

that then it's an endorsement. I can't do it without the--I won't do it unless the union wants to do it--the members. We're a union and we have the influence, see, of endorsing." By that time. . . . That's right. Johnson's not out yet. They're endorsing Johnson. And I said, "We can't do it unless the members want it." I also told him, "We're going to have a lot of problems because their movement is endorsing Johnson." "But," I said, "I don't care about that, if the people want it."

So they had a meeting. They called a meeting of all of the leadership throughout the state and put the question. One guy voted against it, and he was confused. We all voted and it was a solid block. We said like "boom" we want him. One guy said, "No." He looked around and he said, "I want to correct that vote. I want to make it a 'yes' vote."--in our guys. Then I think it was Jim who said, "Well, we voted for him. Now let's get him elected." And right there--it was over at the Forty Acres, at that building, remember?--he said, "All right. Let's get with it."

And we made the plans. I went on a tour for about nineteen days. What I did, we had rallies at universities. Those universities were all solid McCarthy. But I would come in there and the students were very respectful. They didn't abuse me. I would talk why farm workers want Kennedy. I went to Berkeley and there must have been about four thousand people there and I got there and I spoke for about thirty minutes and answered questions for about an hour. And we changed people. We changed people, and the ones that changes were the people who were willing to work. Our guys were really worried about going to Berkeley. I said, "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." We went to Stanford and to almost all universities. But more importantly we went to every county where there are Spanish-speaking people. We had rallies and we had jammed packed sessions everywhere we went. And we had elections. See, we had our own ballots and we had Kennedy and--let's see, we had [Ronald] Reagan, [Richard M.] Nixon--who else was running in the . . .

O'BRIEN: You mean in the . . .

CHAVEZ: Republican. Reagan, Nixon and. . . .

O'BRIEN: It was Reagan and Nixon.

CHAVEZ: And [Nelson A.] Rockefeller.

O'BRIEN: Rockefeller.

CHAVEZ: Then we had Johnson, and McCarthy, then Kennedy way in the bottom purposely. Then we passed out the ballots. [Interruption]

BEGIN SIDE II TAPE I

And all the ballots--and we had thousands of people. If you came it didn't matter how old you were, how young, you voted.

O'BRIEN: So you hit the college campuses and the Mexican-American?

CHAVEZ: Yeah. We had record turnouts. Now, we didn't have the balloting in the college campuses, just in the. . . . And then we signed them up and we said, "Now, you want him. You've got to work for him."

O'BRIEN: Now, who was doing this outside of yourself? Was there anyone else involved in it? Any other groups?

CHAVEZ: No.

O'BRIEN: Just the farm workers.

CHAVEZ: Just us. Then we stopped the strike, literally stopped the strike, for that time. Well, we're dealing with a subject that I had been working on for many years. So I knew the state and what to do. So we had a beautiful campaign.

O'BRIEN: But now you had some guys that you're trying to get in the legislature, too, at the same time, don't you?

CHAVEZ: Yeah, but that becomes. . . . The Kennedy thing becomes so important. Well, look at how important it is here in Delano; the Republicans are registered Democratic so they can screw him by voting for McCarthy and then changing over. We made up our minds that we had to win in Delano for him. We don't care if we lose the whole state; Delano's got to be for him. We assigned 175 men. Now Delano only has 26 precincts, but we put that many men in Delano and we said, "We want every Kennedy vote out. No excuses that 'I can't go,' or 'I'm sick,' or 'I'm tired.' Every registered voter's got to go to those polls," and we got everybody out. One hundred percent on this other side. We lost in 20 precincts. We only won in 6 precincts and we lost in 20, but the amounts of votes; we took the city for him. Six precincts voted so heavily for him that it beat the other twenty precincts. So

all together he got almost 56 percent of the vote, of the Democratic vote. Beat McCarthy very badly.

R. CHAVEZ: Cesar, what about those precincts in Los Angeles from 90 to 100 percent--95, 96 percent turnout?

LYONS: There were some 100 percent turn out.

CHAVEZ: And a 100 percent for Kennedy. Fantastic.

R. CHAVEZ: We really did a job in Los Angeles then.

CHAVEZ: Well, we also did a good job. We had about 3,500 people in the union working.

O'BRIEN: What kind of a job did you do? How did you organize, let's say, East Los Angeles?

CHAVEZ: We moved in about 250 farm workers. We stopped the strike. We just left the boycott going and I scouted through Delano. And we had a shuttle going. We had cars going back and forth from L.A. to Delano with messages and with people going that way and people coming back, key people coming back to Delano to take care of problems as they were coming up. Out of L.A. we divided the state into-- you and Manuel [Chavez] and who were assigned for the supervisors? How many did we have? We had you and Manuel and Jim and. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: Leroy.

