mass of Thanksgiving of 1968, and Robert Kennedy’s presidential campaign of 1968. In this way, I provided myself with a strong foundation for delving deeper into specific aspects.

I read newspaper articles which reported on the events in an effort to ascertain more information on each event. However, I found that these articles were limited in number and provided relatively little information. At the time of the events, the farm worker movement was not as well-known, nor was its leader, Cesar Chavez.\textsuperscript{27} There was limited reporting by major publications on the topic, and when there was, the articles were mostly focused on the legislative work at hand and the political implications of the events, and not on the work of the farm workers or Chavez. These articles provided a greater understanding of public opinion on the events, and were indicative of the relative lack of awareness about the work Kennedy and Chavez did together. Other newspaper articles revealed the farm worker movement’s specific stakeholder groups and their differing viewpoints. Most outlets which reported on the events were Southern right-wing publications, which depicted the farm workers as a possibly-Communist group. On the opposite side were farm worker movement publications, namely El

\textsuperscript{27} Marc Grossman, interview.
Macriendo, which focused on reporting the positive impact Kennedy had on the farm worker movement in relation to the topic I was researching.

In order to learn about the development of the relationship between Robert F. Kennedy and Cesar Chavez, I had to do primary source research, as the topic was not explored in great depth within secondary sources. Additionally, information on the key events and aspects pertaining to this topic in secondary sources was limited, and therefore required primary source research. For archival research for the farm worker movement, I utilized the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project website presented by UC San Diego Library. This site includes extensive documents from participants of the UFW movement which were digitized by former UFW volunteer LeRoy Chattfield. For archival research on Robert F. Kennedy, I did research in the collections relating to Robert F. Kennedy (including the Pre-Administration Papers, the Senate Papers, the Attorney General Papers, and the Presidential Campaign Papers) at the John F. Kennedy Library. The majority of archival information from the John F. Kennedy library was not online and therefore required trips to Boston, however some relevant oral histories were available online. I thought it would be crucial to look into both archives, as they would provide insights from both sides of the events and aspects I was researching, as well as the broader topic of Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship.

Within the Farmworker Movement Documentation Project, I looked at documents pertaining to Robert F. Kennedy in order to analyze information on the broad range of work he did with the farm workers. Additionally, I looked at documents which provided background on

the specific events which I had defined as most important to the thesis. Most of the materials which were available on these topics were essays by UFW leadership and volunteers who had direct involvement in the events, as well as articles from farm worker publications which reported on the events. From these materials, I was able to derive a more complete understanding of the events, the specific actions of both Kennedy and Chavez, the sentiment around their collaboration, and impact of the work they did together.

The UFW leadership and volunteers’ essays offered viewpoints on Kennedy’s impact on the farm worker movement and provided new details on the events. The essays by UFW leadership—people who were close to Chavez—offered new insights into how Kennedy was perceived by farm workers, the union, and by Chavez himself. These sources expressed how Chavez saw Kennedy explicitly, and traced how Chavez and Kennedy’s teams formed a strong working relationship. This was particularly useful in garnering a better understanding of their relationship and how it developed over time.

Chavez’s own speeches, interviews, and writing on the events were important sources to use in order to understand how Chavez thought about Kennedy and the events. However, the most vital sources on these topic are the oral histories of Cesar Chavez. Within these interviews, Chavez discusses work done with Kennedy and his attitude towards Kennedy. This was extremely crucial to my thesis.

Within the John F. Kennedy Library archives, I looked for all materials relevant to Robert F. Kennedy’s work with Cesar Chavez and the farm workers. While this material was relatively limited, I found sources on the specific events I had identified as crucial which helped to fill informational gaps. Memos prepared before the events provided greater detail on the events and
allowed me to better understand Kennedy and his team’s perception of the events, the farm workers, and of Chavez.

Most of the information pertaining to the farm workers within the John F. Kennedy library was about farm worker legislation. These documents included extensive research reports on farm workers (as it pertained to legislation) and correspondence regarding farm worker legislation. Additionally, there are legislative documents outlining bills, the bills themselves, and speeches delivered by Kennedy in front of the Senate where he spoke on behalf of farm workers, and challenged those who were opponents of the legislation. The quantity of legislation-focused information and speeches delivered by Kennedy denoted the nature of Kennedy’s work for the farm workers, and his focus on passing legislation.

News reports on farm worker events and letters from people to Kennedy regarding his work with the farm workers (mostly expressing gratitude for his work with the farm workers from farm worker-aligned groups) are included in the archives. These helped me to understand how Kennedy and his team perceived public opinion around the events and farm worker efforts.

I read correspondence between the Kennedy and Chavez teams, in order to garner a better understanding of the working relationship which formed and developed after the Senate hearings—a topic that is rarely, and possibly never, touched upon with depth within secondary literature. From this correspondence I was able to learn the topics which Kennedy and Chavez worked on together, and the kind of working relationship that developed.

The archives included Kennedy’s speeches and correspondence regarding the farm workers and Cesar Chavez. I read the speeches he delivered about the farm workers and Cesar Chavez, and analyzed the messages he aimed to portray. Kennedy’s correspondence about the
events, his work with Chavez, and his admiration for Chavez were key in indicating how their trust and relationship was developing. It was interesting to find that the public and personal sentiments Kennedy expressed about Chavez were largely in tune with one another.

Some of the most interesting and revealing sources in the archives were oral histories of Kennedy team personnel. These people were very close to Kennedy, and were often crucial members of the with Chavez-Kennedy partnership. These oral histories added color to the events and offered new perspectives on Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship. The oral histories included new interpretations of how Kennedy felt about the events, Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship at the events, and Kennedy’s attitude towards Chavez. The oral histories also revealed the sentiment within the Kennedy team in relation to work with Chavez. Some Kennedy personnel disagreed with Kennedy’s emphasis on working with Chavez. Specifically, in Frank Burns’ description of confronting Kennedy about his focus on Chavez during the presidential campaign of 1968, new aspects of Kennedy’s feelings towards Chavez and the farm workers were exposed.

Oral histories are a great source to learn about history in that they capture new insights which are not available within other sources. I have found that oral histories are incredible sources to use when writing history, in that interviews allow for people to formulate their own theories and voice their own opinions on a given topic, thus distilling vast amounts of information and pointing to new conclusions. In this way, people can pinpoint the most relevant examples to bolster the point they are making. In looking at how arguments amongst oral histories differ and intersect, one can develop a greater understanding of the topic at large. Additionally, oral histories often reveal new stories which have been overlooked by previous historians. Through looking at oral histories within both the Farm Worker Movement
Documentation Project and John F. Kennedy Library archives, I have been able to garner an understanding of how each side viewed the work that was being done by Kennedy and Chavez, and form a comprehensive story about the relationship between Robert Kennedy and Cesar Chavez.

**Oral Histories**

In addition, I embarked on conducting my own oral history project, which allowed me to probe more deeply into the relationship between Chavez and Kennedy. I found it moving to try to learn about the past through the eyes of participants. It was a crucial way to learn in that what was revealed in these interviews were not always captured elsewhere. The oral histories grounded the specific events I was researching in individuals who defined which aspects of the events were most important, and therefore provided new information which truly reshaped and reformed the thesis. I asked specific questions in order to fill gaps within the historical record, which was also critical. I asked people what they thought Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship was like, and their answers provided a plethora of new and important insights. Finally, I proposed my own arguments about Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship, and invited their feedback. Their comments and suggestions were critical to the thesis’s development. In this way, oral histories allowed me to learn far more than any other source.

I conducted oral histories with a variety of people who took part in the Kennedy-Chavez partnership. I interviewed Ethel Kennedy, and discovered that when Robert Kennedy learned about the end of Chavez’s fast, he ran straight up from the Hickory Hill swimming pool to drive to Dulles Airport and board a plane to Delano. I interviewed Robert Kennedy’s close colleague Peter Edelman, who spoke about how Robert Kennedy felt about the farm workers, and how this
caused Kennedy to sideline his own political considerations in order to work on their behalf. I interviewed United Auto Workers western director Paul Schrade, who was a farm worker advocate and friend of Kennedy. In his interview, Schrade asserted that Kennedy’s embrace of the farm workers was driven by his instincts to protect the oppressed, and that his overt expressions of allegiance with the farm workers were unprecedented and politically dangerous at the time. Schrade recounted details about specific stories including watching Kennedy join a picket line in Delano. I interviewed Dolores Huerta, who spoke about how Chavez and she came to trust Kennedy, and told a new story: when farm workers were blocked by Delano police from marching to Sacramento after the Senate hearings, Kennedy forced them to back down by threatening the police with a lawsuit. I interviewed Cesar Chavez’s son, Paul Chavez, who recounted how his father expressed that he felt that Kennedy and he were similar. I spoke to Marshall Ganz who worked for the UFW from 1965 to 1981. Ganz told me how UFW personnel and Chavez felt about Kennedy, and told the story of an all-night meeting amongst UFW leadership where they discussed whether they would endorse Kennedy’s presidential bid,

29 Peter Edelman, interview.

30 Paul Schrade, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, March 27, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island.

31 Paul Schrade, interview.


33 Paul Chavez, interview.

34 Marshall Ganz, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, April 1, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island.
which ended in an unprecedented unanimous resolution in favor.\textsuperscript{35} I spoke to Cesar Chavez’s speechwriter and personal aide, Marc Grossman, who asserted that the greatest impact of the Senate hearings in 1966 was not the impact it had on legislation, but that it provided the foundation for Kennedy’s relationship with Chavez and the farm workers.\textsuperscript{36}

I found it extremely meaningful to add new information to the historical record through conducting oral histories with these incredible historical figures. Through analyzing the work of other historians, one is able to identify gaps in the historical record, and form new questions with the aim to fill those holes. In asking eyewitnesses questions and recording their answers, I was able to discover new information. I was excited to hear new stories which allowed me to contribute to and further develop the history of Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship. I now have a better understanding of the collaborative nature of history—that the work of previous historians allows for the next generation to continue to build and discover, and that this continuous process allows for an ever-growing and ever-improving history.

\textsuperscript{35} Marshall Ganz, interview.

\textsuperscript{36} Marc Grossman, interview.
Chapter One

Robert F. Kennedy and the Farm Workers Background

When Robert F. Kennedy ran for president in 1968 he argued for an ideal that people could identify with—compassion. He believed that compassion could transcend the boundaries that were causing hatred and division in the 1960’s. As Attorney General from 1961 to 1964, he fought organized crime and worked for civil rights for minority groups and particularly for African Americans.\(^\text{37}\) As U.S. Senator from New York from 1965 to 1968, he focused on working on defending the rights of the poor and minority groups—including the farm workers.\(^\text{38}\)

Kennedy had been an advocate for civil rights issues, working on behalf of African Americans as early as law school, when he invited the first African-American Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Ralph Bunche, to speak at the University of Virginia.\(^\text{39}\) As Attorney General his leadership was crucial to the movement, and he assisted in drafting the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and contributed to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.\(^\text{40}\) As Senator from New York, Kennedy advocated for the marginalized and dispossessed.\(^\text{41}\) 1968 brought him new challenges and opportunities to strengthen his role as a champion of rights and for greater understanding. He would include a description of impoverished black children in speeches going forward, making

\(^{37}\) “Robert F. Kennedy.”

\(^{38}\) “Robert F. Kennedy.”


\(^{40}\) Christopher Richardson and Ralph Luker, Historical Dictionary of the Civil Rights Movement (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 263; Kerry Kennedy, Interview.

\(^{41}\) “Robert F. Kennedy.”
his campaign a tool to educate Americans about the struggles faced by a wide range of groups.\textsuperscript{42} He aimed to explain the feeling of racial injustice inherent within the economy for black people, painting the picture of a young black man witnessing vast wealth in the white neighborhood besides him while he remains impoverished. \textsuperscript{43} His closeness to the systematic racism allowed Robert Kennedy to explain what solutions would truly create change. He argued for private and public industry to fund the creation of jobs in black neighborhoods, and for the increased funding of black schools.\textsuperscript{44} Through these efforts, Kennedy showed that he truly was a champion for the black cause and for gaining equality. Kennedy’s compassion for African Americans made him a uniquely effective leader in their fight for equality. For him, this wasn’t merely political calculation. He helped Coretta Scott King with the transportation of Martin Luther King’s body, he was the only white person not booed at King's funeral, he was the first white person pulled onto the podium at the funeral, and afterwards, when rioting broke out in Washington, he walked through the black neighborhoods— the only white politician of international stature who had the legitimacy to do so.\textsuperscript{45}

Kennedy entered the Presidential race on March 16, 1968 in order to oppose the war in Vietnam and propose new policies. Kennedy entered four days after the New Hampshire primary and against a Democratic incumbent president, President Johnson, as well as the Democratic


\textsuperscript{43} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 146.

\textsuperscript{44} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 141.

\textsuperscript{45} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 134.
Senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy. Kennedy said, “I run because I am convinced that this country is on a perilous course and because I have such strong feelings about what must be done, and I feel that I'm obliged to do all that I can.” He spoke on the need for de-escalation of the war in Vietnam, and on the need for a focus on civil rights issues. In his announcement speech he said, “I run to seek new policies—policies to end the bloodshed in Vietnam and in our cities, policies to close the gaps that now exist between black and white, between rich and poor, between young and old, in this country and around the rest of the world.” He spoke about the struggles of the poor and racial minorities that had been ignored by most other politicians.

Kennedy said, “As a member of the cabinet and member of the Senate I have seen the inexcusable and ugly deprivation which causes children to starve in Mississippi, black citizens to riot in Watts; young Indians to commit suicide on their reservations because they've lacked all hope and they feel they have no future, and proud and able-bodied families to wait out their lives in empty idleness in eastern Kentucky.” During a turbulent time, Kennedy introduced his presidential campaign effort with an appeal for compassion and a focus on civil rights issues.

During his presidential campaign in 1968, Robert F. Kennedy became a leader for many minority groups who often were in opposition to one another. These groups found Kennedy an unlikely leader because of his “wealth and privilege.” These groups included the white working

50 Clarke, The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America, 55.
poor, African Americans, Native Americans, and farm workers. Kennedy represented to these groups a strong fighter for justice and someone who believed deeply in compassion. His regular departure from carefully planned speeches in favor of talking to his audience about the poverty and injustices within the United States, and his focus on American ideals and moral integrity, contributed to creating a successful campaign effort.

Robert F. Kennedy wanted badly to win the election so that he could do the work he had promised he would. He would need to appeal to the white working poor, who were frightened by rioting were threatened by the progress of the civil rights movement. They wanted to maintain segregation. Kennedy had a series of meetings—the first on April 7 at Hickory Hill—aimed to determine how best to reach the white working people, who viewed him as a champion for the rights of black people and therefore inconsistent with their own concerns regarding rioting. His team of consultants advocated for speeches that were not alarmist, but focused on his strength as the former Attorney General. But for Kennedy, his advocacy on behalf of the marginalized was not about political expediency, it was from the heart. Time and again, he frustrated advisors and instead of saying how he would fix the economy, he flipped the discussion on its head, saying that GDP is not what represents America. Kennedy was able to go into neighborhoods where people asked him, “What are you going to do about the violence?” and instead respond to the question, “What are you going to do for black people?”

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than their small question, and was called a revolutionary by many.\textsuperscript{55} He said that the United States was failing its citizens, and that “I think we can do better!”\textsuperscript{56} He spoke of poverty in the nearby black ghettos, and the more distant Native American reservations, and said to them that the American people deserve better.\textsuperscript{57} In this way, Robert F. Kennedy proved that he would be the leader to bring the nation peace, with his grander visions and his drive of compassion. He began to convince the white working poor that he cared for them and their problems of poverty, and connected their own feelings of desolation with those of the black people in the adjoining neighborhood.

Robert F. Kennedy saw the farm workers as a group of neglected citizens, about whom he cared deeply, and he would fight for their cause during his years in the Senate and during his presidential campaign. When he attempted to visit workers on a farm outside Rochester, he was greeted by white farmer wielding a shotgun.\textsuperscript{58} At other farms he witnessed horrific conditions—children living in mobile homes with distended bellies.\textsuperscript{59} He spoke on behalf of farm workers across the country, demanding that the more privileged of this country question what allowing for this kind of injustice to continue means for the United States and for them as citizens. He developed close relations with Cesar Chavez, and shared the Eucharist to break Chavez's water-only fast.\textsuperscript{60} He paid no heed to the outsized influence of corporate agriculture interests and their

\textsuperscript{55} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 109.
\textsuperscript{56} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 46.
\textsuperscript{57} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 145.
\textsuperscript{58} Kerry Kennedy, interview.
\textsuperscript{59} Clarke, \textit{The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America}, 79.
\textsuperscript{60} Marc Grossman, interview.
political clout in the crucial state for his presidential run of California. He continued to preach compassion and live it through his actions. Cesar Chavez would partner with Kennedy on the campaign trail, and push his message of compassion.

The history of California’s rise to become the nation’s leading agricultural producer is a story rife with worker exploitation and racism. California growers, from the beginning of the California agriculture business, saw farm workers as replaceable. In 1869, the completion of the transcontinental railroad allowed, for the first time, for the shipping of crops from California to eastern markets. Seeing the opportunity to become agribusiness giants, railroad barons and industry pioneers purchased vast swaths of land which they converted to farmland. The first major California agriculture growers then hired Chinese laborers who had built the railroad to work the fields as farm workers. Discrimination led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, forcing the Chinese to leave their jobs in the fields. Other discriminative legislation would determine who the Chinese were replaced by—poor white European immigrants, then later Japanese in the early 20th century, and Mexicans, who came to the U.S. to work during the harvest season.

