

A Response to my critics

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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*. As is common in publishing these days, it took time for the public to read and digest the book. While more formal reviews are certain to come, several responses have begun to trickle in, many privately to me as well as more public statements. A substantial number of these reviews have been very positive and encouraging, including those from a number of veterans of the movement and their families who believe the book rings true to their experiences and accurately captures the sacrifices they or their family members' made for the United Farm Workers. Although I did not write the book with the intent of receiving such affirmation, I am honored many veterans find my book a worthy testament to their struggles.

Not surprisingly, others have objected to my characterization of Cesar Chavez, and more generally, the net results of his contributions to farm worker justice. This was expected given that the sources led me to a very different interpretation of his legacy than the one typically told. In fact, as I approached the publication of the book, the thorough editing process of the University of California Press prepared me for the backlash. Now that I have received it, I want to respond those who have chosen to take issue with my characterizations of Chavez, and more broadly, my interpretation of the history of the United Farm Workers.

Most who object to my book have misunderstood my approach. The book *is not* a biography of Cesar Chavez, nor is it an exposé of the United Farm Workers during the time of his leadership. Rather, I attempt to understand how and why the boycott, the primary tool of the union, became so effective, and why the United Farm Workers could not capitalize on it to form a permanent union. The best evidence of this approach resides in the years I have chosen to write about: roughly, from 1961, the year before the formation of the National Farm Worker Association (NFWA), to 1978, when Cesar Chavez formally called an end to the grape boycott that had begun in 1965. The year 1978 also happens to correspond with a period of tremendous 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 after 1978, and Chavez lived until 1993, these years constitute the critical period when the movement created its best chance for success and when that chance was lost. I am not the first scholar to make this claim; however, my vivid portrayal of Chavez in the consequential years from 1976 to

1978 dramatically counters the image of Chavez in a way that has shocked readers.¹ This interpretation is not conjecture but rather a product of newly discovered audiotapes of the Game and of meetings of the National Executive Board housed at the Walter P. Reuther library at Wayne State University.

Some have questioned why more attention is not paid to the rank-in-file workers even though I clearly state my reasons for focusing on volunteers and organizers in my introduction (10). I see nothing shameful in foregrounding the volunteers given the extraordinary sacrifices many of them made for the union. The focus on Cesar Chavez in most accounts of the movement has overshadowed other important figures who created the United Farm Workers. They include Gilbert Padilla, Marshall Ganz, Chris Hartmire, Jim Drake, Jerry Cohen, and Jessica Govea, to name just a few, who played important roles in the formation of the union and receive significant attention in my book. Additionally, I have chosen to highlight the contributions of people who played a role in the evolution of the boycott at critical moments, including Hijinio Rangel, Jerry Brown, Elaine Elinson, and Nick Jones. Admittedly, the people I have chosen to write about constitute a fraction of the dedicated volunteers who made the farm worker movement possible. Nevertheless, their stories are representative of the significant effort, money and hope invested in the cause for farm worker justice. Such investments raised the stakes for the UFW during the mid-1970s since their labor and the well being of farm workers were on the line when Chavez and the Executive Board made decisions about the union's direction. This also explains why I use the term "tragedy" in describing what happened to the union when Chavez withdrew from organizing as he became more invested in creating an intentional community.

Others have questioned the breadth of my source material. It should go without saying that anyone wishing to write about the United Farm Workers must spend significant time in the primary archive for the UFW housed at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Over the last several years I have spent significant time in Detroit, and taken numerous students to the library to assist me in processing what feels like an endless archive, including many documents and recordings that were unprocessed at the time. To be sure, my research took me to many other archives listed in my bibliography, but no one archive contains more relevant material than "the Reuther." The book is as much a result of the hard work of my students and the staff at the library as it is of my research and writing skills.

¹ One of the earliest analyses of these years is Miriam J. Wells and Don Villarejo, "State Structures and Social Movement Strategies: The Shaping of Farm Labor Protections in California," *Politics & Society*, 2004, 291-326. For what happened to the UFW legal team as a consequence of this failure, see Jennifer Gordon, "A Movement in the Wake of a New Law: The United Farm Workers and the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act," in Sarat and Scheingold, eds., *Cause Lawyers and Social Movements*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006, 277-300. Two recent books have made similar arguments, using similar sources: Miriam Pawel, *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's Farm Worker Movement*, Bloomsbury Press, 2009; Frank Bardacke, *Trampling Out The Vintage: Cesar Chavez and the Two Souls of the United Farm Workers*, London and New York: Verso, 2011.