CHAVEZ: Leroy. No, no, when I say L.A. that was the other campaign. Manuel and who was assigned to. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: Manuel was assigned to the delta, to the northern part of the state.

CHAVEZ: We took L.A. and we made districts. We took-- L.A. County was one. I went there with a big force. Then we assigned the San Joaquin Valley, then the coast counties from Ventura County all the way up to Santa Cruz County, San Benito County. Then we took the Bay area--one group. San Jose, Santa Clara, San Mateo got in the other group. Then San Diego another group. I think we made seven groups and we sent seven key people. I went to the L.A. group and we just moved over there. We rented a big--no, we got a big church and we slept on the floor with sleeping bags,

just like in the strike, and set up a kitchen and set up the telephones. Then we organized by precincts. See, we sent in. . . . We got there about two weeks before and we assigned the Assembly districts. In each Assembly district we had one leader and that Assembly district was broken down and then broken down again until our guys were in charge of five precincts each. Then they, in turn, organized those five precincts to get at least one person for each block to work. We had a tight organization. It was a machine. We just turned it on and produced. But we had a good candidate and we had a lot of discipline, a lot of work.

O'BRIEN: Is this the tightest you've ever had it?

CHAVEZ: Yes. Never this. . . . With John Kennedy I did it in 1960 and I got about sixty percent of the precincts, but never as tight. We worked like hell, but we couldn't. . . . There was a lot of concern there, but with the Kennedy thing they were coming to us. See, we were the only ones that had a real organization in East L.A. because we had the manpower. We were taking people out of their jobs, out of the strike, out of the offices. We just raided the whole thing.

O'BRIEN: Is this an expensive operation?

CHAVEZ: Yes, very expensive.

O'BRIEN: What does it cost you to do a, let's say a. . . . Can you give, do you have any cost estimates on what it took in this election?

CHAVEZ: I don't remember, but it cost us several thousand dollars. Yeah, a lot of money. Of course, we didn't pay wages. We makeshift, you know. If anybody else had done it, it would have cost them a million dollars, but the way we did it, we did it with several thousand dollars. All we spent was really. . . . The big items were car rentals, gas, telephone and food. Those are the big, big items that we had.

Then we used to have meetings every morning in L.A. Then people would come from East L.A. and they'd come to the meeting, "Gee." We'd just sweep them, you know.

We took the organization we had on the strike and then just said, "Well, the strike stops now." We took the whole organization and just transplanted it. And we worked.

Well, we were so tired that my wife didn't even go to the Ambassador [Hotel]. She was so tired, she wanted to go to sleep.

I went just because I had to go. And I left early because I was so damned tired. We just worked to the bone. I think most of you guys were running on nervous energy.

O'BRIEN: Well, how far in advance of election day did you really put this organization into full working?

CHAVEZ: Well, we planned the whole thing. We had about five guys doing all the planning, advance men out there having the cars--not renting the cars, but just making the agreements to rent them and to open the telephones, about a month ahead of time. Then, exactly fourteen days before the election we moved the first group. We moved fifty people. That's the group I went with, right? We moved fifty men and women out there. Then every day we'd bring in twenty-five, fifty, eighty, thirty.

We didn't want to bring the whole thing through so we'd stay a day and then we'd get those arranged and then we'd bring some more. Sometimes we'd bring a group in the morning and one at night so we could absorb them. But, see, these were groups of people who were already organized by us here and were part of the strike machine. So if it had just been like putting a group together for the first time, no, it would take six months, I guess.

O'BRIEN: At the bottom end of this thing though you depend on local people, on the blocks though, don't you?

CHAVEZ: Oh, yes. Sure. Well, we have the discipline in the union and the discipline, the work discipline, and the habit, the work habit, established. It's just a matter of telling them, "This is what has to be done." Well, it wasn't, "You have to do it." We discussed it. Because, see, going to get people to serve, to take care of their block and of the work is about one-hundredth easier than it is to get a guy who's scabbing to leave the fields. So you develop all this. And it was a change of pace. People just liked him so much they were willing to. . . .

O'BRIEN: Did you get out of the state at all during that primary campaign, in any other states or any other place--in an election area?

CHAVEZ: I went to Oregon for one two-hour thing. Some farm workers were marching over there and they had a demonstration. They also had sort of a Kennedy rally and I spoke to them. But, no, most of the work--all the work was in California.