Discrimination and government-grower collusion caused the breakdown of farm worker organization attempts in the early 20th century. In 1903, Japanese and Mexican migrants


62 "United Farm Workers of America.”

63 "United Farm Workers of America.”

64 "United Farm Workers of America.”

65 "United Farm Workers of America.”
associated, forming the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA), and launched strikes against their employers in an effort to raise wages.\(^{66}\) This arose at the same time as other similar unionization efforts in the often-fragmented American labor movement.\(^ {67}\) However, due to discrimination against the minority groups, the American labor movement refused to support the Japanese-Mexican farm workers’ efforts.\(^ {68}\) Unsupported, the farm workers were powerless against the growers, and their efforts failed.\(^ {69}\) By the 1920’s Mexicans made up the majority of agricultural workers in California.\(^ {70}\) In the 1930’s during the Great Depression, when Oklahomans moved in to work the fields alongside the Mexican farm workers, growers pitted the two groups against one another in order to avoid their collusion for better conditions and wages.\(^ {71}\) The California government was closely aligned with growers, and supported growers in thwarting farm worker efforts aimed at achieving unionization—most often strikes.\(^ {72}\)

Leftover Jim Crow laws excluded migrant workers and domestic help from labor protections. When President Roosevelt passed progressive labor legislation in the 1930’s, Southern Dixiecrats didn’t want Blacks to have the same rights as Whites, and threatened to vote against the legislation. As a compromise, Roosevelt excluded farm laborers and domestics from

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\(^ {67}\) "United Farm Workers of America."

\(^ {68}\) "United Farm Workers of America."

\(^ {69}\) "United Farm Workers of America."

\(^ {70}\) "United Farm Workers of America."

\(^ {71}\) "United Farm Workers of America."

\(^ {72}\) "United Farm Workers of America."
the federal protections, including the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) which protects laborers’ right to join unions and bargain collectively and the Fair Labor Standards Act which established the minimum wage and overtime pay.73 Those exceptions stand today.

Growers garnered significant power over farm workers through the institution of the Bracero Program in 1942. During World War II, many farm workers had moved out of the fields, taken jobs in factories, and been recruited to the military, which caused growers to complain of a labor shortage.74 In responding to this issue, the United States entered into an agreement with Mexico to allow for temporary migrant workers, or “braceros,” to work in U.S. fields. The agreement stipulated that braceros not replace domestic workers, but this was ignored.75 In providing growers with an excess supply of farm workers, the Bracero program gave growers great power over farm workers, which they would exploit. Growers quickly replaced insubordinate farm workers, thereby blocking unionization efforts.76 Growers kept expenses down by keeping wages low and by expending very little on farm workers facilities, resulting in extremely poor conditions for farm workers.77


75 “The Bracero Program 1942-1964.”

76 “The Bracero Program 1942-1964.”

77 “The Bracero Program 1942-1964.”
The growers pushed for the Bracero program—originally a wartime measure—to be extended, and it became Public Law 78 in 1951.\textsuperscript{78} Chavez saw this as a continuation of the growers’ legacy of aiming to maintain a surplus of labor in order to keep farm worker wages and benefits low, and to fight unionization.\textsuperscript{79} The National Farm Labor Union fought the Bracero program in the 1940’s through the 1950’s, however their efforts were largely unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{80} The program finally came to an end as the result of a years-long campaign headed by the national AFL-CIO and the labor movement, as well as the Catholic Church and other faith groups.\textsuperscript{81} Senator Edward M. Kennedy, while working in the Senate, and Huerta and Chavez, while working at the CSO, also played major roles in achieving the end of the program in 1964.\textsuperscript{82} The end of the Bracero program marked the end of growers’ undefeated track record of maintaining farm worker exploitation.

Cesar Chavez was exposed to injustices of farm work labor beginning in his early childhood—injustices he would dedicate the rest of his life to fighting. Chavez was born on March 31, 1927, in the North Gila River Valley outside Yuma, Arizona, where he lived with his mother, Juana, father, Librado, and four siblings in a traditional Mexican-American household.\textsuperscript{83} The family lived in a small adobe home on 80 acres of the family’s land.\textsuperscript{84} Due to financial

\textsuperscript{78} “The Bracero Program 1942-1964.”

\textsuperscript{79} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{80} “UFW History.”

\textsuperscript{81} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{82} “UFW History.”; Marc Grossman, interview.


\textsuperscript{84} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”
issues brought on by the Depression, the family was forced to surrender their home and land to
the bank, move to California, and endure the difficult life of migrant farm laborers.\(^{85}\) In 1938, at
11 years old, Cesar Chavez and his family packed their belongings in their 9 year old Studebaker
President and began to drive west to the Del Rio barrio in the small farm town of Oxnard, in
Ventura County north of Los Angeles.\(^{86}\) Later in San Jose, during their travels along the migrant
trails of California, Juana knocked on doors until she found a garage where the family was
allowed to stay.\(^{87}\) This was in a barrio called Sal Si Puedes, meaning “Get Out If You Can,” and
was one of many temporary homes where the Chavezs would reside.\(^{88}\) Librado led the family in
finding work and at times in walking out of the fields to protest farm worker abuse and
mistreatment by growers.\(^{89}\)

Chavez saw his mother and father, Juana and Librado, engage in degrading farm work,
where they were forced to work in horrible conditions and earned menial pay. Farm workers did
not have unemployment insurance, so after his father, Librado, was injured, Juana and the
children had to work to support the family.\(^{90}\) She often was forced to take the worst-paying jobs,
which involved leaving her home at 3am to avoid the pounding afternoon heat of the fields

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\(^{87}\) Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography*, 16.


\(^{89}\) Marc Grossman, interview.

where she would bunch carrots. Farm workers had no rights to health and safety protections.

In other forms of work, farm workers were forced to use “el cortito” a short-handled hoe which left people with extreme skeletal pain after leaving the fields, making it difficult to stand upright. This often resulted in long-term health complications, which impacted Cesar Chavez himself later in life. Gaining access to water was difficult and often unhygienic, as growers forced farm workers to share cups and at times charged them for water. Farm workers had no access to bathrooms, and there were often no trees in the fields to shield oneself. In the fields, women were sexually harassed and humiliated. Additionally, farm workers were not covered by minimum wage laws, and Juana, Librado and their children, like other farm workers, made only a few dollars per day for the taxing work they endured.

Cesar Chavez and his siblings had a difficult upbringing, working as child laborers in the fields, and constantly subjected to racism when they attended school. Chavez attended 37 schools while working as a migrant farm worker, some of which were segregated. Spanish was

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95 “UFW History.”


100 “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”
forbidden in school, and Chavez was hit on his knuckles by a teacher when he spoke his family’s language.\textsuperscript{101} In integrated schools, Chavez recalled feeling like a “monkey in a cage.”\textsuperscript{102} In 1942, after completing the 8th grade, Chavez went to work in the fields full-time to help support his family.\textsuperscript{103} In 1946, at age 19, Chavez joined the U.S. Navy, serving in the Western Pacific.\textsuperscript{104} At the time, the navy was segregated, and Chavez described his experience as the “two worst years of my life.”\textsuperscript{105} In 1948, Chavez returned from the Navy to Delano and married Helen Fabela, a woman whom he had met at a malt shop in Delano.\textsuperscript{106} They soon settled together in Sal Si Puedes, while Cesar labored in nearby fields and orchards.\textsuperscript{107} Chavez’s early difficulties opened his eyes up to racism and the lack of dignity of migrant farm worker life—experiences which would drive him to work for the improvements of the lives of farm workers.

In San Jose, Chavez met Father Donald McDonnell, a young priest and advocate for farm workers rights, who introduced Chavez to the social teachings of the Catholic Church, including Rerum novarum, Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 landmark papal encyclical on the dignity of labor.\textsuperscript{108} McDonnell had come to Sal Si Puedes in order to perform Catholic services for hundreds of

\textsuperscript{101} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{102} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{103} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{104} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{105} “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”

\textsuperscript{106} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{107} Marc Grossman, interview.

Mexican Americans, who otherwise had no way of engaging in the services.\textsuperscript{109} Father McDonell discussed the plight of farm workers perpetuated by the agriculture industry with Chavez, and introduced Chavez to the writing of St. Francis of Assisi and Mahatma Gandhi.\textsuperscript{110} Gandhi and St. Francis would become key models of nonviolent resistance for Chavez and he would draw upon their tactics in later organizing efforts.\textsuperscript{111} Father McDonnell also helped introduce Chavez to Fred Ross, who ran the Community Service Organization (CSO), a leading statewide Latino civil rights group that advocated for barrio improvements, fought police brutality, helped residents become U.S. citizens and register to vote among other initiatives.\textsuperscript{112} In 1952, Chavez became an organizer for the CSO, and while working closely with Fred Ross, he travelled the state organizing new CSO chapters, founding 22 new chapters in total.\textsuperscript{113} In 1958, Chavez became the National Staff Director of the CSO. Chavez’s tenure at the CSO taught him extensively about community organizing and how to work with people.

Chavez left the CSO, an organization he loved, when the CSO refused to support a concentrated effort for farm worker organizing.\textsuperscript{114} On his birthday—March 31, 1962—Chavez

\textsuperscript{109} Levy, Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa, 89.


\textsuperscript{111} Press Release, “Father McDonnell introduced a young Cesar Chavez to social justice teachings.”


\textsuperscript{113} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{114} “UFW Chronology.”
resigned from his position at the CSO in order to work on starting a farm workers union full-time.\footnote{Marc Grossman, interview.} At 35 years old, and with $1,200 in savings, Chavez moved his family and eight young children to Delano, California.\footnote{“UFW Chronology.”} This date is accepted today by the UFW (United Farm Workers) to be the earliest beginning of “La Causa,” or the fight for farm workers’ rights.\footnote{Marc Grossman, interview.}

In 1962, Chavez co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) with Dolores Huerta. Huerta was a powerful force for the NFWA—she was a great leader, a strategic thinker, a tough negotiator, and a hard worker. Huerta was born on April 10, 1930, in the mining town of Dawson, New Mexico. Huerta was raised by her mother, Alicia Chavez in a farm worker community in Stockton, California.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta,” Dolores Huerta Foundation, http://doloreshuerta.org/dolores-huerta/} Alicia Chavez taught Dolores Huerta early in life to help those who were impoverished. Alicia Chavez owned a restaurant and a 70-room hotel where she set prices to accommodate poor people, sometimes allowing them to say for free.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”} Alicia Chavez also was a proponent of embracing cultural diversity, and aimed to inculcate this value in her daughter.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”} While working as a school teacher, Huerta was confronted with the poor living conditions of migrant farm workers.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”} Many of her students came from farm worker families, and she saw that they were impoverished, hungry, and lacking many basic necessities.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”} “I couldn't tolerate seeing kids come to class hungry and needing shoes. I thought I could do more...
by organizing farm workers than by trying to teach their hungry children,” Huerta said.\footnote{Laura Reyes, “For Women, History is Happening Now,” \textit{Huffington Post}, March 27, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-reyes/for-women-history-is-happening_b_6955736.html}

Huerta began working towards improving the conditions of farm workers by working as a community organizer for the CSO’s Stockton chapter, and founded the Agricultural Workers Association (AWA) which worked on Latino voter registration and lobbied the government for barrio improvements.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”} In 1962, Huerta resigned from her duties in order to join Chavez in the formation of a farm worker union.\footnote{“Dolores Huerta.”}

Chavez and Huerta viewed their farm worker union’s purpose as beginning a social movement.\footnote{“UFW Chronology.”} They aimed to revolutionize the lives of farm workers so as to allow them to become truly equal beneficiaries of the American Dream—able to rise up economically and work with dignity.\footnote{Paul Chavez, interview.} Chavez and Huerta believed that in order to achieve these goals, farm workers had to form a union and sign union contracts with growers, thereby going beyond the tradition of solely aiming to achieve menial wage increases. Union contracts would allow for full democratic participation of farm workers, and would give them power over growers. Chavez and Huerta believed that effective strikes to win union contracts with growers would be in the far distant future, possibly taking decades.\footnote{Marc Grossman, interview.} They would need to first build a large coalition of farm workers who understood and were dedicated to their cause. Chavez and Huerta sought to draw

\footnotesize{123 Laura Reyes, “For Women, History is Happening Now,” \textit{Huffington Post}, March 27, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/laura-reyes/for-women-history-is-happening_b_6955736.html}

\footnotesize{124 “Dolores Huerta.”}

\footnotesize{125 “Dolores Huerta.”}

\footnotesize{126 “UFW Chronology.”}

\footnotesize{127 Paul Chavez, interview.}

\footnotesize{128 Marc Grossman, interview.}
people in to the NFWA through offering benefits and services including a death benefit plan to allow for burials, a credit union that lent farm workers money when work was scarce, a co-op gas station which sold inexpensive gas and car services, and service centers which helped with a variety of problems. Chavez travelled through dozens of farm worker towns in the Central Valley, meeting with farm workers in their homes, and signing people up to the union person-by-person— tactics he had learned from Fred Ross while working for the CSO.

On September 30th, 1962, the NFWA held its first convention in an abandoned movie theatre in Fresno where delegates from across the state assembled. There, the union’s flag was unveiled. Cesar Chavez and his brother Richard Chavez had co-designed the symbol for the NFWA—a black eagle on a white circle with a red background. The eagle’s wings had squared-off edges to make it easy for farm workers to replicate. Chavez said on the symbol, “a symbol is an important thing. That is why we chose an Aztec eagle. It gives pride . . . When people see it they know it means dignity.” He also said where that eagle flies, the farm worker rights will be respected. Chavez utilized symbols to unify the union and express its values throughout the farm worker movement.

129 Marc Grossman, interview.
130 "UFW History."; UFW Chronology.”
131 "UFW Chronology."
132 "UFW Chronology."
133 "UFW Chronology."
134 “The Story of Cesar Chavez.”
135 "The Story of Cesar Chavez."
136 Marc Grossman, interview.
The NFWA (later the United Farm Workers in 1966) made historic gains for the farm workers as a result of their leaders’ commitment to the cause and the maintenance of the union’s values, and though the implementation of new strategies which effectively communicated their message so that it was widely embraced. The Great Delano Grape Strike, beginning in 1965, propelled the group into the national spotlight. The union continued to thrive because it was committed to nonviolence, and implemented new strategies which were highly symbolic including boycotts, picketing (protesting outside their place of employment), marches, and strikes. Through the use of these tactics, the union formed a broad coalition of outside supporters, most often including other organized labor groups, religious groups, and was also embraced by minorities and students. In speaking about the boycott’s supporters, Chavez said, “That segment of the population which makes our boycotts work are the Hispanics, the Blacks, the other minorities and our allies in labor and the church. But it is also an entire generation of young Americans who matured politically and socially in the 1960s and ‘70s—millions of people for whom boycotting grapes and other products became a socially accepted pattern of behavior.” In times of trouble, most notoriously when the union’s commitment to nonviolence was challenged, Chavez embarked on religious-oriented fasts: First in Delano in 1968 to rededicate the union to nonviolence, then in 1972 in Phoenix for 24 days after Arizona passed a law banning farm worker strikes and boycotts, and again in 1988 in Delano for 36 days over the

137 Marshall Ganz, interview.
138 "The Story of Cesar Chavez."
pesticide poisoning of farm workers and their children.\textsuperscript{140} These fasts showed Chavez’s commitment to the union’s values, and were meaningful testaments to how much he cared for the movement—things that the nation noticed. The union garnered significant membership, reaching its peak at 80,000 registered members in the 1970’s.\textsuperscript{141}

The UFW became the first successful farm workers union in the U.S., attained the first genuine collective bargaining agreements between farm workers and growers, established union contracts which secured rights and protections for farm workers including the securement of mandatory rest periods, toilet and drinking water access, the banning of sexual harassment and discrimination as well as protections against pesticide exposure.\textsuperscript{142} Chavez also attained the first union contracts for profit sharing and parental leave for farm workers.\textsuperscript{143} Other significant wins under Chavez’s leadership of the UFW were the establishment of a pension plan for retired workers, the abolition of the short-handled hoe which crippled farm workers, the extension of coverage to farm workers of unemployment insurance and disability insurance, and federal amnesty rights for immigrants.\textsuperscript{144} Additionally, the union created the first family medical plan for farm workers and their dependents, called the Robert F. Kennedy Medical Plan.\textsuperscript{145}

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\textsuperscript{140} Marc Grossman, interview.
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\textsuperscript{144} “Cesar Chavez Foundation.”
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\textsuperscript{145} “Cesar Chavez Foundation.”
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movement that had been stagnant for 100 years, Chavez’s rethinking of how to lead along with Dolores Huerta and others resulted in many accomplishments during his 31 years leading the UFW.146

146 "Cesar Chavez Foundation.”
Chapter Two
Robert F. Kennedy and the Farm Workers 1966

In 1966, Chavez’s young farm workers union was engaged in a strike in Delano, California, in an effort to force growers to recognize the union. As the growers maintained complete control in the area, strikers were relentlessly abused by police officials, and were denied justice by local legal authorities. The strikes in Delano were gaining publicity. At the time, a bill to bring farm workers under the NLRA was proposed in the Senate, and in conjunction with these efforts, senate hearings were scheduled in Delano to hear grower and farm worker testimony. 147 Chavez expressed that he was doubtful that the hearings would lead to real reform, noting that farm workers had historically been ignored by government officials. 148 Robert F. Kennedy was initially hesitant about engaging with farm workers, as he had little information on the matter, and was swamped with other issues in Washington. 149 Additionally, it was politically detrimental for Kennedy to embrace the farm workers. However, Kennedy’s participation in the meetings led to the most important day of the hearings—March 16—which resulted in tangible outcomes. On March 16, Kennedy’s firm questioning of Kern County Sheriff Leroy Gaylen and grower Martin Zaninovich shed a national spotlight on Delano, and in doing so, protected the farm workers by giving them legitimacy. 150 Kennedy embraced the farm worker

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147 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 12.
150 Marshall Ganz, interview.
movement wholeheartedly as a result of hearing farm worker and law enforcement testimony, and felt a deep admiration and desire to work with Cesar Chavez, as he observed Chavez’s advocacy and leadership. Kennedy’s aide, Peter Edelman said that in Delano “something had touched a nerve” in Kennedy. Kennedy expressed this in his actions—delivering a speech to rally the farm workers at Filipino Hall, their union hall, and joining them in a picket line at DiGiorgio Fruit Corp. vineyards. The farm workers, in return, looked at Kennedy as a friend and ally. In this way, the hearings provided for the coming together of Chavez and Kennedy, which sparked the beginning of a very meaningful relationship.

