

ASA Conference, November 7, 2014

"I need a hero: Latina/o biography for a twenty-first century audience"¹

In September 2012, the University of California Press published my book *From the Jaws of Victory: The Triumph and Tragedy of Cesar Chavez and the Farm Worker Movement*. For it, I received the Philip Taft Labor History Award and a number of positive reviews in publications ranging from the journal *Labor* to *Forbes Magazine*. I also garnered my fair share of critics. In anticipation of publication, I wrote an op-ed piece for the *Los Angeles Times* in which I argued that farm workers were as much victims as beneficiaries of Chavez's leadership. For this I received a letter from the Chicano paramilitary group, the Brown Berets, who, ironically, called for a boycott of the *Los Angeles Times* and demanded an apology from me. After the book was published, a few loyal followers of the UFW chastised me for airing dirty laundry and besmirching the name of their leader.

The review of the manuscript gave me some idea that the book would be controversial. In a move somewhat unprecedented, a single member of the UC board attempted to derail the project very late in the process. In a report later shared with me, the anonymous board member stated: "I see this project as more of an exercise in iconoclasm, a 'maverick-y' effort to take someone down, or to debunk the myths of an icon that, for better or for worse, continues to inspire demands for social justice."

Those who object to my book have misunderstood my approach. The book *is not* a biography of Cesar Chavez. Rather, it is an attempt to understand how and why the boycott became so effective, and why the United Farm Workers could not capitalize on it to form a permanent union. I explore the evolution of this strategy: from 1965, the year the National Farm Worker Association (NFWA) began to experiment with the boycott, until 1978, when Chavez formerly called it off. The year 1978 happens to correspond with a period of tumult in the union. That year, Chavez engineered a mass purge of people who disagreed with him on a number of issues, including his decision to visit the Philippines as a guest of Ferdinand Marcos and his attempt to institute a group encounter exercise known as “the Game” at La Paz. He borrowed the Game from his friend, Chuck Dederich, leader of Synanon, a controversial religious community in California. While the union continued, the years I cover constitute the critical period when the movement created its best chance for success, and when that chance was lost.

Why has my reassessment of Chavez’s legacy been so controversial?

One reason has to do with lingering memories and commitments to the UFW leader. Although a younger generation of readers has embraced my interpretation, some readers who are contemporaries of Chavez have struggled with it. This generational divide, in part, illustrates the difference between those who associate support for Chavez as support for the movement and those who want to understand the enduring problem of farm worker exploitation and powerlessness.

Generation alone, however, does not account for the diversity of responses to the recent studies of the UFW. Miriam Pawel, in her two books, *The Union of Their Dreams* and *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, and Frank Bardacke's *Trampling Out The Vintage* have also defined the new farm worker movement history. Both are critical of Chavez and engage some of the same, previously neglected sources I do, especially Pawel. Often, Miriam and I worked alongside one another in the archive at the Reuther Library in Detroit, preserving audiotape and uncovering unprocessed documents. All of us have come under fire from the Chavez family and the current union leadership for challenging the standard narrative of the movement.

In spite of our affinities it should be noted that we have different approaches. While Pawel and Bardacke transform and ultimately maintain the "heroic" narrative, I question it. For Bardacke, the true heroes are in the fields—particularly *lechugeros* in Salinas—who adopted more radical positions than Chavez, and worked for something greater than themselves. Pawel's approach is similar. In her first book, she frames her story around eight alternative heroes derived from the ranks of the workers and volunteers. In her biography of Chavez, she makes Cesar the hero, despite revealing that he purged volunteers earlier, paid Mexican officials to brutalize undocumented immigrants, and unilaterally denied democracy to *lechugeros* who demanded representation.

While I respect Miriam and Frank, I find the heroic narrative to be a distraction to achieving a deeper understanding of the movement's past and who was responsible

for its demise. This is not to say that I reject heroic narratives outright, or that I cannot be convinced of its appropriateness for some histories. More often than not, however, I find that heroic narratives serve very particular needs or the tastes of an American public that demands role models and prefers to avoid lessons that come by way of examining failure.

From the Jaws of Victory is partly a study in failure. Who is accountable for that failure can be debated, but what is not debatable is that farm workers remain the most exploited workers in America. We need only look at Seth Holmes' new book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* to see this truth. For me, the more important historical question is this: why did the United Farm Workers not change this? By answering this question, we can decipher what worked and what did not, and apply that knowledge to current struggles in the field.

Critics have been more concerned with Chavez's legacy than how his decisions and leadership style derailed the movement. Let's be clear—UFW was no democracy, especially in the 1970s. Every decision that came out of the Executive Board was Chavez's decision. The audiotapes that capture conflict within the Executive Board provide evidence of the debate that raged among this group, but it also demonstrates how Chavez moved away from farm workers; demanded complete devotion to the union without compensation; and ultimately tried to build a religion rather than a union by decade's end. This happened all the while union lawyers had

secured the “best labor law in the country”—the Agricultural Labor Relations Act—and union organizers won more elections than they lost.

Chavez made mistakes that revealed his hubris, stubbornness, and, at times, mania. For decades, those closest to him kept these stories to themselves, for fear of weakening what was left of the movement. Academics avoided these aspects of his character for fear of compromising his reputation as one of the only US Latino role models. As decades passed, Chavez became like Bank of America—“Too big to fail.” While he gained prominence in the wake of his death—his face gracing a postal stamp, his name emblazoned on street signs and buildings across the United States—the gains of the farm workers and the lessons from the UFW’s failure became more remote. More troubling Chicano scholars, who defended the myth of Chavez, sacrificed the well being of the farm workers for what I consider a hollow pride in an ethnic compatriot.

As the grandson and son of farm and food chain workers, this offends me. I know I am not alone. In my conversation with sons and daughters of current farm workers, and several veterans of the movement, many have expressed their dissatisfaction with the approbation heaped on Chavez. They want to know, “what went wrong, and how do we learn from it?”

Hero narratives impede our ability to find answers to this question. Rather than challenge readers to grapple with the grey area of human motivation and actions,

authors of hero narratives cater to the lack of imagination of Americans who eschew complexity and demand simple, black and white, good guy-bad guy, interpretations of the past.

The narrative in *From the Jaws of Victory* is challenging because I explore the complexities of the human condition in *everyone*. With the exception of Elaine Elinson, who single-handedly enforced the boycott in England, I reveal most people in this drama to be imperfect. In doing this, I was guided by one of the only living founders, Gilbert Padilla, who urged me to tell this story, “warts and all.” His commitment to telling tough truths about the movement was shared by many other veterans I talked to who seemed prepared to come clean, not only about Chavez’s mistakes, but their own. They, like I, saw no value in upholding the myth of Chavez’s infallibility anymore. They, like I, regarded the legend as a key factor in the failure to make progress on farm worker rights in this country.

In closing, Lorena encouraged all of us to pose a question to the audience. Mine is this: What is at stake in seeing Chavez as an ordinary person and a flawed leader? Are his accomplishments missed if we acknowledge his failures?

To offer a brief answer, let me end with this:

Until we get beyond the legend of Chavez, we will not truly learn the lessons of the farm workers movement. Current and future activists will also be vexed by trying to live up to a model of leadership that is based in lies and half-truths. Finally, to

paraphrase Bert Corona, the failure to measure our leaders and organizations by workers' quality of life threatens to dishonor the very individuals we, as Chicano scholars, purport to care about the most.

¹ Westin Bonaventure, San Gabriel C, 2:00-3:45pm, 105 minutes total for the panel

Presentation: 10-12 minutes each=60 minutes

Discussion: 45 minutes