O'BRIEN: Well, I understand there was one problem that came up between you and the Unruh organization over, I believe it was a Richard Calderon? Didn't you have a guy? Was it Calderon that was running for . . .

R. CHAVEZ: State senator.

O'BRIEN: . . . state senator and Unruh was supporting somebody against him and you were trying to get. . . .

CHAVEZ: No. No. See, what happened was. . . . No, we made up our minds that we weren't going to get torn between, in the local elections. Now, Richard Calderon was supporting McCarthy, see. So people liked him, but our guys said, "Well, he's supporting McCarthy." We did work for him, but we didn't throw ourselves into it. We couldn't. First of all, you'd confuse the electorate. We don't think we can say, "Vote for blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," all of these and be effective. We single shot it. We say, "We want Kennedy first. We want the others, but Kennedy's the most important." I think towards the end he was trying to pass. . . . He was caught in a real bind. Most of his active help were McCarthyites.

R. CHAVEZ: No. Well, see, Cesar, the reason McCarthy was mopping everybody was because Kennedy didn't announce. They were committed so they were in a bind.

CHAVEZ: That's right. We were the only good ones not committed to McCarthy.

R. CHAVEZ: That's right. See?

CHAVEZ: We were free.

R. CHAVEZ: So when Kennedy decided he was going to run we were free to jump right in and these guys were already, well, they thought that it was getting late and so they jumped on the McCarthy wagon. And they were caught in a bind, but not because they really wanted to.

CHAVEZ: That's what happened to Richard?

R. CHAVEZ: That's what happened to Richard. Remember?

CHAVEZ: No, we stayed free of the. . . . We had no problems with the state organization. We just

stayed completely free. We did as we liked. I think at one time they wanted to. . . . I think somebody called Jerry [Cohen] and I'd tell him, "You tell him to go to hell. We want to do as we like, and we know how to do it." We were left pretty much alone. We did go to them for materials. I sent Manuel one day and he went in for materials. And we're hungry, hungry for materials. He walked in and they said, "Well, no, we haven't got any." Manuel--this is my other brother. The secretary said, "No, we haven't"--very efficient--"got any." He says, "Don't give me that shit." He just walked in and there were stacks of them. He said, "Load them up, boys." People came and he says, "Don't you give me any shit." He just stole the material. So we got it.

R. CHAVEZ: That's right.

CHAVEZ: Remember?

R. CHAVEZ: Yeah.

CHAVEZ: He really pulled. . . . He just went and literally stole it. They were saying, "Well, you can't do that." He says, "The hell I can't. We're going to get this." Well, we were pretty pissed off at them because we thought they were. . . . We heard that they were fighting among themselves and we were pretty mad about not producing. They had that material there and they weren't giving it out. We were really afraid about. . . . So Manuel went and just got, because we had gone every day for about two or three days and, hell, we got all these people, so Manuel just walked in and we had about ten guys and loaded up. We cleaned up the room. There were about thirty guys there. They were madder than hell. We told them to go to hell. We just loaded up and we stole it. We had it out; in two days we had everything out. Quite a. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: Cesar, remember when we were going into that big building, the main headquarters in East Los Angeles? We were going to go there originally. That's the place where we were going to stop and we were going to work out of there. Remember everybody landed there?

CHAVEZ: Oh, yeah.

R. CHAVEZ: That was a very cold reception. In fact, they didn't want us there. They didn't. They didn't, you know. So then this arrangement about the church was made like over a period of about three or four hours. Somebody pushed the panic button; they don't want us there.

And here we are; we want to work. And somebody came across with this church right away, like in two or three hours. That's the reason we went to the church. Originally we were going to this main headquarters, a big building, about a million phones were there and everything. But they didn't want us there. We got there, they. . . .

CHAVEZ: See, the fight came because they were going to close at 5 o'clock. "Five o'clock? You're nuts. We work until midnight, 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock. We don't close." Our guys were just kind of in a big fight with them. So I came in and said, "Well, let's just move out." "Where?" "I don't know." So we went and got the church. Moved in.

R. CHAVEZ: The church was an emergency thing because we couldn't find anything . . .

CHAVEZ: They wanted to close the offices at 5 or 6. By the time I came back I was. . . . Oh, I came back, remember to Delano for a meeting here; I got back about 4 o'clock and there was this uproar. Our guys were ready to just start picketing the place. [Laughter] These scabs--we're calling them scabs, you know--were Cemocrats and they were going to get-out-the-vote, but they were going to close at 5 o'clock and to us it was an insult. You don't close at 5 o'clock.