1965 marked the beginning of an unforeseen strike effort which would catapult Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) into the national spotlight. In 1965, the NFWA was a fledgling organization, consisting of mostly Latino farm workers. Chavez and Huerta had spent three years recruiting people—one by one and forming local chapters—techniques they had learned as a community organizers in the Community Service Organization (CSO). Chavez was focused on his far-off goal of signing union contracts with growers in that he believed this alone would establish lasting and meaningful change. Chavez believed that the present power dynamics of the time which kept growers in complete control over farm workers had to be changed to allow for these contracts to be signed. His goal was “to overthrow a farm labor system in this nation which treats farm workers as if they were not important human

152 Marc Grossman, interview.
153 Marc Grossman, interview.
Therefore, farm workers would have to become empowered in the efforts to attain contracts, as growers were resistant to give up any power. Chavez thought it would take as many as ten years of grassroots organizing until he had built up significant membership, and thereby the strength of the union in order to achieve these goals. Launching a large strike for wage increases was far from on his mind. When another farm worker group reached out for support on a strike, Chavez and the union needed to decide if they would support the effort.

On September 8, 1965, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), an organization of Filipino American grape workers, launched a strike against Delano-area table and wine grape grower after growers cut pay rates during the harvest. AWOC members had held strikes in May in Coachella, California, where they had successfully fought for and won $1.40 per hour wages and 25 cents per box. When these same farm workers, following the grape harvest, arrived in Delano, they expected the same wages, but were met with an average wage of $1.25 an hour and 10 cents a box. AWOC launched a strike fighting for better pay and working conditions.

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154 Chavez, “1984 Cesar Chavez Address to the Commonwealth Club of California.”
155 Marc Grossman, interview.
Leader of AWOC Larry Itliong approached Chavez asking for his union to join the picket lines. At the time, the young UFW had little money, less than $100 in its bank account, and a relatively small membership paying dues. Chavez doubted that the NFWA was prepared for a strike. While reflecting upon the strike proposition, Chavez said, “All I could think was, ‘Oh God, we’re not ready for a strike.’” Additionally, the coming collaboration of Filipinos and Mexicans was unprecedented. The groups had historically been pitted against one another by growers, who utilized the groups as strikebreakers (temporary farm workers who replaced those on strike) against one another. During the debate with the NFWA, Cesar’s wife, Helen settled the issue by asking, “Are we a union or not?” Supporting the idea himself, Chavez put the matter of whether the NFWA should join the strike to a union vote on September 16, 1965—Mexican Independence Day. The union members voted unanimously in favor, symbolizing the breaking of racial barriers in favor of the pursuit of one common goal—farm workers rights. Chavez asserted that the two groups would come together as one in their strike efforts, and would not only share picket lines but common facilities including strike kitchens and a union hall.

162 "The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott."
166 “The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott.”
167 "The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott."
168 "The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott."
Chavez also stressed that the strikes would be nonviolent, asking each participant to take a vow of nonviolence.\textsuperscript{169} The two groups combined later in 1966 to form the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) which became an organizing committee of the national AFL-CIO, with Chavez as director and Larry Itliong as associate director. (The union became the United Farm Workers of America in 1972.) In this initial effort, AWOC and the NFWA began work on September 19, 1966—a job that was incredibly difficult to organize.\textsuperscript{170} The combined efforts of both organizations would lead to what would be called the Great Delano Grape Strike—an effort that propelled the farm worker movement into garnering national attention, and put it on the path to become the nation’s first enduring farm workers union.

For the strike effort, the NFWA and AWOC had mobilized “13,000 of the most oppressed workers in the country” to protest their lack of labor protection from pesticides and exploitation and their poor living conditions.\textsuperscript{171} In order to combat the organizational challenges of the fields which stretched across thousands of square miles of farm land, the farm workers created roving picket lines, focusing on striking at specific fields each day.\textsuperscript{172} In an effort to break the strikes, growers brought in strikebreakers (also known as scabs) who replaced the striking workers in the vineyards.\textsuperscript{173} The unions sent 15 to 20 cars full of strikers (also known as pickets) to fields where growers were employing strikebreakers.\textsuperscript{174} The strikers were effective at convincing farm

\textsuperscript{169} “The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott.”

\textsuperscript{170} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 106.

\textsuperscript{171} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{172} “UFW History.”; Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{173} “UFW History.”

\textsuperscript{174} “UFW History.”
workers to join the strike.\textsuperscript{175} The growers, expecting to end the strike, quickly conceded to the union’s demands, and allotted farm workers a small wage increase, granting them $1.25 wages.\textsuperscript{176} By this time, the farm workers had embraced Chavez’s vision of a social movement, and these grower consolidations made farm workers feel a greater sense of empowerment and dedication to pursuing greater feats—recognized unionization.\textsuperscript{177}

The striking farm workers were up against California’s powerful corporate agriculture interests, a 3 billion-dollar-a-year industry whose heads held board seats on banks, in local governments and the state legislatures.\textsuperscript{178} The agricultural industry in California held control over the state’s economic, political, and social institutions.\textsuperscript{179} Politicians feared the growers, leaving them virtually with total, unregulated power.\textsuperscript{180} On the ground in Delano, this was manifested in that local law enforcement and justice system personnel partnered with growers to break strikes and ensure that growers were not prosecuted. Delano became a petri dish of corruption and the complete disregard of justice.

Growers responded to the ongoing strikes by trying to intimidate strikers through the use of threats and violence.\textsuperscript{181} Growers physically abused strikers, posing threats to their lives and

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\textsuperscript{175} “UFW History.”
\textsuperscript{176} “UFW History.”
\textsuperscript{177} “UFW History.”
\textsuperscript{178} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 77.
\textsuperscript{179} Marc Grossman, interview.
\textsuperscript{180} Marc Grossman, interview.
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during later, more tragic strikes, resulting in strikers’ deaths.\textsuperscript{182} Growers often drove cars at high speeds close to picket lines, so that strikers had to jump out of the way of cars. Sometimes the growers hit strikers with their cars. Growers sprayed strikers with sulphur (at Schenley Ranch) and dust (at Dispoto Ranch.)\textsuperscript{183} They threatened strikers while wielding shotguns.\textsuperscript{184} Individual strikers were singled out and beaten mercilessly.\textsuperscript{185} The growers knew that they would not be prosecuted, so violence against strikers proliferated.

Law enforcement openly colluded with growers. Police officials stood by to witness the growers’ violence, and refused to arrest growers or their agents. One striker recounted, “Police were looking on while growers elbowed, knead, pushed, stepped and cursed NFWA pickets. One of the growers spoke to the police and the police moved away. They made no move to curb the attacks of growers involved.”\textsuperscript{186} Police also took part in violence against strikers. “[Reverend] Chris Hartmire was pushed by Sergeant Dodd because he didn't move fast enough although he was just a visitor and not picketing.”\textsuperscript{187} Reverend Chris Hartmire ran the California Migrant Ministry (CMM) and was a close friend of Chavez and a partner of the NFWA. The police also refused to provide strikers with any sort of help supplying information on their grower attackers.

“When we asked for information on names of growers or strike breakers who harassed or

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\textsuperscript{182} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”

\textsuperscript{183} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”

\textsuperscript{184} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”


\textsuperscript{186} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”

\textsuperscript{187} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
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attacked pickets, police and prosecutors refused to get their names for us. This happened many times.”\textsuperscript{188} There was no debate over the matter—the police were there to break the strikes.

Local police launched their own effort to intimidate strikers. They constructed an obtrusive information-gathering campaign. The Kern County Sheriff’s Office created a dossier of 5,000 cards of suspected strike supporters.\textsuperscript{189} These cards included each person’s name, criminal record, civil-rights group associations, and mug shot.\textsuperscript{190} The sheriff’s office acquired this information by photographing picketers on picket lines, recording license plate numbers of cars parked at the NFWA headquarters, and pulling information from outside law enforcement offices.\textsuperscript{191} These methods—particularly photographing strikers—were devised to intimidate and harass strikers. In one instance, Sergeant Dodd “blocked off the exit of pickets at Masakian Ranch” in order to take strikers’ photographs.\textsuperscript{192} Sergeant Dodd told strikers that “pickets were violating and injunction” and he “would need the information for the filing of a complaint.”\textsuperscript{193} One striker recounted that Dodd told strikers, “he would arrest us and let the courts decide whether the arrest was justified.”\textsuperscript{194}

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\textsuperscript{188} UFW Report, “Harassment of Pickets in Delano Grape Strike.”
\textsuperscript{190} Dunne, \textit{The Story of the California Grape Strike}.
\textsuperscript{191} Dunne, \textit{The Story of the California Grape Strike}.
\textsuperscript{192} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
\textsuperscript{193} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
\textsuperscript{194} Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
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The District Attorney’s Office colluded with growers in denying farm workers’ appeals for justice against grower violence. When farm workers filed complaints to the D.A.’s office, they were turned away. A striker said, “When Bruno Dispoto of Dispoto Farms knocked down striker Gene Nelson with a car, the farm workers issued many complaints to the D.A. office and none were accepted. Dispoto went off free.”195 The prosecutors, however, were quick to prosecute strikers. Regarding the same instance, the striker added, “When a farm worker “accosted” Dispoto, asking him “why he had beaten up a one-legged war veteran” he “was arrested on the spot.”196

Local judges partnered with growers to break the strikes. Growers obtained anti-picketing injunctions or temporary restraining orders (TRO’s) from rural judges in an effort to ban strikes.197 This included issuing a special directive against striking in Delano and against shouting from streets, labeling it “disturbing the peace.”198 Two days after this directive, the local court issued an order forbidding the use of the word “huelga” (meaning “strike” in Spanish.)199 Strikers resisted the unjust TRO’s, leading to mass arrests. The day following the “huelga” ban, on October 19, 1965, Cesar’s wife, Helen Chavez, and strikers shouted “huelga” at a picket line. The sheriff arrested Helen and 43 picketers, including Reverend Chris Hartmire who was

195 Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
196 Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”
197 Marc Grossman, Interview.
199 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 16.
arrested in the middle of an Interview with the *Los Angeles Times*. Their bail was set at $276 each. Helen remained in jail for 3 days. The general attitude of local law enforcement was summed up by strikers as, “We will arrest the pickets first then let the courts decide if they are innocent or not.” In Delano, the strikers were up against the growers, the police, and the courts.

The strikes were gaining attention. Two supporters of the strike movement (also close colleagues of Kennedy) propagated holding congressional hearings in Delano in an effort to grow attention around the strike. United Auto Workers (UAW) International President Walter Reuther and UAW director Paul Schrade supported the strikes in Delano. They had visited Delano with national media personnel in December, 1965 in order to gain national attention for the strike. National attention was important to farm workers in that it lent them legitimacy and support, which would help generate support for early union boycotts of products from struck ranches. Reuther and Schrade saw congressional hearings as an opportunity to do the same.

They persuaded Senate Subcommittee on Migratory Labor Chair, Harrison “Pete” Williams, Jr.

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200 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 16.

201 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 16.


203 Report, “Incidents Involving Police Or Other Law Enforcement.”

204 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 16.

205 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 16.

206 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 16.

207 Marc Grossman, Interview.
of New Jersey to hold hearings in advance of proposing farm worker legislation. As the strikes were gaining attention, Senator Williams decided to hold hearings in Delano.

In 1966, Williams reintroduced a farm labor reform package before the subcommittee. The package had been introduced many times previously, but was blocked by southern representatives who were backed by agricultural business interests. The proposed legislation would provide farm workers with union protections including holding elections in the fields. This legislation included provisions which would establish collective bargaining rights, protect against child labor, establish a voluntary farm employment service and create a National Advisory Council on Migratory Labor.210 The 1966 package included additional protections compared to legislation proposed in 1965 including tax amortization for farm labor housing and reduced residence requirements for voting.211 There was little chance that the bills would be passed, due to lobbying by corporate farming interests, especially from growers in California.212

But corporate farmers were not the only critic of the proposed legislation. Chavez saw the legislation proposed by Williams was problematic, in that it was not-well suited for the needs of migratory farm workers. Under the NLRA, it could take months for a union election to be held.213 As farm workers operated on a seasonable basis—working at each farm for only a short period of time—far-off elections meant that the majority of farm workers would not be present at

\[^{208}\text{Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity 12.}\]
\[^{209}\text{Letter, Peter Edelman to Harry Van Arsdale.}\]
\[^{210}\text{Letter, Peter Edelman to Harry Van Arsdale.}\]
\[^{211}\text{Letter, Peter Edelman to Harry Van Arsdale.}\]
\[^{212}\text{Marc Grossman, interview.}\]
\[^{213}\text{Grossman, interview.}\]
the farms during the elections, thereby rendered unable to vote. The more meaningful legislation would have been bringing farm workers under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938, in that this would provide the federal minimum wage and overtime pay for all farm workers—not just the minority who would be protected by unions. The state Agricultural Labor Relations Act granting farm workers the right to organize, vote for the union and bargain with their employers was finally passed nearly a decade later by the California legislature under Governor Jerry Brown—a major victory for Chavez and the UFW. But without federal legislation, its impact was limited to farm workers in California.

Three of six United States Senators on the Migratory Labor Subcommittee attended the hearings in California, including Democratic Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey, Republican Senator George Murphy of California, and Democratic Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York. The hearings began on March 14th in Sacramento, were held on March 15th in Visalia, and ended on March 16th at the epicenter of the strike movement—in Delano. In addition to participating in the hearings which were set to take place from 11am to 5pm, the

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214 Grossman, interview.
215 Grossman interview
216 Grossman, interview.
Committee visited farm labor camps and other locations with media tagging along.\textsuperscript{218} The hearings were successful in gaining attention and traction for the farm worker movement.\textsuperscript{219}

The senators came from a variety of backgrounds, and maintained different and developing stances on the farm worker movement. Williams was a champion of the farm worker movement.\textsuperscript{220} Williams said that these bills aimed to “end the law of the jungle in farm labor-management relations.”\textsuperscript{221} Senator Murphy was thought of as an enemy to organized labor.\textsuperscript{222} It was widely held that while defending the Bracero program in 1964, Murphy had made the racist argument that Mexicans were better suited to be workers because they were “built close to the ground,” although Murphy disputed that he made this claim.\textsuperscript{223} Murphy’s support for bringing farm workers under the NLRA was at best, meek. Feeling pressure from employers who were against the farm worker movement, Murphy expressed that while he didn't necessarily support

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\textsuperscript{219} Marshall Ganz, interview.

\textsuperscript{220} Matthiessen, \textit{Sal Si Puedes}, 124.


\textsuperscript{222} Article, “Big Changes Loom In Farm Labor Economy.”

\textsuperscript{223} Article, “Big Changes Loom In Farm Labor Economy.”
the bill, he believed that farm workers should have the right to unionize if the “proper machinery” were put into place.  

Senator Kennedy was in the early stages of establishing himself as an ally of the farm workers. It was not self-evident why a senator from New York would take up the cause of Mexican American farm workers in a remote area of California. Some might have speculated that doing so would allow Kennedy to expand his constituency beyond his home state and establish a foothold for a future presidential bid. But farm workers at the time had no political clout, and their plight was not a major issue across the country. Poverty then, as today, was not a popular cause, and white working class voters, the core of Kennedy’s support, would have been skeptical about why he was spending time on that cause while there were many other, more urgent issues, to tackle. In a letter sent to Kennedy on February 9, 1966, Sylvia Kalitinsky, a New York Representative for the NFWA, asked Kennedy to meet to discuss the strikes, noting that she had been told he had “become interested in the strike and had recognized its importance.” Kalitinsky also said, “Although, seen from New York State, a strike in Delano California, might seem somewhat remote, the issues involved are important to all farm workers and to all Spanish speaking people in the United States.” The farm workers issue was raised by Kennedy staffers Peter Edelman, and backed by United Auto Workers President Walter Meister.