As an oral historian, I also believe in the necessity of talking to veterans of the movement when no interviews with them already exist. This book is no different. I sought out many veterans for interviews and, in most cases, they graciously shared their memories with me. In a few cases veterans denied me access, including LeRoy Chatfield who, instead, directed me to the valuable online archive, the Farm Worker Documentation Project (<http://www.farmworkermovement.org>), which he had a significant hand in creating.² It proved to be a goldmine; although he now objects to the way I have used it. Contrary to his assertions, I drew on it extensively, engaging essays, documents, photos, and the listserv that contains lively and, at times, acrimonious debate among veterans who had lived through the purges and the Game. My focus on some sources more than others is no different than what historians do with more traditional archives. The citing and quoting from source material is always a selective process that serves a larger historical argument that derives from multiple sources and perspectives. A good historian produces more than a timeline of events or achievements; rather he or she is expected to identify pivotal or “watershed” moments in which the story turned. Admittedly, these moments are open to debate, which leads to spirited and sometimes contentious discussion among scholars and occasionally the public. I take the passionate criticism of my book as a sign that this history warrants such discussion and that the long overdue debate about the legacy of Chavez and the United Farm Workers has begun.

My recognition of the limitations of the Farm Worker Documentation Project as an archive created by computer-savvy, English-dominant veterans is a statement of fact and is in no way an attempt to diminish its importance. As one of the principal investigators and co-creators of the Bracero History Archive (<http://braceroarchive.org>), I understand the need to do more than open a website for veterans of a particular historical event to contribute their stories. By going into the field and recording former braceros we created an archive that contains over 700 oral histories and additional materials from people who made their living in agriculture. A similar archive for veterans of farm work in the era of the UFW should be created so that we can someday tell the story from their perspectives. My book combines existing archival source material with interviews with key participants to offer a partial view of the United Farm Workers. My hope is that future scholars will build on this work.

² I approached LeRoy Chatfield by email to request an interview in August 2007. He asked to communicate by email rather than in person. We had a couple productive exchanges but no interview was granted. His time in the union ended in 1973, before the signing of the California Agricultural Labor Relations Act (1975) and Chavez’s pursuit of an intentional community at La Paz. Eliseo Medina is the only living veteran leader for whom I lack an oral history. I talked to him and his secretary by phone many times, and actually scheduled meetings in D.C. and L.A. that he later cancelled. The tapes and documents I found in the archives provided me with an adequate substitute, although for a more thorough treatment of his story, readers must consult Miriam Pawel’s *The Union of Their Dreams*.

My attention to the Jewish background of participants on both sides of the struggle has curiously been called into question. The muted allegation is that I am somehow promoting anti-Semitism by acknowledging the role religion and ethnic identity played in the motivations of people involved in the union or those engaged in negotiations with the UFW. As I argue in the book and elsewhere (see, *Racial Formations in the Twenty-first Century*, University of California Press, 2012, <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520273443>), race, ethnicity, and religion proved critical to the alliances that formed and dissolved over the period of the boycott. In the grower community, there were whispers of anti-Semitism towards owners such as Eli Black and Lionel Steinberg for “selling out” to the union by cutting deals to preserve their businesses and the reputations of their companies. Many veterans of the movement saw the strategy of “divide and conquer” along the lines of class, race, religion, region and/or ethnicity as leverage against the growers, and used it to great effect. Additionally, during the boycott, the rapport between Jewish advocates for the farm workers and Jewish storeowners sometimes produced understanding and shared action on behalf of farm workers (67). Finally, in the case of at least one important volunteer, Elaine Elinson, the experience of her grandmother in fleeing Russian pogroms and fighting against anti-Semitism informed her activism. I believe there is much more to write on this topic but let me state that identifying how Judaism functioned in the movement is no more taboo than discussing how Chavez’s Catholicism informed the movement and his actions.³

My book invites debate—civil debate, hopefully—among people who inevitably will disagree. This is a practice familiar to scholars. In fact, one of the scholars whom I greatly admire and happen to challenge in the book is Mario T. Garcia. Professor Garcia is perhaps the most prolific Chicano historian in our profession and a person who, at least on two occasions, I have talked with about my interpretation (once, at his home campus, UC Santa Barbara, and at a history conference in San Diego). In our cordial meetings, he has been supportive. As we know, next to imitation, the fondest form of flattery in this business is having your work cited and challenged well after its publication. As for others whom I allegedly dismiss as hagiographers—especially Ron Taylor, Peter Mathiessen, John Gregory Dunne, Jacques Levy, Dick Meister and Anne Loftis—most, if not all, were documenting the movement as it happened rather than writing history. I hold them in high esteem and far less responsible for perpetuating the narrow celebration story. I do, however, hold accountable the historians who have failed to engage a range of sources and experiences that reveal a much more complex and useable history.