R. CHAVEZ: Hanson--Lou Hanson was on the phone calling, "Get them all out."

CHAVEZ: Oh, yeah. Oh, it was a lot of. . . . Our guys were very. . . . I'd forgotten about that. Our women were criticizing them because they were too manicured.

R. CHAVEZ: Yeah. Cute little rascals, but not very effective. [Laughter]

CHAVEZ: Yeah, I'd forgotten about that. I'll be right back.

O'BRIEN: In all this friction that's going on who are the people that you're working with on the Washington end? Or with Senator Kennedy directly? I mean, who are you making contact with?

R. CHAVEZ: Who were we making contact with at the time?

O'BRIEN: Yeah.

R. CHAVEZ: I think Peter was one of the main guys that we were in contact with. And the others, but I think Peter was the key guy that we had. Smith, [Steven E.] Steve Smith.

O'BRIEN: Did you ever see anything of people like, oh, Fred Dutton? Did you ever run across Fred Dutton?

R. CHAVEZ: Oh, let's see. I think Fred was in the neighborhood sometime back in '68.

LYONS: It wasn't that tight, you know. We didn't bother them for anything. Oh, we didn't bother Senator Kennedy. Oh, no. The order was: "Don't bother him because he's got a lot to do."

CHAVEZ: No, I think the only time we called him was in response to their calls. No, the order here was, . . . We made up our minds. "He's too busy. We know what he's going through. We don't have to bother him. We know what we have to do." It's very clear, we want to get him elected. Anything that we wrote, any leaflet we made, we made pretty much from the material that they had. Then we would use our own heads to something that would apply. No, we didn't. I bet you. . . . I never talked to him during the campaign, except when he called. See, Paul Schrade called me to ask me to become an elector or whatever you call it, and then I told him that I couldn't unless the. . . . I didn't want to. I mean, I wanted to work for him, but I didn't want to. . . . I thought it was being too big shotish to do that. I thought the best way to help him was to just get out the vote.

And I was just back from my fast; I'd just come back. So I was still in bed and I was feeling weak. So the Senator called me the same night, but I must have sounded pretty bad because, according to Paul--Paul called him that night. He said, "Have you talked to Cesar?" And the Senator said, "Yes, I just talked to him." "Well, what did he say?" The Senator said, "Well, to tell you the truth I didn't ask him. He sounded so weak, I didn't feel right asking him to be an elector." So Paul called me that night again. It must have been about 1 o'clock. He said, "Well, a good example of how. . . . This goes to prove that Senator Kennedy's really--" What was the word that they used? What was it charging? That he was. . . . What was it? That he was. . . .

O'BRIEN: Ruthless.

CHAVEZ: Ruthless. "Yes. This is a good example of a ruthless man." That's what Paul Schrade told me. I said, "Why?" because I didn't know what he had called for. "Well, he just called to ask you to serve, and he thought you sounded so weak that he didn't have the heart to do it."

No, we didn't. In fact, I think Frank Mankiewicz was in touch with me a couple of times. Jim was in touch with Edelman daily, but it wasn't--mostly on stuff that wasn't at the very high level. But 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. That's how we did it, see. We forced a lot of people to work, because we just refused to get involved in arguments.

O'BRIEN: Well, where did the money come from?

CHAVEZ: Well, we got a lot of money from the workers. We got some money from Kennedy, but we also got a lot of money from the workers. In those nineteen days we were out we collected several thousand dollars. I never asked people for money like I did then. I said, "You've got to give of your time and your heart and your money, and you've got to give us money right now because these things cost money. You want to elect him? Put up." Like an old Baptist preacher. I really had heart. And they came through.

Of course, the campaign wasn't done on money, you know. It was done just on an awful lot of sacrifice. I bet you we didn't. . . . I was just thinking of the money we spent in Los Angeles alone. It was peanuts.

R. CHAVEZ: It was. I think the greatest expense that I can think of was the car deal.

CHAVEZ: We've never had enough transportation, so we did have to get cars. [Interruption]

O'BRIEN: Is there anything we've left out to this point in organization or in contact with Senator Kennedy?

CHAVEZ: Yeah. I've left out about ninety-nine percent of it because, see there were people, other people, involved with us who were playing that leadership role. Only by talking to them can you get all of the pieces put together. So, I'm just giving you like a real general picture.

O'BRIEN: Well, the night of. . . . You know, the Ambassador. I understand that you took a mariachi band.