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226 Letter, Sylvia Katlinsky to Robert F. Kennedy.
Reuther, and the western states head of the UAW, Paul Schrade, who were active supporters of the farm workers. After some consideration of the capacity to take up yet another issue in a far off place, Kennedy decided to attend the hearings in Delano. While some of Kennedy’s detractors argue that this was a calculated move by Kennedy, it was in fact his compassion for the underdog and his love of justice which drove him to attend the hearings.

In 1966, Kennedy was focused on grappling with the escalating issue of the war in Vietnam. Additionally, according to Paul Schrade, Kennedy was largely unfamiliar with the farm worker movement at this point.\(^{227}\) When the idea to leave Washington in order to visit farm workers in California was proposed to him by Edelman, Kennedy was initially hesitant.\(^{228}\) After considering the proposition over the course of three days and reaching out to colleagues in California for advice, Kennedy decided to go.\(^{229}\) After the hearings, Kennedy thanked Schrade for urging him to go.\(^{230}\)

On the first day of hearings, March 14th in Sacramento, Williams presided over testimony for growers and farm workers.\(^{231}\) Williams said during the hearings, “We have all to come to California to seek the causes and background of the protracted strike in the grape vineyards in the Delano area—to see whether this bitter dispute stands as a symbol of the need to provide procedures in this place of contrast.”\(^{232}\) Later, in providing testimony in Delano on

\(^{227}\) Marc Grossman, interview.

\(^{228}\) Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman, July 15, 1969.

\(^{229}\) Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman, July 15, 1969.

\(^{230}\) Paul Schrade, interview.

\(^{231}\) Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 12.

\(^{232}\) Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 12.
March 16th, Chavez pointed out that hearings in the past had been unsuccessful. “We are meeting, once again, to discuss the problems of the farm worker, and what might be done to correct these problems. Such meetings have been called for decades, and unfortunately things have not changed very much in spite of them. The same labor camps which were used 30 years ago at the time of the La Follette committee hearings are still housing our workers. The same exploitation of child labor, the same idea that farm workers are a different breed of people—humble, happy, built close to the ground—still prevails.” Chavez took a powerful stance on challenging the senators—especially Murphy who had been linked to the “built close to the ground” quote—to reflect on how the nation had failed them in the past, and question what role they would play in the future.

During the hearings, Governor of California Pat Brown issued a statement endorsing the legislation proposals including establishing a minimum wage and collective bargaining rights for farm workers, as well as instituting child labor laws and unemployment insurance for farm workers. Brown said, “We cannot put off forever what must be done to correct the deplorable economic and social plight of many of our farm workers.” This line was picked up by newspapers across the country. The governor, it can be assumed, knew the package had no chance of passage. While he had taken courageous moral positions in the past, including opposing housing discrimination in 1964, which significantly contributed to his losing of his

233 Marc Grossman, interview.

234 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 13.


236 “Governor Endorses Farm Labor Proposal.”
reelection campaign to Ronald Reagan, he was extremely cautious in engaging with the farm workers. They grew still held significant weight within the political arena, and were key donors to political campaigns, especially those of Democrats. They were squarely against Chavez and the work of the UFW. These political calculations caused Brown, like many other politicians, to steer clear of aligning themselves in a meaningful way with the farm workers union. As a senator from New York, Kennedy did not have to contend with the corporate farming political weight in California. None the less, he was well aware of its influence on fellow Democrats, and some in his circles cautioned him against harming his colleagues. Furthermore, farming was the most lucrative industry, virtually the only industry in upstate New York, and his constituents there would not take kindly to his advocacy of farm workers rights. For these reasons, it seemed nonsensical for Kennedy to openly embrace the plight of the farm workers.

Notable labor leaders including Al Green and Larry Itliong of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), William Kircher of the national AFL-CIO, and Dolores Huerta provided testimony supporting the farm workers. Supporters from the Migrant Ministry, a group which had aligned itself with the NFWA also provided pro-farm worker testimony including Reverend Chris Hartmire and Catholic Bishop Hugh Donohoe of Fresno. Hartmire said, “As Christians we cannot assume a position of non-involvement or neutrality in the presence of social injustice which reduces the dignity and well-being of any of God’s children.”

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237 Grossman, interview.

238 Grossman, interview.

239 Grossman, interview.


On the morning of March 15, in Visalia, California, the senators toured the horrific living places of farm workers. They visited two farm worker housing projects which left them stricken by the horrible conditions they observed. In a memo on the trip, Peter Edelman noted: “This housing was described last year by Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz as some of the worst he had ever seen.” The committee visited the Self-Help Housing project in Goshen, California where farm workers were able to build their own homes using low interest federal loans. The senators were comparatively impressed by the efficacy of this effort. The Committee next toured the Linnell Farm Labor Camp and were “shocked” upon viewing 12’x16’ feet tin shacks which housed farm workers. Farm workers often endured horrible conditions in segregated temporary housing projects run by growers, who charged them at least $2 a day for the housing. The housing was often unheated, mosquito-ridden, and lacked indoor plumbing as well as cooking facilities. Williams called the camp was “The worst public housing I have ever seen.” Murphy also said, “As a U.S. Senator from California, I am ashamed of what I have


244 Briefing, “Briefing Sheet For Hearings By United States Senate Subcommittee of Migratory Labor.”

245 “Murphy, Williams Express Shock At Linell Labor Camp.”

246 “Murphy, Williams Express Shock At Linell Labor Camp.”

247 “Murphy, Williams Express Shock At Linell Labor Camp.”

248 “UFW History.”

249 “UFW History.”
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later advocating for the use of federal funds to improve the camps. Kennedy remarked that the housing reminded him of that of impoverished people in Mississippi.

On March 15th, hearings began in Veterans Memorial Hall at 11am. In a statement prepared by Governor Pat Brown, the governor argued for housing benefits for farm workers. The statement asserted that there is a “shocking lack of adequate housing for farm worker families.” Williams said, “This has been an ignored part of our population.” Williams added, “The time has long gone past when we should make some kind of effort.” Kennedy also said he supported farm worker housing, but added: “a whole range of legislation is needed for farm workers.”

Throughout the hearings, growers defended the working conditions and wages of farm workers, argued against unionization and federal intervention, and, incredibly, denied that a strike was occurring. Growers testified that conditions were good, and that California offered the highest farm worker wages in the country. Growers contended that establishing a minimum


251 “Murphy, Williams Express Shock At Linell Labor Camp.”

252 Paul Schrade, Interview.

253 Briefing, “Briefing Sheet For Hearings By United States Senate Subcommittee of Migratory Labor.”


255 “Housing Benefits For Farm Families-Brown.”

256 “Housing Benefits For Farm Families-Brown.”

257 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 14.

258 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
wage would “destroy incentive.”259 Additionally, growers defended child labor as providing “far-reaching educational benefits in allowing children to work [in the fields].”260 The growers asserted that the unique nature of grower-picker relationships made collective bargaining impossible, in that agreements could only be reached based upon “individual relationships.”261 They argued that farm worker issues were too complex for federal regulation. Growers argued that farm worker-labor relations should fall under state jurisdiction “so that a State board can properly handle the multitude of local problems involved in production of farm crops.”262 In this way, growers aimed to maintain control over the farm workers, as they knew that the state would stay on their side, and that it would be virtually impossible for farm workers to prevail in every state across the country. So long as there was no federal legislation, big agriculture interests could retain the status quo. The growers also labeled the strike a myth. One grower testified, “There is no strike among the Delano farm workers. The so-called strike is pure myth, manufactured out of nothing by outside agitators who are more interested in creating trouble in the United States than in the welfare of farm workers.”263 Growers said that organizing was driven by “trouble-makers in the cities,”264 portraying strike leaders as outsiders and anarchists. Robert Kennedy had heard virtually identical words before when, at the height of the Civil Right Movement. Police Chief George “Bull” Connor said, “Ladies and gentlemen, for 42 days now

259 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
260 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
261 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
262 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
263 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez and The Dream of Dignity, 13.
264 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 13.
the city of Birmingham has been under siege from outside agitators led by Martin Luther King. Now, the President has seen fit to move some 3,000 federal troops into this state for possible use in Birmingham.”265 As Robert Kennedy and John F. Kennedy had been the people to send in those troops at the time, in order to protect African American citizens from the white racists who controlled the levers of power in the city, Robert Kennedy must have understood the plight of the farm workers at a visceral level—he had seen this before.

The most memorable day of the trip, was March 16th, the day of the formal hearings in Delano, when the growers’ weak testimony was torn apart in front of farm workers who had been abused by them mercilessly for years. One thousand spectators crowded into the Delano High School auditorium.266 By 11am, the room was overflowing. Three hundred people were denied entry and were forced to wait outside.267 Growers had taken almost all the seats, forcing farm workers out of the auditorium.268 When Kennedy realized this, he demanded that half of the seating be given to farm workers and their families.269

Chavez told the senators about police harassment. He said that police photographed strikers, kept a dossier on each one, and used the dossier to intimidate strikers.270 He described

266 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 31.
267 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 31.
268 Paul Schrade, interview.
269 Paul Schrade, interview.
mass arrests of peaceful demonstrators. Kennedy was incensed. Kennedy’s cross examination of the Kern County Sheriff remains an enduring memory for the farm worker movement to this day. Sheriff Leroy Gaylen of Kern County explained that he took photographs to identify troublemakers so that he could keep the peace. The transcript captured the key moment of confrontation:

Kennedy: “Do you take pictures of everyone in the city?”
Gaylen: “Well, if he is on strike, or something like that.”
Kennedy: ”Why are the picketers arrested as a preventive measure?”
Gaylen: “Well, if I have reason to believe that there’s going to be a riot started, and somebody tells me that there’s going to be trouble if you don’t stop them, then it’s my duty to stop them.”
Kennedy: “You go out there and arrest them?”
Gaylen: “Absolutely.”
Kennedy: “Who told you that they were going to riot?”
Gaylen: “The men right out there in the field that they were talking to said if you don’t get them out of here we’re going to cut their hearts out.”
Kennedy: “This is the most interesting concept, I think, that you suddenly hear talk… about somebody’s going to get out of order, perhaps violate the law, and you go in and arrest them, and they haven’t done anything wrong. How do you go arrest somebody if they haven’t violated the law?”

272 Marshall Ganz, Interview.
Gaylen: “They are ready to violate the law, in other words—”

The crowd roared. Kennedy slapped his fist on the table, leaning back in surprise at the Sheriff’s statement.273

Kennedy: “Could I suggest that in the interim period of time, in the luncheon period of time, that the sheriff and the district attorney read the Constitution of the United States?”274

The room exploded with farm workers’ laughter.275 Farm workers shook signs in the back of the auditorium which read “Kennedy for President in ’68”.276 Schrade recounts, “it just woke everyone up in the crowd and they applauded. It was a really spectacular moment.”277 For farm workers, this exchange confirmed the feeling that Kennedy would be a strong ally in their fight for justice. Chavez whispered to Dolores Huerta, “He shouldn’t go so far, because it’s only going to hurt him.”278 Chavez recalled, “Instead of that awful feeling against politicians who don’t commit themselves, we felt protective. He said that we had the right to form a union and that he

273 “Robert Kennedy Took On Kern County Sheriff United Farm Workers” United Farm Workers, August 18, 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G66myWragTg


277 Paul Schrade, interview.

endorsed our right, and not only endorsed us but joined us. I was amazed at how quickly he grasped the whole picture… He immediately asked very pointed questions of the growers; he had a way of disintegrating their arguments by picking at the very simple questions….”

The story of Kennedy grilling the Kern County Sheriff became a powerful symbol of farm workers fighting and winning against injustice, shared widely by media personnel and farm workers alike. The union’s paper, *El Macriendo*, featured the story of Kennedy interrogating the Sheriff, showing a picture of Kennedy on the third page entitled “In this Issue,” in the top ranking position with the quote, “I suggest, Sheriff, that you read the U.S. Constitution before you arrest any more strikers.” The farm workers believed that Kennedy had blocked the Sheriff from his unjust arrests. The larger article was entitled “The U.S. Senate Has The Last Word,” and began with, “The senators who came to Delano last month have told the whole world just what is happening in the Grape Strike around Delano.” By questioning Sheriff Gaylen, Kennedy exposed the failure of justice for farm workers, and broadcast that message to the world. This interaction made the farm worker movement a national concern, boosted farm worker morale tremendously, and made the growers afraid, all because the media had spread the farm workers’ message. UFW Organizer Marshall Ganz said that Kennedy’s tough cross-examination of the sheriff acted as a warning, and told the corrupt police, you can’t get away


282 Marshall Ganz, Interview.
with this because the whole world is watching now.\textsuperscript{283} Kennedy’s powerful stance made him revered as a leader and friend.

During the break for lunch hearings, Kennedy and Chavez unexpectedly met in the parking lot outside of the high school auditorium, where they took an immediate liking to one another.\textsuperscript{284} It was not their first meeting. They had met briefly in 1960, when Chavez was registering Latino voters for John Kennedy’s presidential campaign.\textsuperscript{285} The two men stood talking quietly in conversation.\textsuperscript{286} People began to surround them in concentric circles. Schrade recounted, “A crowd gathered, two deep, then four deep, and finally ten or fifteen people deep. It went in maybe five minutes, maybe even ten.”\textsuperscript{287} Both Schrade and Edelman said that Chavez and Kennedy bonded immediately. Edelman said, “The two men took an instant like to one another and bonded immediately into a close relationship that lasted until RFK’s death.”\textsuperscript{288} Schrade said on the encounter, “there was a good relationship that was building,”\textsuperscript{289} adding, “I don’t know what they said to each other. I do know that when it was over they were friends for

\textsuperscript{283} Marshall Ganz, Interview.

\textsuperscript{284} Paul Schrade, Interview.

\textsuperscript{285} Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy and His Times, 792.

\textsuperscript{286} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{287} Paul Schrade, interview.


\textsuperscript{289} Paul Schrade, interview.
What was clear was that Chavez and Kennedy were drawing people together in excitement, and were beginning to form the beginnings of a lasting and important bond.

Immediately following the hearings, Kennedy, accompanied by Chavez and Huerta, made a surprise visit to Filipino Hall where he addressed a mass meeting of farm workers. He said, “And it’s not just a question of wages. It’s a question of housing. It’s a question of education. It’s a question of living conditions. It’s a basic question of hope for the future.” The crowd cheered in response. Kennedy had embraced the farm workers’ cause, and aimed to position himself as a partner in their efforts. He went beyond the traditional political role of working from Washington to institute change, but instead wanted to know what the farm workers needed in order for them to “help themselves.” Kennedy treated the farm workers with dignity. Dolores Huerta later said, "Robert didn't come to us and tell us what was good for us. He came to us and asked us two questions: 'What do you want? And how can I help?' That's why we loved him.”

The farm workers mobbed Kennedy, bustling around him, grabbing onto whatever they could touch. By the time he left, his hands were red, swollen and bleeding.

Kennedy cancelled his schedule, and instead joined 100 strikers on a picket line at DiGiorgio Fruit Corp. vineyard. DiGiorgio was one of the largest vineyard in California, at 4,400 acres, and had been the model for the fictional ranch, Gregorio Fruit Corp., depicted in

290 Paul Schrade, interview.

291 “Robert Kennedy Took On Kern County Sheriff United Farm Workers.”


293 “Robert Kennedy Took On Kern County Sheriff United Farm Workers.”


295 Mahoney, *The Kennedy Brothers: The Rise and Fall of Jack and Bobby*. 

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John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. DiGiorgio was a major grower and enemy of the farm workers. Farm workers and growers alike were shocked when Kennedy arrived at the picket line, as no politician had done so before. Under blue skies, Kennedy walked down the half-mile picket line, shaking hands with strikers while people cried out “Viva Kennedy” and “Kennedy for presidente!” Special correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune* Dick Meister wrote on the scene, “It was an odd sight; Sen. Robert Kennedy in a proper pin-stripe suit moving along a line of pickets in work clothes. He was responding in his Boston manner to cries of ‘Welcome’ shouted in Spanish accents.”

Kennedy’s visit to the picket line reinforced the sincerity of his commitment to the farm workers. Schrade, who was present, said, “It was a great time when you knew that friendship had been cemented and Bob wouldn't forget; that the farm workers wouldn't forget. It was really very important towards building the movement.” Schrade also said, “This guy was doing something no other politician had. It was a beautiful, beautiful moment.” In striking against DiGiorgio ranch, Kennedy had made a statement of his unqualified devotion to the farm workers, something which no politician had dared to do, and exhibited his fearless commitment to Chavez

296 Marc Grossman, interview.
297 Mahoney, *The Kennedy Brothers: The Rise and Fall of Jack and Bobby*.
299 “Support From Robert Kennedy.”
300 Paul Schrade, Interview.
301 Paul Schrade, Interview.
and the strikers.\textsuperscript{302} There was no mistaking it—Kennedy was against the growers and for farm workers.