One lesson I wish to impart is the need to respect the selfless acts of people who gave freely of their lives (or a substantial portion) to build a movement that

³ It is worth noting that Miriam Pawel, in *The Union of Their Dreams*, shows how anti-Semitic comments towards Jewish UFW members Marshall Ganz and Jerry Cohen contributed to an erosion of the *esprit de corps* within the union during the early eighties. It was also the subject of a review of her book by Richard Baldwin Cook on the Farm Worker Documentation Project website, <http://farmworkermovement.com/category/commentary/as-deceivers-yet-true-essaybook-review/>.

achieved meaningful reform and almost succeeded in establishing a permanent union, if not for Chavez's errors in judgment. It behooves us to learn from those errors so as not to repeat them today whether in the pursuit of farm worker justice or creating and leading an organization that depends on the labor of many people. The end for volunteers was often not dignified, and many left without compensation or appreciation. My choice of staying within the years of the boycott and adhering to the mandates of UC Press to keep the book under 400 pages forced me to eliminate stories of their departures although I hint at what it was like for many of them in my discussion of the National Executive Board Meeting in 1977 (199). In it, Richard Chavez, Cesar's brother, asks, "What's going to happen to me when I am 65?" He also worries aloud about being pushed aside without a pension or some form of support once they retired. Sadly, this came to pass for many veterans, including Gilbert and Esther Padilla. In a recent conversation with Esther, she remembered their unceremonious departure from La Paz with \$100 in her pocket, a daughter in tow, and no job prospects on the horizon. They moved into her mother's house and began looking for work. Gilbert fought against negative references from Chavez and the UFW that hindered his ability to gain employment, including with California Rural Legal Assistance, a position for which he was eminently qualified. Eventually, the black listing became so severe that he wrote a strongly worded letter to Cesar Chavez asking him to stop maligning him. This treatment occurred again and again with other prominent UFW leaders and volunteers including Marshall Ganz, Jessica Govea, and Chris Hartmire.

President Barak Obama's decision to designate La Paz as a national monument in October 2012 came just days after the official publication of my book, a move I supported. La Paz has been a very controversial site since it became the headquarters of the UFW in 1971. It is unlikely that President Obama knew that many people in the union considered the move from Forty-Acres in Delano to La Paz a mistake, including co-founder and UFW Vice President, Larry Itliong (125). He might not have known that it became the site of many purges, including the "Monday Night Massacre" on April 4, 1977. He would not have known that it was also the location where Chavez instituted the destructive practice of The Game that shattered the trust among residents and forced many talented organizers to leave the union. I support the national monument because it invites public inquiry into the history of the place and creates the potential for a deeper understanding of the complexities of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. In short, I see the President's actions—born of a political moment in which he needed more of *our* Latino votes—as the beginning of a national conversation, not the closing of one.

Since the publication of *From the Jaws of Victory*, I have encouraged debate in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times*, in lectures, and on many radio programs across the country (see my website, <http://mattgarcia.org>). I will continue to do so. The book is the product of over ten years of research in the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan; interviews with many of the leaders and volunteers in the movement; and thorough use of the valuable online archive, the Farm Worker Documentation Project. The book was not conceived in

anticipation of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Farm Workers in 2012. I find this anniversary somewhat problematic since it fails to account for the contributions made by members of the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), a mostly Filipino union whose members walked out of the grape fields first in 1965. Their activism precipitated a merger of NFWA and AWOC resulting in the United Farm Worker Organizing Committee (UFWOC). The United Farm Workers represented a multiethnic, multigenerational movement whose origins should be dated from this moment, not 1962.

Finally, there is little material or professional advantage for me to gain by writing this book. *From the Jaws of Victory* is published with a university press, not a commercial press. As people in publishing know, university presses do not give large advances on royalties. They also retain an overwhelming majority of the profits so that they may continue to publish scholarship of the highest standards. In terms of promotion, I am a full professor who has taught for over seventeen years at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, the University of Oregon, Brown University, and Arizona State University. Before leaving for ASU in 2010, I spent nine years at Brown University as a tenured professor, and left because I believe in the mission of public education. As a teacher and contributor to Chicano/Latino history, I have no investment in besmirching Cesar Chavez or his legacy, nor have I done so. I have followed the sources where they have taken me, and have told a story that I hope will bring attention to the sacrifice of numerous people in the movement, and provide lessons for the pursuit of food chain worker justice in the future. I encourage all readers to engage the material and achieve a more complete understanding of the history and relevance of the farm worker movement.

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