CHAVEZ: Well, see, I had this idea about campaigning with a mariachi band and so we hired one. We got a truck and I went up to the--this is the day of the election, right? The day of the election. We started out at about 1 o'clock and I went to some of the cross streets where there's a lot of traffic, a lot of. . . . When they started playing I'd get on the mike and I'd. . . . You know, we had big signs, "Viva Kennedy." Then, well, they'd be coming and I'd say like--I'd call one of the young girls or somebody up to the truck to talk to them and all I would say, "What is your name?" and, "This next song is dedicated to you, if you're going to vote for Kennedy." Then we'd do three or four stops and in ten minutes we had two or three hundred people, "Just stop." So we played mariachi music and we'd say, "We want you to work. The last thing is that today is the important day. Get out to vote. How many has voted?" Then, well, most of the people who were coming said they'd voted. Or we'd say, "What about your aunt, your father, your mother, your grandfather? Everybody votes." And they'd say, "Yeah, yeah." It was this kind of thing. We went into the black groups to the black areas with the mariachi and we had a lot of people come out in the--we're down in the housing projects there on

R. CHAVEZ: Ramona Gardens?

CHAVEZ: Ramona Gardens and over in Alisal Village. We took the mariachi through there. They were like a thousand percent for Kennedy, too. So we had a ball with them over there, too. A lot of kids. Then the polls closed and we kept the mariachis. We brought it into our headquarters. See, we were the last ones to get out there to the Ambassador because we worked until the polls closed, because, see, there were lines. Seven o'clock and there were two or three hundred people trying to vote in these precincts. We stayed there to make sure everybody would get through and vote. So we didn't get back until about--8:30 or 9 o'clock we got back from the polling places. The mariachis were playing there and we had something. Then we started out; we went with the mariachi band to the Ambassador. We didn't get to the Ambassador until 9:30 was it?

R. CHAVEZ: Well, I got there around 10.

CHAVEZ: Well, it must have been then around that time.

R. CHAVEZ: Late. It was late.

CHAVEZ: Very late.

R. CHAVEZ: We couldn't get in. Everything--there was a million people there, I think. It just looked like it. We couldn't get in.

CHAVEZ: Well, we were out working until the very last guy had voted. I didn't leave the precinct until about ten minutes to 8, until the last guy voted. I was afraid they were going to say, "Well, this is it." We'd have to go home.

O'BRIEN: You were out, actually worked at the precinct?

CHAVEZ: Oh, sure. I had my own precinct. I'm not special.

O'BRIEN: Everyone had a precinct?

CHAVEZ: Everyone had a precinct, yeah. Well, besides my precinct, I had some other responsibilities. And I didn't do as well as the others did. I think Helen [Chavez] did pretty well, huh? Helen was the one-- and Esther [Urunday].

LYONS: I got 100 percent.

CHAVEZ: You got 100 percent?

LYONS: Sure. That precinct? Ninety-six . . .

CHAVEZ: It was a very . . . See, 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. And coming back and people saying. . . You know when I got this real, tremendous feeling? When you took me around to visit your precincts. Rich took me around to visit about three of his precincts and we went in and the ladies there recognized me and they stopped the voting and they wanted me to take pictures with them.

R. CHAVEZ: That's right. That's right.

CHAVEZ: Remember?

R. CHAVEZ: Yeah.

CHAVEZ: And I said, "Gee, well, what about the election code?" "Oh, we don't care about the election code."

R. CHAVEZ: They dropped everything.

CHAVEZ: I said, "But I'm a Kennedy man." They're all Chicano, you know. So they said, "Well, what. . . ." I was kidding them. I said, "I don't know if I should take a picture because I'm for Kennedy and maybe you won't like me." They would say like, "What do you mean? We're for Kennedy, too."

Then it was about 10 o'clock and I went out for a little rest. I was sure that we were going to get a. . . . Remember. I told you they told me, "People are voting like they had never voted before." At 10 o'clock they had like 30 or 40 percent vote in. And I told Richard I'd done this work in East L.A. two other times plus that was the third time and I said, "You know what that tells me? This tells me--my bones tell me--that it's going to be the biggest vote out yet; and it was."

We had those PA [public address] systems going. Oh, we had it organized.

R. CHAVEZ: Very organized. Very organized. Well, we had a candidate, too, and that's what counts.

CHAVEZ: We were living out of suitcases. Remember we didn't even have a place to shower? Oh, it was miserable.

R. CHAVEZ: We were living in the cellar of a church. In the hall, some kind of a recreational hall or something in the cellar.

CHAVEZ: Then we had another building.