On the day of the hearings, Chavez announced the farm workers would embark on a 25-day, 350-mile march entitled pilgrimage, penance and revolution from Delano to Sacramento.\textsuperscript{303} The strikers were making a \textit{peregrinacion}, (pilgrimage in Spanish), a Mexican tradition which was pursued in order to achieve change.\textsuperscript{304} The farm workers sought penance for the “sins of the strikers, their own personal sins as well as their yielding perhaps to feelings of hatred and revenge in the strike itself.”\textsuperscript{305} The march concluded on Easter Sunday at the state Capitol, reaffirming the notion of penance, to present the grievances of the farm workers before the governor and legislature.\textsuperscript{306} The march effort aimed to inspire revolution tied to Chavez’s farm workers social movement ideas. The “Plan of Delano” prepared for the march included, “Our PILGRIMAGE is the MATCH that will light our cause for all farm workers to see what is happening here, so that they may do as we have done. The time has come for the liberation of the poor farm worker!”\textsuperscript{307} Chavez explained that “The pilgrimage from Delano to Sacramento has strong religious-cultural overtones. But it is also the pilgrimage of a cultural minority who have

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{302} Marc Grossman, interview.; Mahoney, \textit{The Kennedy Brothers: The Rise and Fall of Jack and Bobby}.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{303} Cesar Chavez, “Peregrinacion, Penitencia, Revolucion,” Cesar Chavez Foundation, http://www.chavezfoundation.org/_cms.php?mode=view\&b_code=001008000000000\&b_no=10\&page=1\&field=&key=&n=2}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{304} Cesar Chavez, “Peregrinacion, Penitencia, Revolucion.”}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{305} Cesar Chavez, “Peregrinacion, Penitencia, Revolucion.”}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{306} Marc Grossman, interview.}

suffered from a hostile environment, and a minority who mean business.” The march demonstrated the strength of the farm workers, their dedication to their cause and made a powerful statement to the entire country about the need for change. The march was strategically planned to be directly after the conclusion of the hearings, so as to capitalize on the media personnel already present in Delano for the hearings. News stories about the hearings and Kennedy’s confrontation with the Kern County Sheriff were retold over the next month, presenting the farm workers with the perfect opportunity to spread the issues raised by the march. This was successful, and the march and the march’s message was broadcast nationwide.

The marchers would quickly have to confront those who sought to deter them. At the start of the march, while still in the town of Delano, the marchers were blocked by 30 police officers who stood in the middle of the road wearing riot gear. The police officers told the marchers that they did not have permission for a “parade.” Captain of the march Robert A. Bustos responded that they did indeed, have permission for passage. Police disregarded this message, and the march was at a standstill. Upon hearing the news, Robert Kennedy called the chief of

308 Marc Grossman, interview.
309 Marc Grossman, interview.
310 Marshall Ganz, interview.
311 Marc Grossman, interview.
313 Robert Bustos, "The March to Sacramento."
314 Robert Bustos, "The March to Sacramento."
police and told him that if he continued to block the march, he would bring a lawsuit for discrimination against the department. After three hours of waiting, the police dispersed and the marchers were able to pass. This would be the first of many instances where Kennedy made sure that the farm workers were protected and that their opponents would no longer stand in their way.

Kennedy was ready to embrace the issues of the farm workers because he had garnered an understanding of poverty and injustice. As Attorney General during the Civil Rights Movement, he learned about the oppression faced by African Americans, particularly in the rural South. He visited Southeast Asia on behalf of President Kennedy, and travelled extensively in Latin America and Africa. A decade earlier, he had travelled across the Soviet Union, keeping a meticulous diary on the lives of people living in poverty. During his time in the Senate, in addition to the international arena, Kennedy took up the causes of Native Americans, Appalachians, and people living from Watts to Bedford Stuyvesant, Detroit, Newark and the Mississippi Delta. Kennedy’s former experiences in working for the “underdogs” of society prepared him to quickly comprehend the problems in Delano. Kennedy’s sharp intuition on these issues—those of poverty and injustice—propelled him to leave Washington to attend the congressional hearings without having a deep background in the matter. Schrade said, “He

316 Robert Bustos, "The March to Sacramento."
317 "Robert F. Kennedy."
318 "Robert F. Kennedy."
319 Kerry Kennedy, interview.
320 Kerry Kennedy, interview.
exposed himself to a lot of this poverty and abuse by governments and employers. So he picked it up really quickly with the farm workers in Delano.”

Once in Delano, Kennedy wholeheartedly adopted the farm worker movement despite only having been at one and a half days’ worth of hearings. Schrade said, “There was an immediate change because this was a first experience for him and he really picked up on it very quickly.”

Kennedy was able to quickly see and understand what the farm workers were going through, probably at least in part due to his wide exposure to poverty in the past. Edelman recounted, “He just was very moved again by what he saw out there, the testimony of the workers were very genuine about their conditions, versus the very flimsy justifications offered by the law enforcement officials for their repressive treatment of the strikers plus the rather blustering and not very convincing position taken by the growers.”

Kennedy was disturbed by the injustice, and would not let the farm worker movement go on without him. Kennedy had rapidly embraced the farm workers’ cause, as he was characteristically a supporter of the underdogs.

Kennedy was effective in utilizing compassion to argue on behalf of farm workers during the hearings. In exposing himself to many different groups of impoverished peoples, Kennedy became an expert at drawing larger connections out of their experiences. Edelman said, “You begin to get this blossoming, this real connecting up in his head between the various kinds of oppressed people.”

Kennedy also became very good at understanding what the issues and

321 Paul Schrade, interview.

322 Paul Schrade, interview.


feelings of the people were. Edelman noted that after these trips, Kennedy’s speeches became incredibly compelling at expressing the understanding of what was “on people’s minds and why they did what they did.” Kennedy was very good at explaining those connections, those issues, and those feelings to the public for the farm workers as well. He was able to draw in connections during the hearings. In questioning grape grower Martin Zaninovich, Kennedy compared him to those who denied Blacks who wanted the vote in the South. In visiting the living camps of farm workers, he brought up the poverty of Mississippi. As Kennedy had more contact with the farm workers and garnered a greater understanding of their plight, he would skillfully communicate their needs to the American public and become key in garnering support.

Kennedy’s active engagement at the hearings brought in a plethora of media attention. During the hearings, nationwide media attention headlined farm workers’ issues. Kennedy’s unusual actions in supporting the farm workers provoked even more stories including his standing up to the Kern County Sheriff which was the most widely broadcast event of the hearings. Additionally, Kennedy’s visiting the picket line at DiGiorgio Fruit Corp. vineyards became indicative to the public and lawmakers alike of how important the cause was to him, and of his strong support of the farm workers. Chavez said, “No one was taking any notice of what we were doing. Then Robert Kennedy came out to see us. He joined our picket lines. That was unheard of. Once he took an interest, lots of other people started coming, offering help.” Kennedy’s reputation as a person whom embraced the struggles of those who had been wronged

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326 Marshall Ganz, interview.

and needed support, helped to put farm workers on the map, and lend legitimacy. Kennedy’s broad support base was translated into the farm worker movement, and would help the farm workers in the future in garnering volunteers, particularly when it was most essential once the international boycott of California grapes began in 1967. Additionally, with greater eyes on the farm workers, they were protected from the unheeded police brutality they had been experiencing. Chavez said, “He gave us credibility. We were being murdered. Literally. So when he came and championed our cause, he made us credible. He helped stop the cops from beating the hell out of us.”

For these reasons, Kennedy’s attendance and active embrace of the farm workers lent direct support from his own large supporter base, the public’s support, and eventually the support of other politicians—an impact that would last throughout ongoing NFWA/UFW efforts.

Kennedy’s support lent legitimacy to the farm workers union, and defended it against enemies who attempted to tar the workers as communists. This smear campaign was perpetuated by leaders in government who supported the growers and also by right-wing media. The FBI spied for years on Chavez and the union beginning with the start of the Delano strike to determine whether Chavez was a Communist, and Ronald Reagan called Chavez and farm workers “classic Communists” and “a danger to American society.” Southern papers colored new stories around farm worker events with headlines that spread the message. It was designed to deter farm worker movement support. Kennedy, in 1966, was a key factor in stopping this

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328 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 20.
329 Marshall Ganz, interview.
330 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 21.
name-calling by actively denying that the farm workers were communists. As someone who had been very vocal against communism while working with Senator Joseph McCarthy against Communist influence in America, Kennedy had established himself as an influential voice in this regard. During his experience while working with McCarthy, Kennedy also recognized the detrimental effects of rampant Communist paranoia, and was vehement to take a stand against it damaging the reputation of the farm workers. Kennedy’s assertion that the farm workers were not communists put an end to the power of the growers’ propaganda campaign. Chavez said on the topic, “I think it was the turning point in the vicious campaign on the ‘Red-baiting’ issue and us. He turned it completely around, completely destroyed it, tore it apart. They kept trying for another year, but after that… people just wouldn’t believe it anymore.”

Kennedy, as expected, received challenges that he was a Communist after standing up for the farm workers. Kennedy did not bend from what he believed was right, and embraced the farm workers’ cause at the expense of his own political career.

Kennedy’s attendance and active resistance to the growers brought immeasurable support to the farm worker movement as it bolstered their sense of hope in the struggle. Kennedy represented an important ally for the farm workers, and for Cesar Chavez. The hearings came after five months of tiresome strikes. His presence was described by UFW volunteer Wendy Brooks as a “shot in the arm.” Farm workers watched Kennedy’s fiery testimony with the

331 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 21.

332 Marshall Ganz, interview.

Kern County Sheriff, his participation in striking at DiGiorgio Farms, and his expression of allegiance with their cause at Filipino Hall. As Kennedy was a renowned figure for justice, and a powerful politician, they celebrated his genuine actions of support and took it as a hopeful testament to the future success of their movement. Chavez said in a letter thanking Kennedy for visiting, “Our members were very pleased to have the opportunity to meet and talk with you and deeply appreciate the strong and provocative lines of questioning which you used to elicit important information from many witnesses.” Farm workers came out of the hearings viewing Kennedy as a friend who understood their struggle. Cesar Chavez’s friend and songwriter Lala Guerrero included Kennedy and Senator Murphy in a song, “Corrido de Delano,” telling the story of the grape strike.

“Murphy y Kennedy vinieron
A consultar a nuestra gente
Escucharon las demandas
Y se fueron muy conscientes
De que se trata de un pueblo
Trabajador y decente.”


335 “Francisco Garcia: Farm Worker Troubadour Vol. 1 (Essay + Songs + Translation + Photos).”

336 “Francisco Garcia: Farm Worker Troubadour Vol. 1 (Essay + Songs + Translation + Photos).”
“Murphy and Kennedy came
To consult with our people
They listened to our demands
And left keenly aware.
That at the center of it all
Is a hard-working and decent people.”337

Robert F. Kennedy and Cesar Chavez formed the beginning of a very strong relationship during the hearings in Delano. They shared the same core values. Many historians have remarked on the similarities between the two men and how it led to their friendship—they were introverts, with a passion for social justice, a healthy sense of skepticism, even fatalism, and yet an idealism and charisma which motivated others.338 Kennedy admired Chavez for his commitment to nonviolence, and his pursuit of justice for the farm workers. The two were both connected by their deep sense of faith, which ran through their political actions and reaffirmed their commitment to social justice, the poor, and self-sacrifice. Kennedy admired Chavez’s incorporation of religion into the actions of protest. He understood what the peregrinacion meant, in that he too had leaned upon religious reflection when confronted by challenges, including after the death of his brother. He admired Chavez’s commitment to the cause, and the suffering he would undergo. This mutual understanding allowed the two relatively quiet men to take an immediate liking to one another.

337 “Francisco Garcia: Farm Worker Troubadour Vol. 1 (Essay + Songs + Translation + Photos).”
338 Schlesinger, Robert Kennedy and His Times, 792.
Chapter Three

Robert F. Kennedy and The Farm Workers 1966-1968

By the conclusion of the hearings, Kennedy and Chavez had established a relationship of trust and admiration which was both personal and professional. At Kennedy’s behest, his team was extremely responsive to all calls made on behalf of Chavez. Kennedy took on a range of UFW related work, including working for federal legislation to help farm workers, and successfully advocated for the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Amendment of 1966, which granted a minimum wage for agricultural workers. When Chavez was confronted with a new issue from some strikers who challenged the commitment to nonviolence within the union, he embarked on a highly religious and personal fast. Kennedy aimed to help Chavez through this challenge. Chavez aides first reached out to Kennedy asking for Kennedy’s support which Kennedy lent immediately, and throughout the fast Kennedy asked his aides for daily updates on Chavez’s condition. When Chavez’s team called Kennedy and informed him that Chavez would end the fast and that he wanted Kennedy to be there, Kennedy was six days out from announcing his presidential bid. He eagerly accepted the invitation for the day of the end of the fast, and, on that day told his aides his plans to run. It was important to Kennedy to be there for Chavez and Kennedy was moved by Chavez’s expression of sacrifice, dedication and

340 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 22.
341 Paul Chavez, interview.
343 “UFW Chronology.”
344 Peter Edelman, interview.
love at the end-of-the-fast mass, the farm workers’ overwhelming enthusiasm for Kennedy reaffirmed his commitment to run. The mass marked a firming of Chavez and Kennedy’s bond.

Kennedy clearly established himself as the UFW’s strongest ally within government. From the hearings forward, Kennedy and Chavez’s teams were in very close contact. When Chavez’s team made calls to Kennedy’s team, Kennedy’s aides were very responsive, and aimed to support the UFW in whatever way possible. Edelman said, “Cesar’s people kind of got the idea very early that we were responsive, that when they would call up and ask us to do something that we would try to do it.” In this way, Kennedy made it clear to Chavez and the farm workers that he was there for support.

According to Edelman, Kennedy was “the first national political figure to wholeheartedly embrace the farm workers’ cause and offer unqualified support for the union movement.” As a “ruthless interrogator of the corrupt and powerful,” the farm worker movement fit in well with his strengths, as he worked hard on getting legislation passed for farm workers, in addition to pushing growers and stakeholders on farm worker matters. During the strike and into the boycott, Kennedy applied pressure to growers, sending letters to DiGiorgio with Senator Williams. At the same time, he continued to apply pressure on Governor Brown, writing Brown letters on behalf of Chavez.

In the Senate, Kennedy called for the extension of federal labor protections to migrant laborers. Kennedy pushed for the passage of collective bargaining legislation from 1966 through


347 Clarke, The Last Campaign: Robert F. Kennedy and 82 Days That Inspired America. 242
1968. Kennedy argued for the inclusion of farm workers, saying in June 1966, “If ever there were a classic case for bringing farm workers under the collective bargaining provisions of the National Labor Relations Act, this is certainly it. The lack of legally constituted, orderly procedures upon which labor and management may rely created chaos in this situation. And if, as seems inevitable, the union movement among farm workers is going to spread, the chaos will spread unless we enact legislation to extend the rights and obligations of our national collective bargaining laws to the farm industry.”

In 1968, Chavez sent a telegram to Kennedy, asking whether he believed it would be passed, to which Kennedy responded that he was “cautiously optimistic.”

The proposal to have farm workers under the NLRA died in Congress, and was not enacted. Kennedy thereafter worked with Chavez in Congress on the successful passage of the Fair Labor Standards Amendment of 1966, which granted a minimum wage for agricultural workers.

Kennedy and Chavez’s relationship and trust for one another developed as they continued to partner on farm worker rights work. At Chavez’s request, Kennedy advocated on behalf of grape strikers over enforcing federal regulations banning green card holders from breaking strikes, and over applying pressure to the Justice Department’s Immigration Service and the Labor Department.

Kennedy also helped in fundraising efforts, went to Texas to observe strike

348 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 23.
349 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 23.
350 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 23.
351 Bender, One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity, 23.
352 Peter Edelman, interview.

Chavez recognized that a battle in the fields, where growers held total, unregulated power, would not achieve the goals he sought. Two years after the launch of the strike, in 1967, Chavez called for the boycott, bringing the farm workers’ fight to the cities, and focusing widespread public attention on the cause. The boycott was a technique Chavez had learned about through his extensive readings of the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, who undertook a salt boycott in 1930, and Martin Luther King, who led the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. The technique of using a boycott had never been used before in a dispute between farm labor and management, and national labor leaders put down the idea, but Chavez remained resolute in his belief that it would be successful. He aimed to harness the power of the people—whom he called “our court of last resort”—and believed that the American public would support “La

353 Peter Edelman, interview.
354 Peter Edelman, interview.
355 Peter Edelman, interview.
356 Peter Edelman, interview.
357 Marc Grossman, interview.
358 Marc Grossman, interview.
360 Marc Grossman, Interview.
Causa” by refraining from buying grapes. In this way, he aimed to directly engage the nation in the fight for farm workers’ rights.

Hundreds of grape strikers and UFW staff members travelled to cities across the U.S. and Canada to spread word of the boycott. At first, the union urged consumers to not purchase grapes bearing the labels of Guimarra Vineyards Corp., one of the largest table grape growers. The boycott was expanded to all California table grapes after the Giumarra used the labels from other grape growers in order to avoid the boycott. This effort garnered the broadest coalition of volunteers Chavez ever had. Tens of thousands of supporters picketed supermarkets across the U.S. As the boycott occurred during the Civil Rights movement, people were increasingly aware of injustices against minorities, and were therefore were more apt to embrace the farm workers, as they saw their struggle as reflective of the larger evils of racism. Millions of consumers stopped purchasing grapes across the nation. The boycott was successful in gaining significant leverage over table grape growers, who were forced to negotiate their first union contracts in 1970.