R. CHAVEZ: No facilities, showers or anything. It was very bad.

O'BRIEN: In those last couple of weeks there of campaigning did you get to see Senator Kennedy much?

CHAVEZ: No. I didn't see him.

O'BRIEN: Didn't see him at all?

CHAVEZ: No. See, the last time I saw him was in March. I didn't see him again.

O'BRIEN: You didn't see him the night at the Ambassador, either, did you?

CHAVEZ: No. No, I didn't. Some of these guys started drinking early I guess. They went with the mariachis and I was trying to tell them. . . . You know, I was getting embarrassed because--like I said, they worked very hard--they thought they had a right to a lot of things. So they went and the first thing they did was that they put the mariachis in front and began to open up the traffic, you know, and went right to the stage. There was this Dixie band playing over there and the first thing they did is they just cleared them out. Oh, God, I just was so damned embarrassed. So I went. I said, "Look you can't do that. I mean, it's 'No.' What right?" "Oh, the hell with it. We've worked for it. We deserve it." I said, "Well, I suppose you do." I didn't tell them, you know. And they began to. . . . Then the word came down that Senator Kennedy wasn't going to come down until a while later. So they began to shout that I should get on the stage. You know, our guys. So I was pretty embarrassed. So then they got off the stage. Remember that poor lady?

LYONS: I wasn't there then. I got there late, very late.

CHAVEZ: The poor lady was trying to be nice and the guys said, "The hell with you. We did some work, too. We need some recognition." And they had the mariachis and they played, and they got the mariachis out and they traveled around. So finally I was pretty embarrassed and I tried to get them to . . .

R. CHAVEZ: Cool it.

CHAVEZ: . . . cool it. So I called them and I said, "Look, whatever you do we don't want any violence here." He said, "Oh, no, no. But we're going to show these gringos that we know how to work, too." So I left and I went to the bar. I wanted to get a Diet Rite [Cola] and I was hoping to see someone, one of our guys with a car to take me. My wife didn't go because she just plain was tired. She didn't have any clothes to put on so she stayed home. And I wanted to get home for her and I thought I could do better by watching the TV. I went to the bar and I got a Diet Rite and there were some people there, so I got trapped. It was this conversation. I was trying to get out. Finally, Rudy Ahumada came--he's our controller. And I told Rudy, "Can you find someone with a car to take me home?" And he went around, just around the corner and here's Father Luce the priest we stayed with at the church, the Episcopalian priest, Father Luce. Well, he came and one of his assistants came with him. Anyway, so I told them that I wanted to go home and they said, "Yeah, I think so. I think we'll go home ourselves." I was staying at their home for that time of

the election. So I drove back with them and instead of going home I said, "Let's go over to Richard Calderon's headquarters just to say 'hello.'" So we went to Richard Calderon's and we said "Hello." We got there and people were really loaded. They were just loaded. And I said, "Well, let's leave." And I'm just leaving, going out the front door, when somebody started crying. I said, "What?"--this is when they heard. The thing I heard was that Senator Kennedy had been shot, that a woman had been shot and a man, a labor leader. Right in my mind I said, "I just. . . ." Delores was--I asked her to stay there and represent me. I was going to go home. And I somehow knew when they said a labor leader, I just in my--I knew it was Paul Schrade. Something told me it was Paul Schrade and also something told me, I don't know why, I said, "No. I know Delores wasn't shot." I was so sure that Delores hadn't been shot. It was a lady. I knew she was going to be pretty close, but I just instinctively knew--it was something that Paul had been shot and that Delores wasn't shot. And we went home. I went and Helen was home. She was asleep--well, she was in bed watching TV, so she already knew, too.

O'BRIEN: What happens here in Delano after that?

CHAVEZ: Well, you see, we had . . . [Interruption]

BEGIN SIDE I TAPE II

We had made a plan. I think I talked to Manuel and Jim about having a beach party the following day and trying to get the Senator to come and say "hello to us. So, I think I assigned a couple of guys to start looking at the possibility of transportation and everything to the beach. Also, even about noon of the election day I had to assign a couple of guys to begin to dismantle the operation, begin to think about tearing the thing down as soon as possible. Then we'd get back to the strike.

When that happened people. . . . Well, we saw on TV people were running all over the place, back and forth. Then I saw in the screen our guys, Marshall Ganz and. . . . People began to get glasses and throw them, you know. Our guys were the only organized group in the whole hall. I don't know how Marshall took over the leadership, but Marshall was directing our guys. Our guys just began to just quiet the people down. I saw them on TV and I was kind of proud because they were. . . . Well, this is an organized group and that's the difference.

O'BRIEN: Tight discipline, yeah.

CHAVEZ: Discipline, yeah. Then, well, people came later

on and we stayed up all night. We stayed up all night? I think I went to sleep about 8 o'clock, 7 o'clock in the morning.

R. CHAVEZ: Nobody stayed. Everybody took the bus back.

CHAVEZ: People just started coming. I was the last one to leave, I guess, in the bus. People that didn't have cars came back in the bus, about fifty people and about six or seven cars that came in like in a caravan. And the others came back right away. That was on a Wednesday we got to Delano. He was shot on Tuesday night, right? He didn't die until 1 o'clock on Thursday.

O'BRIEN: In the morning. I think it was morning.

CHAVEZ: He lived about, what, 24 hours or whatever it was. We came to Delano and we got here about 6 o'clock, 7 o'clock and I think everybody went home. I went to sleep. About 1 o'clock--no, about 4 or 5 o'clock Manuel came and knocked on the door. I was very sleepy. I woke up and he said--that's my other brother--that he had died. We had all. . . . I had talked to our doctor--we have a doctor here--and I talked to our nurse who explained to me and diagramed where the bullet was and what they knew about it. They knew that it was difficult to pull out. So we sort of were prepared for it. So the real shock was when he got shot, when we found out. But when he died, I was like we were prepared for it, at least as much as we could. Then we had--I think we had a meeting the following day, on Thursday.

R. CHAVEZ: A Mass.

CHAVEZ: That's right a Mass on Thursday. He died on a Thursday early morning. That evening we called the people from, people around the ranches. We had about a couple of thousand people at the Forty Acres. We had a Mass over there.

O'BRIEN: What happens, though, in the Mexican-American community after that? Has there been a kind of growing cynicism about politics?

CHAVEZ: I don't know. If it's not cynicism, at least it's like "Who's going to fill that vacuum?" No, I think they're not going to get turned on again, unless there's. . . . And it'll be a long, long time before we have another candidate like that. So it's going to take. . . . Probably create a lot of fear, too.

For instance, some time ago we were talking about [Edward M.]

Ted Kennedy and the people in the union were saying, "No," because of the fear that he would get killed, too. You know, like it isn't worth it. We shouldn't get him killed.

O'BRIEN: Did you get anything, any kind of results, in the November election for [Hubert H.] Humphrey close to what--or anything in the way of voter turnouts the way that you did during the primary?

CHAVEZ: The turnout was very good, but no. We didn't have the spirit. We pushed the members. We pushed and we preached to them and we pulled them and begged with them and we pled with them. The spirit wasn't there. They went, but the spirit was empty--and only because we were so afraid of Nixon. So it was Nixon that we were voting against and not for Humphrey. Well, I didn't participate. I was flat on my back. I didn't participate in the election, but we did have a We didn't have as big a get-out-the-vote. We did put in a lot of time. It was very difficult. And the people voted for him. In Delano he won, for instance. No, it wasn't the--it was difficult.

O'BRIEN: Have you noticed any change in the farm workers in the relationship with the government in Washington since the change of administration? Is it more difficult for you now?

CHAVEZ: Oh, Jesus, yes.

O'BRIEN: In what way?

CHAVEZ: Well, the departments under Johnson were like disinterested. In this case with Nixon they're actively working against us. Oh, yeah, you can see the difference; it makes some difference.

O'BRIEN: Did you sense that back before the election of 1968, before the primary in California as well as before the general election that it meant a lot to get a friendly President in the White House?

CHAVEZ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: As much as you do now?

CHAVEZ: Oh, yes. Yes. Not all the people probably. I did because I've had a lot of experience and I've been at it for a long time and I remember the differences in the past administrations. The people sense it.

Even if they didn't feel it then, they're feeling it now. But, well, see, what happened was that we could relate to what happened in California, too. Brown was in and Brown probably fumbled all over the place. At least he didn't fight us, you know. While he was sympathetic, he didn't go out of his way to help us, but he didn't attack us either. And we have had the experience with Reagan actively. He has had the state working against us, using state money to destroy our movement. So, we could understand what was going to happen with Nixon and sure enough. We haven't had any contact whatsoever with the Nixon or with the Reagan administration, not even on a courtesy basis. It's been complete isolation, totally and complete. The only contact is when they come. . . . They're trying to discernify our strikes now and they've been coming around to hearings and to tell people that the strike doesn't really exist--the Defense Department and all these Agencies.

O'BRIEN: Well, you started in political activity in the late fifties, were involved in the voter registration things as well as get-out-the-votes.