In the winter of 1968, the UFW’s commitment to nonviolence was challenged by frustrated strikers. At the time, the UFW had been striking for two and a half years for union contracts and signs of progress were dwindling. The UFW was fighting 32 powerful growers, led

361 Marc Grossman, interview.
362 Marc Grossman, interview.
363 "The Story of Cesar Chavez."
364 “UFW History.”
365 “UFW History.”
366 Marc Grossman, interview.
by John Giumarra Sr.; as well as for a brief time in 1966 the Teamsters Union, which had worked with DiGiorgio to defeat Chavez’s union.\textsuperscript{367} UFW members, especially some young men, were becoming increasingly frustrated by the ongoing nature of the struggle, and by grower and sheriff violence. They challenged Chavez’s tactics of nonviolence.\textsuperscript{368} Militant, frustrated strikers spoke about violence as a means of fighting back against growers, which they associated with strength and manliness, while depicting nonviolence as evidence of cowardice.\textsuperscript{369} At the same time, Giumarra Vineyards leveled allegations of violence by union members against farm workers, and served Chavez with a 12-count summons which ordered him to appear in court on February 26, 1968.\textsuperscript{370}

Chavez responded to the grumblings of violence with a powerful message—the farm worker movement would not go on until the strikers recommitted themselves to nonviolence. Chavez, unlike others, held that violence and martyrdom had no place in the farm worker movement. Chavez said, “If to build our union required the deliberate taking of life, either the life of a grower or his child, or the life of a farm worker or his child, then I choose not to see the union built.”\textsuperscript{371} In this way, Chavez took an unqualified position on nonviolence.


\textsuperscript{368} “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”

\textsuperscript{369} ”The 1965-1970 Delano Grape Strike and Boycott.”

\textsuperscript{370} “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”

Chavez embarked on a deeply spiritual and personal mission to reaffirm the union's commitment to nonviolence—that of a fast. In doing so, Chavez showed that he would willingly suffer for the farm worker movement, and for nonviolence. For Chavez, nonviolence was heavily intertwined with his Catholicism, and therefore fasting as a means of penance for the violent nature of the strikers seemed necessary. Thus, Chavez began “fasting in penance for violence provoked by his union’s struggle for survival.” Additionally, Chavez was fasting in penance for his perceived failures as a leader, in that he had not succeeded in completely committing his union to nonviolence. Chavez began the fast privately, and for several days didn't tell anyone his intentions. Chavez brought his fast to the attention of the farm workers in an effort to reaffirm their commitment to nonviolence. On February 14, 1968, Chavez addressed the members of the UFW, announcing that he was embarking on a “personal and religious fast. Chavez asserted that he would either remove himself from the union, or there would be a mutual recommitment to nonviolence. In recounting his announcement, Chavez said, "I told them I thought they were discouraged, because they were talking about short cuts, about violence. They were getting so mad with the growers, that they couldn't be effective anymore . . . Then I said I was going to stop eating until such time as everyone in the strike either ignored me or made up their minds that they were not going to be committing violence.” Chavez, in this way, embarked on a journey of suffering so as to enact change within his union. Chavez’s fast was a way to bring the movement


373 Paul Chavez, interview.

374 Hoffman, Ministry of the Dispossessed.
to a halt in order so that they would rethink their commitment to nonviolence. The fast would become a clear demonstration of how deeply Chavez felt about nonviolence, and the farm worker movement, in that he was willing to suffer greatly for both.

Chavez’s team reached out to Kennedy early on, asking him for support, as they believed Kennedy’s relationship was strong enough to influence Chavez if the fast went too far. One week into the fast, Cesar’s team contacted Edelman, asking him to notify Kennedy that he had begun the fast and of their concerns. They were concerned for Chavez’s health, unsure of his intentions, and thought the fast was getting little attention. The team said that they thought the only way for Cesar to go off the fast was if Kennedy went to see him and personally asked him to stop. Chavez would end his fast voluntarily, but Kennedy would make sure that he was by his side.

Chavez’s fast garnered attention across the nation. While fasting, Chavez lived on the union headquarters’ property of the “Forty Acres” in an adobe-like building which served as a gas station for union members. He spent his time in a 10 by 12 foot white-walled storeroom furnished by a single bed. On the wall of the room hung a picture of John F. Kennedy. During

375 Hoffman, Ministry of the Dispossessed.
376 Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman.
380 “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”; “What Cesar Chavez Taught Us.”
the fast he would pray and read the Bible and Gandhi.\textsuperscript{381} Within the first few days of the fast, groups of farm workers began visiting Chavez.\textsuperscript{382} He refused to be interviewed by reporters.\textsuperscript{383} People came from across the state, set up tents, and camped in support of Chavez.\textsuperscript{384} Visitors participated in daily masses at a makeshift chapel, held prayer vigils, and spent hours in line in order to speak with Chavez as he lay on his bed.\textsuperscript{385} Masses were attended by Helen Chavez, Chavez’s eight children, and his mother, in addition to swarms of visitors.\textsuperscript{386} Reverend Mark Day recalled. "We offered Mass each night at the adobe gas station . . . Nationwide TV audiences caught the prayer, penance, and nonviolence themes of the fast. I am sure Cesar got his point across, and I am convinced that much of our present support was generated during that period."\textsuperscript{387} Chavez made a powerful demonstration of his commitment to the farm workers and nonviolence in undergoing the fast which was seen by people across the nation.

Kennedy admired Chavez’s heroism and self-sacrifice. Kennedy, a devout Catholic, and someone who was resolutely against violence, understood and applauded what Chavez was doing. Both men regularly returned to their faith in desperate times, and were outspoken critics of violence. Kennedy was impressed by Chavez’s sacrifice for the cause and sent a telegram reading, “I want you to know that I fully and unswervingly support the principles which led you

\textsuperscript{381} “What Cesar Chavez Taught Us.”

\textsuperscript{382} “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”

\textsuperscript{383} Marc Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{384} “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”

\textsuperscript{385} “What Cesar Chavez Taught Us.”

\textsuperscript{386} “La Causa The Word Was Made Flesh.”

\textsuperscript{387} Day, \textit{Forty Acres}.
to undertake your fast…Your work and your belief have always been based solely upon
principles of non-violence…you have my best wishes and my deepest concern in these difficult
hours.”

Senate aide Peter Edelman recalled: “He asked me every day, you know, ‘How is he
today? Have you called out there? Do they want us to do something? What can I do?’”
Edelman called the team often, asking for updates—something that was rare for Edelman.
Finally, there came a point when Kennedy could be of service. After 25 days, Chavez lost 35
pounds and was left in dire condition. Chavez wanted to end his fast in a Mass of Thanksgiving,
and wanted Kennedy at his side.

Kennedy was at a critical juncture in his political career when Edelman told Kennedy
about Chavez’s request. At the time, Kennedy was in the final stages of deciding upon entering
the presidential race. Not even this would stop Kennedy from responding to his friend’s call.
Ethel Kennedy recounted when Robert Kennedy received the phone call. “[Robert Kennedy] had
been on a rigorous campaign and was totally exhausted and out of gas. He had just gotten home
and went for a swim with the family and then took a phone call. He climbed back up the hill,
drove to Dulles and flew out to Delano.”

There was no political efficacy in going to Delano. Senate aide Ed Guthman told Kennedy that the trip would have no impact on changing people’s views. Guthman said, “Well the people who like you are still gonna like you and the people who

388 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
389 Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman.
390 Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman
391 Peter Edelman, interview.
392 Ethel Kennedy, interview with Mariah Kennedy Cuomo, April 6, 2017, Providence, Rhode Island.
dislike you are gonna still dislike you.” After saying this, Guthman asked Kennedy, “What do you think?” to which Kennedy responded that he liked Cesar. Kennedy accepted the invitation without hesitation.

Kennedy stopped in Des Moines on the way to Delano, where Kennedy delivered a campaign speech for Governor Hughes. While there, Kennedy asked if the Hughes and three other governors who were at the rally to join him in visiting Cesar. They said no as “it wasn't on their agenda.” No national political figure was as committed to the farm workers as Robert F. Kennedy.

Speaking to reporters before the Mass, Kennedy said that he understood farm workers’ irritations and even resentment, and asserted they had been failed by the federal and state governments. “I think people are frustrated and I think they’re terribly disturbed by the fact that they haven’t had more success and that the federal government in Washington has not been helpful to them and that the State has not been helpful to them, and this is not only true here, but elsewhere in the country, so that there is this frustration and there is apt to be this explosion.” He called on the government to take action to support the farm workers. Kennedy said, “I think that Cesar Chavez is very influential, but I think also what in the last analysis is the answer is that we pass the laws that will remedy the injustices. That’s what we should do, that’s what those

393 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
394 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
395 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
396 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
397 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
of us in Washington should do.” Kennedy aimed to formulate constructive discussion around the farm workers. He aimed to get the story out that the farm workers should be helped, and denigrated the mere criticism of violence. Kennedy added, “We shouldn’t just deplore the violence and deplore the lawlessness. We should pass the laws that remedy what people riot about. We can’t have violence in the country, but we should also not have these injustices continue.” In this way, Kennedy openly applauded Chavez, and aimed to garner the support of the nation for the farm workers. Kennedy saw that people could point to Delano in fear and say “look at the violence,” and wanted to instead get people instead to see the injustice, and ask “how can we help?”

By attending the Mass of Thanksgiving in front of a crowd of about 8,000, Robert Kennedy solidified his relationship with Chavez and the farm workers. They understood he was making a sacrifice—traveling to Delano while contemplating the presidential campaign, and showing support for a leader and a cause that not only had no political benefit for him, but could cost him dearly with the powerful growers lobby in the crucial state of California. Doing so demonstrated Kennedy’s deep dedication to the farm workers’ cause and to their leader, Cesar Chavez. By attending the event, Kennedy developed a deeper connection and admiration for Chavez, in that he recognized Chavez’s suffering, and valued Chavez’s religious and symbolic message. Chavez, in turn, witnessed Kennedy’s compassion. In this way, the two men’s relationship was reinforced, and they garnered a greater sense of mutual trust.

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400 “Senator Robert F. Kennedy Visits Delano 1969.”
Before the mass, Kennedy briefly met with Chavez privately in the small room where Chavez had been fasting. Kennedy was concerned about Chavez’s health, and was aware of the significant suffering and religious experience he had undergone over the past 25 days. Kennedy did not take the fast lightly. Kennedy greeted a very weak Chavez, saying “How goes the boycott, Cesar?” Cesar smiled and said, “How goes running for President, Bob?” The two laughed and embraced one another. Chavez expressed his hopes that his fast efforts would be successful, and Kennedy gave Chavez a note he had the governors in Des Moines sign earlier that day. Kennedy and Chavez never had long, substantive conversations, nor did they spend a significant amount of time with one another, but in their actions they developed a close relationship. The two seemed to “just click.”

Kennedy, Chavez, and Huerta drove to the scene of the mass, a public park in Delano called Memorial Park. Eight thousand Chicanos watched the procession, excitingly calling to Kennedy and waving baseball caps while shouting, “Bobby! Bobby! Bobby!” and “un gran’ hombre!” Helen Chavez said about the scene, “Everybody was yelling, Kennedy, Kennedy. And you could tell by the expression on their faces that there was a lot of admiration and love for

401 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
402 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
403 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
404 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
405 Marc Grossman, interview.
406 Marc Grossman, interview.
407 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
408 Marc Grossman, interview.
Upon arriving at the park, Kennedy was mobbed by the farm workers who were eager to touch him. The crowds were excited to see Kennedy, and grabbed at his hands, sometimes scratching them. Helen Chavez said, “everybody wanted to touch him.” When people reached for him, Dolores Huerta called out, “Get back!” Edelman knew that Kennedy liked engaging with the crowds so told her it was unnecessary. The farm workers were excited by their political hero’s enthusiasm for their cause.

Chavez was weak, and had to be half carried to his seat. Most who attended the mass were Mexican American farm workers. The event was highly symbolic and ceremonial. Edelman described the event as having a “marvellous kind of pageantry about it.” The union had prepared a makeshift altar on a flatbed truck. The mass was ecumenical, symbolizing the farm workers’ openness to other faiths, and included readings from Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic representatives. Three hundred loaves of Mexican semita bread, called the bread of

409 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
410 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
411 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
412 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
413 Peter Edelman, interview with Larry Hackman, July 15, 1969.
416 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.
social justice, were distributed after the mass for communion. Paul Schrade presented the union with 50 thousand dollars to build its new headquarters at the Forty Acres on behalf of Walter Reuther.

While many important figures attended the mass, Kennedy was the most highly celebrated, as he was loved and admired by Chavez and the farm workers. As Chavez was too weak to speak that day, he prepared a statement which was read by assistant and Migrant Ministry staffer Reverend Jim Drake. In signaling Chavez’s appreciation of Kennedy’s continued dedication and friendship, his statement opened, “We should all express our thanks to Senator Kennedy for his constant work on behalf of the poor, for his personal encouragement to me, and for taking the time to break bread with us today.” Helen Chavez said about Cesar Chavez’s attitude towards Kennedy at the time, “He admired Robert a lot, because he took the time to come out here, where he was, to be with the workers. And that really was a big impression on César and on everyone that this man that was so busy and so well known, so well-loved was out here to help the workers.” Helen said the fact that Kennedy was the first


419 Ethel Kennedy, interview, Farmworker Documentation Project.

420 Paul Schrade, interview.


423 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
political leader to spend time to visit the farm workers “meant a lot to all of us—to everyone.” For the farm workers and for Chavez, Kennedy’s attendance was hugely important.

Chavez’s statement was a “call to sacrifice” in the “non-violent struggle for justice.” In explaining his fast, Chavez said, “It was a fast for non-violence and a call to sacrifice.”

Chavez argued that the farm workers struggle was difficult, and would require making sacrifices. Chavez said, “Our struggle is not easy. Those who oppose our cause are rich and powerful and they have many allies in high places. We are poor. Our allies are few. But we have something the rich do not own. We have our own bodies and spirits and the justice of our cause as our weapons.”

Chavez portrayed farm workers as underdogs fighting for justice. In arguing against nonviolence, Chavez shared what he believed showed true strength—sacrifice. “It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find life. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally non-violent struggle for justice.” Chavez’s statement concluded with, “To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!”

Chavez’s statement was powerful in that it revealed that Chavez had committed his life to suffering for the farm worker movement, and he had transformed the struggle of the farm workers into their strength.

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424 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.


While wearing a black-eagle UFW button, Kennedy sat beside Chavez during the mass.\textsuperscript{429} Chavez was covered in blankets and sat slumped in his chair, looking extremely weak.\textsuperscript{430} During communion, Bobby Kennedy broke a home-baked loaf of Semita bread and personally presented the Eucharist—the Body of Christ—to Cesar Chavez, ending the labor leader’s twenty-five day fast with the bread of Life.\textsuperscript{431} Kennedy ate from the same home-baked loaf.\textsuperscript{432} Ethel Kennedy said of the moment, “I thought it was wonderful…together they broke the bread of social justice.”\textsuperscript{433}

After receiving communion, Kennedy delivered a speech in an effort to rally the farm workers.\textsuperscript{434} He began by trying to speak Spanish. After realizing that his accent was no good, Kennedy said in a teasing manner to the crowd, “Am I murdering the language?”\textsuperscript{435} The crowd of excited farm workers cheered in response. Kennedy said he was at the “historic occasion” “out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time—Cesar Chavez” but also “to congratulate all of you, you who are locked with Cesar in the struggle for justice for farm workers, and the struggle for the Spanish-speaking American.”\textsuperscript{436} Kennedy commended the achievements of the farm workers. He said, “You have won historic victories,” calling them the first union to “fight

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[429] "Senator Robert F. Kennedy Visits Delano 1968."
\item[430] “What Cesar Chavez Taught Us.”
\item[431] "Senator Robert F. Kennedy Visits Delano 1968."
\item[432] “What Cesar Chavez Taught Us.”
\item[433] Ethel Kennedy, interview, April 2, 2017, Farmworker Movement Documentation Project.
\item[434] Paul Schrade, interview.
\item[435] Marc Grossman, interview.
\item[436] “Robert F. Kennedy Statement on Cesar Chavez March 10, 1968.”
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
and triumph, over all the odds” and said that “the victories are yours and yours alone.”

He commended their strength in committing to nonviolence, saying “It takes far greater commitment, far more courage to say, ‘we will do what must be done through an organization of the people, through patient, careful building of a democratic ‘organization.’” Kennedy, in a nod to *Henry V*—his favorite passage from Shakespeare—said that in the future, the farm workers would look back on these days of struggle with pride. “And when your children and grandchildren take their place in America—going to high school, and college, and taking good jobs at good pay—when you look 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 was there at the time of difficulty and danger. I marched with Cesar.’” Kennedy’s remarks went far beyond a rote rally—for him, save love, there was no more admirable trait than moral courage—self-sacrifice for a cause greater than oneself. For Kennedy, Chavez become one in his band of brothers.

Kennedy placed himself as a proud partner in the plight of farm workers. He clearly outlined “Washington’s responsibility” “to pass the laws that will remedy the injustices farm workers face.” Kennedy said that farm workers must have a federal law for collective bargaining “this year,” more adequate regulation of green-card workers to prevent their use as strikebreakers “this year,” the enforcement of labor laws “this year,” and equal protection laws

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437 “Robert F. Kennedy Statement on Cesar Chavez March 10, 1968.”
“from now on.” In this way, he took a clear and strong stance on the legislation he believed ought to be passed. Kennedy concluded in saying that he was proud of his alliance with the farm workers, and would continue to fight with them in the future. Kennedy, said, “I come here to say that we will fight together to achieve for you the aspirations of every American—decent wages, decent housing, decent schooling, a chance for yourselves and your children. You stand for justice and I am proud to stand with you.” He ended the speech saying, “Viva La Causa!” Kennedy had reaffirmed his allegiance to and admiration for Chavez and the farm workers.

The farm workers reacted to Kennedy's speech by mobbing him and calling on him to run for President. Chavez recounted that “The crowd was pushing and surging” to reach Kennedy as he made his way to his car. While this made some around him fearful, Kennedy embraced the excitement. Having reached his car, Kennedy turned towards the crowd and stood shaking hands and speaking to people. When Kennedy finally began driving away, farm workers yelled to him through the windows, asking “Aren't you going to run? Why don't you run? Please run!” Kennedy spontaneously jumped on top of the roof of the car, and shouted back to the

441 "Senator Robert F. Kennedy Visits Delano 1968."
442 “Robert F. Kennedy Statement on Cesar Chavez March 10, 1968.”
443 "Senator Robert F. Kennedy Visits Delano 1968."
444 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
445 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
446 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
447 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
farm workers, thanking them for their support and saying, “Viva la Causa!” The farm workers loved Kennedy, and Kennedy loved the farm workers.

On his flight back to New York, Kennedy called California State Assembly Speaker Jesse Unruh—and repeated the news he had shared with Chavez—that he would run for president. Kennedy’s announcement six days later came to the farm workers as no surprise. Some of Kennedy’s close advisors, including Paul Schrade, say that it was in Delano, amidst the crowds of cheering farm workers, that Kennedy decided to run. Schrade said, “Farm workers were big in provoking Kennedy to run, and so was that day.” In Delano, Schrade followed Kennedy to the airport in order to convince him to run. “I really pounded him about running. I said these people need the presidency more than you do, more than anybody, and you've got to run.” Schrade recounted that at this point, Kennedy “began asking questions about tactics, strategy and so forth.” In truth, Kennedy had made decision the day before. It was clear that Kennedy was truly touched by the outpouring of support from the farm workers—a group whom he respected and admired vastly—and by their resolute dedication to justice. The farm workers would be a central part of Kennedy’s campaign.

448 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
449 Paul Schrade, interview.
450 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
451 Paul Schrade, interview.
452 Paul Schrade, interview.
453 Paul Schrade, interview.
454 Peter Edelman, interview.
Kennedy was deeply moved by Chavez’s fast. In a letter to a constituent about the trip, Kennedy reiterated the message which he had shared during his speech with the farm workers, showing that he truly believed in what he said. Kennedy wrote, “I was pleased and proud to go to Delano to honor a great man, an heroic figure of our time, Cesar Chavez. His non-violent struggle for the rights of the migrant worker is a great achievement which will afford Americans of Mexican decent the full participation in our society which they deserve.”

The event deepened his ties with the farm worker movement, and Kennedy wrote a note to Edelman saying, “I’d like to stay in touch with those people.” Chavez was also deeply moved by Kennedy’s participation, and was fully committed to him. On March 16th, when Kennedy announced his campaign for presidency, Chavez committed the UFW to the Kennedy campaign in the primary. The efforts contributed to Kennedy’s victory in the state.

In speaking about his presidential campaign in Los Angeles, California on March 24, 1968, Kennedy would heavily dedicate the majority of his remarks to the farm worker movement, and praise Chavez for the sacrifice and values he portrayed in his fast. He opened up speaking about visiting Chavez during the Mass of Thanksgiving. Kennedy said, “Two weeks ago, I came to California to pay homage to one of the great living Americans: Cesar Chavez. For

456 Palermo, In His Own Right, 226.
458 Tejada-Flores, "Chávez, César."
459 Tejada-Flores, Rick. "Chávez, César."
more than two years from his base in the grape fields of California, Cesar Chavez has been
sending the rest of America a message. The message says that Americans of Mexican decent
were walking taller than ever before. The message says that dignity is not something warded
coldly in a welfare office. The message says that dignity is something man attains with his mind,
with the labor his body, with his belief in himself. It is not something you buy in a
supermarket.” Kennedy had developed a clear understanding of what Chavez was trying to
accomplish, and utilized his campaign as means of spreading that message. He would go on to
say that it is Chavez’s work which is one of the major reasons why he ran. “I come here to honor
Cesar Chavez, and to honor his message. I come here today for other reasons. But my concerns
remain the same concerns of Cesar Chavez.” At the Mass of Thanksgiving, Kennedy had
aligned himself with Chavez’s underlying drives.

Chapter Four

Robert F. Kennedy and Farm Workers 1968

Even before Kennedy had announced his presidential candidacy, he had a campaign team of staunch supporters who were eagerly preparing for his bid: the UFW. When Kennedy announced, the UFW stopped strike efforts in order to focus solely on campaigning for Kennedy for months. Chavez spent 19 days on the road for Kennedy, and the farm workers launched a “get out the vote” campaign effort in major barrios across California, including East L.A., with such tenacity that the efforts reaped historic voter turnout numbers. Kennedy, in turn, acknowledged the farm workers, and honored them at the victory celebration—Dolores Huerta was by his side on the podium when he delivered his victory speech. Kennedy and Chavez both worked for one another with vigor, and in doing so, expressed their faith in one another and that they were bound in a mutual struggle.

On March 16, 1968, Kennedy announced he was running for president. Senator Eugene McCarthy had almost defeated President Lyndon Johnson in the New Hampshire Democratic primary. Robert Kennedy entered the race late in the game. Winning California would be essential in attaining the democratic nomination, as the state had a large delegate bloc. McCarthy had a lot of support in the state. Liberals in California had already committed to McCarthy in

463 Marc Grossman, interview.
464 Paul Chavez, interview.
large numbers by the time Kennedy announced. Additionally, democratic registration in the state was on the decline, posing another challenge for Kennedy.

At the time of his announcement, the Democratic Party was split over the issue of Vietnam. Walter Reuther of the UAW and George Meany of the AFL-CIO supported Johnson (although Paul Schrade with the UAW was for Kennedy.) Kennedy, advocating peace, would not rely on “old hard-liners of the Democratic Party” and instead benefited from the “new and fresh and very enthusiastic support that he was getting” from minority groups—including the farm workers—and students. Schrade said that “it was a beautiful campaign.” Just a few weeks after Kennedy announced his candidacy, Johnson withdrew from the race, citing the war. The date was March 31, 1968.

In California, the Mexican American vote was large in numbers but a difficult vote to get out. The Kennedy campaign would focus significant time on engaging this voter base. The campaign created one of its headquarters for these efforts in East Los Angeles, which was a

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467 Paul Schrade, interview.

468 Paul Schrade, interview.

469 Paul Schrade, interview.

470 Paul Schrade, interview.

471 Paul Schrade, interview.


473 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
central hub of Latinos. Bert Corona, head of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), would help in this effort, although Chavez and the farm workers were the major contributors.

Kennedy focused extensively on attracting the votes of minority groups, especially the Mexican-American vote. Some within his campaign, including Frank Burns, a California political figure and aide to Jesse Unruh during Kennedy's campaign, saw this as problematic, asserting that he was “overplaying their strengths,” and favored instead appealing to “party leadership” and “the blue collar guy,” groups he thought Kennedy was largely ignoring and which he thought Kennedy could get through outreach. Burns expressed that he was trying to get Kennedy to make “contact with more people in California than say just Cesar Chavez or Paul Schrade or some of your liberal groups,” and that in resisting, Kennedy and Burns engaged in “some ring-ding fights on that subject.” Kennedy continued to focus on the liberal base. Regarding the decision to do an event for farm workers and the Mexican American vote, Burns, said, “Usually there’d been a decision to do it and then we would come in and perhaps just say, well, all right, do that but do some other things, too.”

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474 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.


477 Frank Burns, interview with Larry J. Hackman.

478 Frank Burns, interview with Larry J. Hackman.

479 Frank Burns, interview with Larry J. Hackman.
Cesar Chavez believed that Kennedy had to run for President. After Kennedy spoke so vehemently about the changes he saw necessary in Washington, and showed a passion to enact those changes, Chavez was confident Kennedy would run for President. Chavez said, “We couldn't see how he couldn’t run. With us it was a foregone conclusion that he would.”\(^{480}\) As early as two years before Kennedy announced his bid for President, the farm workers had begun preparing for his campaign effort, claiming that they were the first organized group to do so.\(^{481}\) During the Senate hearings in 1966, the union disseminated campaign materials—bumper stickers, signs and posters—for a Kennedy presidential race.\(^{482}\) Campaign signs hung on the walls of the Delano High School auditorium where Kennedy participated in hearings on March 16th, and farm workers shouted, “Kennedy for ’68,” and “We want Kennedy ’68.”\(^{483}\) At the time, Peter Edelman asked Jim Drake whether the farm workers “really meant” what was intended by the campaign materials, to which Drake responded “Not only do they mean it, but it’s going to happen.”\(^{484}\) Instead of asking the questions of whether or when Kennedy would run, the farm workers had jumpstarted his campaign.

By the time Kennedy announced his run for President, Kennedy and Chavez had formed a close relationship based upon mutual trust and Kennedy’s attendance at Chavez’s fast had sealed the bond between them. Kennedy and Chavez’s teams had day-to-day contact, and Chavez

\(^{480}\) Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

\(^{481}\) Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

\(^{482}\) Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

\(^{483}\) Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

\(^{484}\) Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
knew that he could rely on Kennedy no matter the issue that arose. During Chavez’s many campaigns, including boycotts and strikes, he relied heavily on community engagement, and Kennedy’s supporters backed the farm workers in a way that was crucial to the success of his efforts. Schrade said of their bond, “That was really a beautiful relationship. I’ve never seen anything like it, and I’ve never seen anything like it since.” Chavez and the farm workers saw that Kennedy was committed to their welfare and their futures, and had built a strong relationship grounded in that commitment.

Chavez believed that getting behind Kennedy for the presidential race was the right thing to do for the nation. Chavez was aligned with Kennedy’s positions on issues that Chavez too thought were important—deescalating the war in Vietnam, combating poverty, and desegregation. Chavez believed Kennedy had the necessary leadership skills to tackle these issues—those of compassion and strength. Chavez therefore thought that Kennedy’s election was more important than the impact it would have on the farm worker movement alone, in that it would allow for him to help with these major issues which were also close to Chavez’s own heart.

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485 Paul Schrade interview.
486 Paul Schrade interview.
487 Paul Schrade interview.
488 Paul Schrade interview.
489 Paul Chavez, interview.
490 Paul Chavez, interview.
491 Paul Chavez, interview.
492 Paul Chavez, interview.
Immediately after the fast, Kennedy called Chavez in order to ask him to be a delegate in California.\textsuperscript{493} Chavez’s support would be crucial in the state.\textsuperscript{494} Upon hearing Chavez’s frail voice, Kennedy felt badly asking him for a political favor, and decided against it.\textsuperscript{495} Kennedy knew that in being a delegate, Chavez would have to take on greater challenges, so he would not push Chavez on the matter. When Kennedy’s campaign chairman in California Jesse Unruh hadn’t heard back from Chavez on the delegate question, he contacted Paul Schrade, who in turn, called Kennedy.\textsuperscript{496} Schrade told Kennedy that Chavez’s delegate status was incredibly important, and asked him what had happened.\textsuperscript{497} Kennedy explained to Schrade, “He sounded so sick and so weak at that point from the fast I didn’t have the heart to make him take on the Teamsters and George Meany and because it would be trouble for him.”\textsuperscript{498} Schrade responded, “That doesn't sound like the cold-blooded SOB you’re supposed to be.” There was a pause, and Kennedy chuckled, saying, “Yeah Paul, but don’t tell anybody.”\textsuperscript{499} Schrade said that he was adamant that they absolutely needed Chavez, and so Schrade called Chavez himself.\textsuperscript{500} Chavez responded to Schrade saying that he had to call a community meeting of the grape strikers to consider the

\textsuperscript{493} Grossman, interview.

\textsuperscript{494} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{495} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{496} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{497} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{498} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{499} Paul Schrade, interview.

\textsuperscript{500} Paul Schrade, interview.
Committee members from different ranches assembled in Delano, and voted unanimously in favor of Chavez’s becoming delegate for Kennedy. Chavez and the farm workers' support were key for the campaign.

The farm workers campaign for Kennedy in California broke boundaries. The farm workers embraced Kennedy not as a politician, but as a partner whom they idolized and loved. The campaign had an “electric” spirit, where people engaged quickly, with passion and dedication to the effort. This was indicative of the strong relationship Kennedy had formed with Chavez and the farm workers.

Chavez led a campaign effort that benefited from a positive working relationship with Kennedy personnel and his expertise in the area. Chavez had extensive experience in community organizing, campaigning, and working in California, particularly with Chicanos. Chavez had worked on the Viva Kennedy campaign in 1960, a campaign to garner Mexican-American votes for President Kennedy. Chavez was well-prepared to launch a campaign in East Los Angeles and in barrios throughout the state. Chavez said, “We had the truth and we had the resources and we had the courage and the willingness to do it. So we were independent. We didn't want to get tied into any fighting. We wanted to do some work.” Chavez and his staff partnered with Kennedy personnel, including Jim Drake, Peter Edelman, and Fred Dutton, who helped provide any

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501 Paul Schrade, interview.
502 Paul Schrade, interview.
503 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
504 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
support necessary. Schrade recounted, “It was really a beautiful relationship.” The Kennedy campaign provided the farm workers with funding, although they did not require much, Kennedy campaign materials, which the farm workers appropriated to fit their needs. Chavez said, “We had a beautiful campaign.”

It was important symbolically for the farm workers to win Delano for Kennedy. Chavez said, “we made up our minds that we had to win in Delano for him.” The farm workers were up against Republicans who were registering as Democrats so that they could vote for McCarthy and thereby sabotage Kennedy. The farm workers stationed 175 people in Delano, amongst the 26 precincts. The attitude, according to Chavez, was, “we want every Kennedy vote out. No excuses that ‘I can’t go,’ or ‘I’m sick,’ or ‘I’m tired.’” Kennedy lost in 20 precincts, won in 6, but those votes were enough to give him the City of Delano. The farm workers had secured their home base for Kennedy.

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505 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.; Peter Edelman, interview.
506 Paul Schrade, interview.
507 Paul Schrade, interview.
508 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
509 “Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.’
510 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
511 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
512 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
513 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
514 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
Chavez went on a 19-day tour, speaking on behalf of Kennedy at colleges and universities and in Spanish-speaking communities across the state. Chavez visited almost every university in California. The universities were largely pro-McCarthy. Chavez held rallies where he expressed why the farm workers wanted Kennedy for President. Chavez noted that these speeches were effective on college campuses. Chavez said, “And some people would say, ‘All right, if that’s what the workers want, we’ll work for Kennedy.’” Chavez recounted one moment when he overcame pushback around the idea of visiting Berkeley. People expressed fear around visiting Berkeley. Chavez responded, “No, we’re going to go to Berkeley and we’re going to talk those guys’ heads off. He’s our candidate and we don’t have anything to apologize for.” Chavez was resolute in his work for Kennedy.

During the tour, Chavez visited every county with significant Spanish-speaking populations. During this portion of the tour, rallies were “jammed packed.” Chavez told his close friend and assistant from the Protestant Migrant Ministry Reverend Jim Drake that he was impressed by the large numbers of people who came to hear him speak about Kennedy.

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515 Bender, *One Night in America: Robert Kennedy, César Chávez, and the Dream of Dignity*, 38
516 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
517 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
519 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
520 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
521 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
farm workers handed out ballots which people were to use to select their vote upon.\textsuperscript{523} At the very bottom of the ballot was Kennedy’s name.\textsuperscript{524} Once the ballots were filled out, Chavez got people to commit to the job of working to make sure their selection was victorious.\textsuperscript{525} The farm workers were the only group utilizing this tactic.\textsuperscript{526}

The farm workers created an organized and concerted campaign effort through strategically assigning farm workers to blocks within East Los Angeles. Chavez strategically assigned farm worker supervisors to five precincts each in East L.A.\textsuperscript{527} Groups of farm workers were assigned precincts, and each farm worker was assigned specific blocks within these precincts.\textsuperscript{528} Every block had at least one worker assigned to it.\textsuperscript{529} Chavez said during one meeting, “Forget about California, forget about Los Angeles, forget about East Los Angeles. You just remember your block.”\textsuperscript{530} Workers went door-to-door on their assigned block, appealing for support for Kennedy.\textsuperscript{531} They would go to each registered Democrat’s door four times—first to ask for their support, second to ask them to volunteer, third to drop off literature, and fourth to

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{523} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\bibitem{524} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\bibitem{525} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\bibitem{526} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\bibitem{528} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 170.
\bibitem{529} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien part 2.
\bibitem{530} Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
\bibitem{531} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 170.
\end{thebibliography}
remind them to vote.\footnote{Chavez said about his campaign organization, “We had a tight organization. It was a machine. We just turned it on and produced.”}{533} Latinos and African Americans were overwhelmingly in support of Kennedy. Kennedy had a strong track record of standing up for these two communities. This was reinforced during the campaign, as Kennedy’s strategy had a heavy emphasis on personally touching those communities and the people in the communities.\footnote{He often pointed to the plight of these minority groups as precipitating his run for office. In these ways, Kennedy had achieved the love and admiration of these two minority groups. Farm workers recount that in their door-to-door campaigning, they were overwhelmingly met with strong support for Kennedy which was derived organically.}{534} \footnote{Helen Chavez recounted campaigning saying that, “Everybody really liked him and thought that he would make a good president. And everybody would say that they were going to vote for him. The response was very good. I don't think we got any no's in that area.”}{535} The get out the vote effort was incredibly successful due in large part to the fact that there was a lot enthusiasm for the farm workers union in East L.A.\footnote{Many people volunteered to join them in their campaigning.}{536} Additionally, the support of the farm workers union helped to propel even further support for Kennedy. The support for the farm workers was often translated into support for Kennedy.

\footnote{Paraphrased from Pawel, The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography, 170.}{532} \footnote{Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.}{533} \footnote{Peter Edelman, interview.}{534} \footnote{Pawel, The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography, 170.}{535} \footnote{Helen Chavez, interview.}{536} \footnote{“Cesar and Martin, March ’68.”}{537}
The farm workers would approach the people whom they were addressing, announcing that they were from Delano with the farm workers. At this point, people were excited. Chavez said, “We were extremely popular. They knew all about the farm workers and they liked them very much because they're only about [a] generation removed from farm work.”\textsuperscript{538} Chavez said, “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.’”\textsuperscript{539} Helen Chavez said that she thought that the fact that they were from the union helped generate positive responses and an outpouring of volunteer support. Chavez said these positive responses and volunteers she received “had a lot to do with us.”\textsuperscript{540} She said, “Saying where we were from and that the Union—by then, the Union was— people knew a lot about the Union and knew what César was doing. And so, knowing that we endorsed him, I think that helped a lot, and then we had a lot of people that were out there volunteering to go help.”\textsuperscript{541} In this way, the farm workers paired with Kennedy formed a campaign force which was difficult to beat.

On election day, Cesar Chavez and 3,500 union members worked in L.A. in a highly-spirited a get-out-the-vote effort.\textsuperscript{542} The farm workers went to their assigned precincts, reminded people to vote for Kennedy, and offered people rides to their voting places.\textsuperscript{543} Farm workers said

\textsuperscript{538} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 170.

\textsuperscript{539} “Cesar and Martin, March ’68.”

\textsuperscript{540} Helen Chavez oral history

\textsuperscript{541} Helen Chavez oral history

\textsuperscript{542} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

\textsuperscript{543} Pawel, \textit{The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography}, 171.
“Cesar Chavez says today’s the day to vote for Robert Kennedy.”[^44] Twenty cars drove through East Los Angeles making announcements in Spanish over loudspeakers.[^45] Kennedy campaign coordinator Walter Sheridan said of the effort, “So his whole thing was that they would get, literally drag every Mexican-American in East Los Angeles to the polls, and they did.”[^46]

At one o’clock, the farm workers began to march through Los Angeles, led by Chavez and a mariachi band that was driven on a truck.[^47] After making three or four stops over the span of about ten minutes, the march had amassed 300 people.[^48] There was overwhelming support for Kennedy in the districts they visited. Chavez recounted that in black neighborhoods and housing projects people “were 1000% for Kennedy there.”[^49] Chavez engaged the crowds, rallying support for Kennedy. He pointed to those holding “Viva Kennedy” signs, and told them, “This next song is dedicated to you, if you’re going to vote for Kennedy.”[^50] He yelled to the crowds saying, “How many have voted?” and, “What about your aunt, your father, your mother, your


[^45]: Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.


[^47]: Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

[^48]: Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

[^49]: Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.

[^50]: Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
grandfather? Everybody votes.”

Chavez said on the march, “We were working very hard, but we were very happy. It was structured so that there was a lot of happiness and a lot of spirit.”

People turned out to vote in historic numbers. Certain precincts in East L.A. and Watts were reporting 100 percent turnout—two times the normal rate—by 4 or 5pm, and were closing the polls. When Kennedy campaign press secretary Frank Mankiewitz heard that polls were closing, he sent out people to see what was the matter. His messengers came back laughing, to which Mankiewitz asked them what was so funny. They reported back that the polls had closed because 100% of the people had voted—something that had never occurred in the history of the state.

Many pointed to the registration effort by the farm workers as a key factor in Kennedy’s winning California. Schrade said, “it was just because Chavez and Ted Watkins were out working those precincts and the fact that people really wanted to get out and vote…that’s why the polls were closed early and that’s where the votes came from and were important in the race against McCarthy.” He said about the victory, “It was just a great moment. that whole relationship with Chavez, Huerta and Watkins was really important to winning California.”

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552 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
554 Paul Schrade, interview.
555 Paul Schrade, interview.
556 Paul Schrade, interview.
557 Paul Schrade, interview.
558 Paul Schrade, interview.
People were impressed by the registration efforts. Frank Burns said, “The Cesar Chavez people did a hell of a job, the most effective and most honest registration I’d ever seen conducted; they turned back money, if you can believe it. They did a good job, but there wasn’t much time to do it in.”\textsuperscript{559} This tactic would be replicated in future campaigns. The GOTV technique was utilized in the “Humphrey for President, Art Torres for Assembly, Bradley for Governor, No on Proposition 22, Brown for Governor, Brown for President, Yes on 14, Dellums for Congress, Bobby Seale for Mayor, Jack O’Connell for Assembly” campaigns—among many other campaigns.\textsuperscript{560}

The farm workers campaign effort was driven by the mass enthusiasm of its volunteers. The farm workers campaign was unique in that its efforts did not require significant funding. Chavez called the amount spent in Los Angeles “peanuts,” and noted that it was 1/10 the money of JFK’s presidential campaign.\textsuperscript{561} This was rare for a union campaign.\textsuperscript{562} What was essential to the farm workers’ success were the numbers of dedicated volunteers they had on the ground. Chavez said that for every person working for John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign, they had 50 for RFK, adding “It was electrifying. The polls will show you. That line is very seldom crossed.”\textsuperscript{563}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[560] “Commentary.”
\item[561] Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\item[562] Schrade, interview.
\end{footnotes}
Senator Kennedy was unique in that he was the first person whom the farm workers would politically trust. Chavez said that Robert Kennedy was the only politician he ever truly trusted because he provided his support without being asked and when it was not in his interest.\footnote{Marc Grossman, interview.} Dolores Huerta said, “The UFWOC supported Robert F. Kennedy’s Presidential primary campaign in 1968 because we felt he would make a difference. We wouldn’t support any politician.”\footnote{El Macriendo, October, 1970, Farmworker Documentation Project, \url{https://libraries.ucsd.edu/farmworkermovement/ufwarchives/elmalcriado/1970/October%201,%201970%20No%208_PDF.pdf}} “He [Kennedy] had a sense of what was wrong and had the courage to enforce the law,” Huerta added.\footnote{El Macriendo, October, 1970, Farmworker Documentation Project.}

In 1968, the farm workers and Chavez had embraced Robert Kennedy as a partner whom they loved. Kennedy was also different in that he crossed the boundary of being perceived as a politician, and instead, was viewed as a member of the farm worker movement and a friend. Chavez noted that this was a unique feeling for a politician. “It’s that line that you very seldom cross. I’ve never seen a politician cross that line and I don’t think that I’ll ever live to see another public figure.”\footnote{Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.} Chavez said, “With Senator Robert Kennedy it was like he was ours.”\footnote{Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.} Chavez also said, “It would be that kind of close, like the kind of closeness that creates tearing him to pieces, little by little just wanting him all for you and that kind of thing…We liked him very— we loved him very much.”\footnote{Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.} The farm workers felt a unique affection for Kennedy,
which Chavez and others characterized as idolization. Chavez also said, “It was like respect, admiration, love, idolized. God, I can’t explain it. It’s just—I do know that it will probably be a long, long time.”570 There was lots of enthusiasm for Kennedy amongst farm workers.571 Chavez noted that this was something he observed in other groups as well. “It’s strange, I’ve never seen anything like it. It wasn't only our group, because I did a lot of speaking for him…”572 This deep affection was visible in the crowds that swarmed around Kennedy.573 These feelings of admiration translated into “unlimited love and excitement” within the effort and a spirit driving a campaign that was also extremely dedicated in that participants worked hard day and night.

Helen Chavez said that one of the highlights of her life was walking precincts for Kennedy in East L.A..574 Her son, Paul Chavez, said that every time she passed the City Terrace, neighborhood where she had walked for Kennedy, she pointed it out and said that she was so proud, and that people were genuinely excited to be involved during the campaign.575 Helen wasn't someone to get excited.576 She also was not predisposed to support politicians, or to campaign, as she was shy.577 However, Helen liked campaigning for Kennedy because she liked him. She said that it was difficult because she was so shy “It was in the beginning,” adding, “but

570 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien part 2.
571 Paul Chavez, interview.
572 Paul Chavez, interview.
573 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
574 Paul Chavez, interview.
575 Paul Chavez, interview.
576 Paul Chavez, interview.
577 Paul Chavez, interview.; Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
like I say, for Bobby Kennedy, I went all out. I admired him. I admired him because he had come up to meet with César and to be with him when he broke his fast, and had talked to him, you know, not to fast, because he was going to harm himself, and how they had sent out Dr. [Janet] Travell.”578 (Dr. Travell, a renowned specialist in back pain, had treated President Kennedy and was sent to California by the Kennedy family to help Cesar with his chronic and debilitating back condition.)579 Helen added, “I said, if they're willing to take the time to be so generous, and so kind, you know, we have to go out and do all this work for this great man. And he would have made a great president…he would have been the best.”580 Helen recounted that in walking precincts, there were a “A lot of hills up and down,”581 but that “for him, I didn't mind it.”582 She said, “That was one campaign that I didn't mind doing. I enjoyed it. I gave all my heart to it because I really admired him.”583 Kennedy was the last person for whom Helen Chavez walked a precinct.584

The farm workers were willing to sacrifice for the campaign effort. Cesar Chavez said, “The campaign wasn't done on money, you know. It was done just on an awful lot of sacrifice.”585 The farm workers picked up from their homes and families, and moved into

578 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
579 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.; Marc Grossman, interview.
580 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
581 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
582 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
583 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
584 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
585 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
churches and other places in East Los Angeles in order to campaign. One hundred or more farm
workers slept in one church basement, which was filled with mattresses.\textsuperscript{586} Some slept in
sleeping bags.\textsuperscript{587} They created a makeshift kitchen, lived out of suitcases, and had no place to
shower.\textsuperscript{588} Richard Chavez, Cesar’s brother, called the living conditions miserable.\textsuperscript{589}

Cesar Chavez was supposed to be a major part of the victory celebration in California. The hard work and successful efforts of the farm workers were recognized by the Kennedy team as hugely impactful, and they wanted to honor Chavez and the farm workers. Sheridan said on Chavez, “all he ever asked in return was that he and his people be invited to the victory celebration.”\textsuperscript{590} On Election Day, Cesar Chavez was told by Sheridan that Kennedy’s campaign manager Steve Smith was eager to have Chavez be a part of the victory celebration.\textsuperscript{591} Chavez, staying true to his character, replied asking whether the mariachi band could come, as the union had voted that it should be included in the festivities.\textsuperscript{592} When Sheridan told Chavez that Smith said a mariachi band wouldn’t fit with the event, Chavez said, “Oh, that’s too bad. But it’s all right, we just won’t come.”\textsuperscript{593} Sheridan responded to Chavez saying, “Well, bring your goddamn

\textsuperscript{586} Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
\textsuperscript{587} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\textsuperscript{588} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\textsuperscript{589} Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien.
\textsuperscript{590} Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
\textsuperscript{591} Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
\textsuperscript{592} Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene, August 13, 1969, (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.
\textsuperscript{593} Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
band.”

Two hundred farm workers, the mariachi band, and Cesar Chavez marched through the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel to join the VIP reception. At the reception, the mariachi band replaced the Dixieland band that was on stage. Sheridan said of the scene, “So we finally—it was really a struggle—got the mariachi band up on the stage, and they took over, and it was just fantastic.” While Chavez wanted the farm workers’ effort to be recognized, Chavez himself felt embarrassed at the scene. He was even more embarrassed when people began chanting, “We want Chavez!” Either way, the farm workers’ vivacious energy and enthusiasm was not to be ignored.

When Kennedy heard that he had won, he sent a search party looking for Chavez in order to ask him to be on stage with him during the victory speech. Chavez had left, to be go with his wife, Helen Chavez, to the victory parties of local candidates also on the ballot that day, and then to return to the church rectory in East Los Angeles where they were staying. The last time Chavez spoke with Kennedy was during the Mass of Thanksgiving in Delano on March 10. Dolores Huerta took Chavez’s place on stage. At the podium, Kennedy thanked “Cesar Chavez

594 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
595 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
596 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
597 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
598 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien part 2.
599 Day, Forty Acres: Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers.
600 Walter Sheridan, interview with Roberta Greene.
601 Marc Grossman, interview.
603 Cesar Chavez, interview with Dennis J. O’Brien part 2.
and Bert Corona….and Dolores Huerta who is an old friend of mine.” Kennedy sought to fully acknowledge the farm workers whom he loved in his victory speech and celebration.

Shortly after delivering his speech, Kennedy was killed, and the nation spiraled into mourning and turmoil after the loss of its beloved champion for justice and compassion. Robert Kennedy’s brother, Senator Edward M. Kennedy said in his eulogy, “My brother need not be idealized, or enlarged in death beyond what he was in life; to be remembered simply as a good and decent man, who saw wrong and tried to right it, saw suffering and tried to heal it, saw war and tried to stop it.” He also quoted Robert Kennedy who said, “Some men see things as they are and say why. I dream things that never were and say why not.” Robert Kennedy had excited people who cared about justice, compassion, and love. His death brought overwhelming sadness, as people recognized they had lost a hero who truly cared about bridging divides, righting wrongs, and healing those who were suffering. When he learned that Kennedy had passed away, Chavez felt the loss acutely. He hugged his wife Helen Chavez, saying “We lost a great man. Someone that would have brought good for our people.” Kennedy had dreamed the same dream as Chavez—that all people ought to live with dignity—and had asked why not? Chavez would continue to push others to realize that dream, but would never have the same kind of friend who truly shared the vision as he had with Robert F. Kennedy.

604 “Cesar and Martin, March ’68.”

605 Helen Chavez, interview with Marc Grossman.
Conclusion

Why should we care about two men who worked on a remote social justice issue 50 years ago, and whose quest failed—Kennedy’s to become president in order to address injustice, alleviate poverty, and end the Vietnam War; and Chavez’s to transform the lives of farm workers. Today, farm workers suffer much of the same injustices and working conditions as they did in 1968. So why did their efforts matter?

It matters because these men, through their work, their commitment, their sacrifice, their courage to overcome challenges, offer us guidance on how to live with integrity and teach us to join the struggle for justice and peace. These men believed that their purpose was to be of service to others and they were able to break down barriers in the pursuit of what was important. At the essence of that pursuit was the notion of treating people with dignity. This is why when Kennedy came to the farm workers, he did not tell them how he was going to help them, but asked them what he could do for them. Kennedy did not approach the farm workers as a constituency, but as a people who deserved dignity, and who could teach him how to be of service. The story of these two men is not about outcomes, but is about the shared journey towards justice of two iconic figures whose integrity, commitment to peace, and willingness to sacrifice offers a roadmap not only for our country to live up to its greatest ideals, but also for each of us to become our best selves.

Despite their “differences in background, the two men were rather alien: both short, shy, familial, devout, opponents of violence, with strong veins of melancholy and fatalism.” 606

606 Schlesinger, Robert F. Kennedy and His Times, 792.
At the Senate hearings in Delano, when Kennedy took on the Kern County Sheriff, suggesting that he and the district attorney read the Constitution of the United States, Chavez recognized in Kennedy not only an ally who was willing to take on entrenched power on behalf of farm workers, but a force for good.

Over the next two years, as Kennedy’s Senate office continuously responded immediately to concerns and requests for help from Chavez, Huerta, and their colleagues, they developed a working relationship based upon mutual trust, respect, and common cause. As a result of his exposure to farm worker issues from Chavez, Kennedy’s interest in the issues grew, and he visited farm working communities in upstate New York, was appalled by the conditions there, and vowed to seek justice in the form of federal legislation.

When Chavez embarked on the fast, Kennedy, a devout Catholic, who before he had met his wife, Ethel, had considered becoming a priest, recognized the sacrifice Chavez was making. Not only on behalf of farm workers, but also in penance for those farm workers who were calling for violence. By that time, Kennedy, who had had a hand in sending troops to Vietnam and endured the unbearable pain of the loss of his brother to a man with a gun, had become committed to nonviolence and immediately answered Chavez’s call to come to his side to break the fast.

Kennedy had decided to run for president in the days leading up to breaking the fast. His commitment to that decision was reaffirmed when he was once again reunited with Chavez and the farm workers. Their love was mutual and when Kennedy announced, Chavez took the extraordinary step of suspending union activities in order to support Kennedy’s bid. It was in no

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607 Kerry Kennedy, interview.
small part due to the unprecedented turnout of the Latino vote thanks to Chavez and his troops that Kennedy won the all-important California primary on June 5, 1968. As an indication of the high-esteem, affection, and gratitude Kennedy felt towards the farm workers, Dolores Huerta stood next to him on the podium at the Ambassador Hotel when he accepted victory that night.

Today, when our country is riven by division based upon race, nationality, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, religion, and political party, we have much to learn from the relationship between Cesar Chavez and Bobby Kennedy. It is in recognizing a shared humanity, that the fears of difference which drives rage dissipates. Kennedy was the first and last politician in American history to garner strong support from working class whites while allying himself with a leader of immigrants. This story of Kennedy and Chavez is instructive to all who search for a way to heal the divisions in our country.
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