CHAVEZ: No, it was not late fifties, the late forties.

O'BRIEN: Late forties. Well, what's happened to the Mexican-American political community in these years? What changes do you see?

CHAVEZ: I haven't seen much, for the work we've done-- and we've done an awful lot of work in voter registration. . . . Saul Alinsky set the pattern and then after about 1960, '61 we pulled out. I left CSO and Dolores left. The leadership, the working leadership left CSO to come and build the union and CSO went down. But in all these years there hasn't been really that much change. I think that if Bobby Kennedy had been elected that there would have been some changes only because he would have made a special effort to see them. There has to be a special effort and an ongoing interest to make some changes happen, otherwise they wouldn't happen.

But I'm pretty convinced that political power for minority groups is a real myth. The things are so structured against us that it doesn't really make that much difference for change. For instance, to really eradicate poverty, to really get these things that are killing us, to get rid of them is not going to happen through political power. A Democrat comes in, it's a little better, but it doesn't change things. A Republican comes in, it becomes oppressive, like in this case. Those of us who are in this struggle which is such a big issue with the power structure, well, the Democratic administrations never

really helped us that much. They really never really like making a special case out of it. They didn't do it. Then, see, what happens is that the power of vote is a very short lived kind of thing. For instance, it's like more anticipation than anything else. The election is on June the 6th or June the 8th, as an example, and you begin to. . . .

Well, like this year is now beginning to build up this anticipation and they're courting for votes and so forth. And you go and you go and the closer you get to the election the more your vote seems to count. The moment you give them the vote, boom, you haven't got anything else. It'd strip you, you know. Then there's no way in which you could really come back and say, "Well, damn it, give me my vote back at least, if you won't do anything for me." So I think that political power without any economic power is useless. It's a myth. It doesn't work and it's never going to work. It never has worked. The poor are not going to get out of it, unless. . . . You can't have a political power, an ongoing political power, with the kind of restrictions that we have and with the kind of opposition we have and with the kind. . . .

For instance an example. To get the vote out for Kennedy, we had to just stop everything, and do that, nothing but that. But how many times can we do that? How many times can we have a Kennedy as a candidate? Then you elect a guy who will go to Sacramento, who will then feel all the pressures of the economic power and very little pressure from us because in order to keep the heat on them we've got to keep organized. But the type of, the real. . . . One guy with a couple million dollars, an industrialist in the state--one grower picks up the phone, and he erases the power of a thousand workers actively sending letters or campaigning and calling and demonstrating and going to the capital. That's the kind of myth. I've seen it too long. Oh, I think the political party makes a lot of sense, but it's got to be nourished and it's got to be back-stopped by something else. I'm not saying that we shouldn't vote, but I'm saying we've got to develop other kinds of power.

O'BRIEN: What kinds of power?

CHAVEZ: Economic power.

O'BRIEN: Basically economic?

CHAVEZ: Basic economic, raw economic power and out of that flows the. . . . See, it's like electricity. You keep that generator going all the time you've got a light. The moment that generator stops, you've got nothing.

That's your vote. And you can't keep that generator going strictly on a political organization.

O'BRIEN: Well, how are you going to generate economic power? Obviously, the boycott.

CHAVEZ: Well, it's not going to be through brown capitalism or black capitalism or any of those. No, I think it's got to be through some kind of cooperativism. The union develops very good economic power, but it's only a fraction of the power that's needed, and it only touches a fraction of the people directly. But, no, we've had too many. Then you begin to get. . . . Well, there are so many things that happen. For instance, nowadays good candidates are being killed. You have good candidates that people who love them want.

For instance, our people, for example, they'd be afraid to have Teddy Kennedy run for President. Not that they don't want him, they love him so much they don't want to see him killed. It's not as important. It's more important for him to live than for him to be President. This would be the feeling of all of us. We already tried it with the membership and they say, "Oh, God. No, no. We don't want any more of that." So all these things that are happening are working against people. The assassinations have had a tremendous impact on people. You don't want them to participate out of fear not for themselves, but out of fear for the one that they like, the one that seems most. . . .

Then, I think that, well, gerrymandering the districts. Your votes counts only when. . . . It's an illusion, really. See, you can't. . . . If there was an election every day of the year, fine. Or if we could have elections like every month it'd be great because there would be the constant pleading for votes. But you elect them for four years or whatever it is--two years--and then you've got nothing else. So I think it's got to be something other than that.

I've seen some changes. Sure, I've seen some changes in the Mexican-American community in the last twenty years. In March it will be twenty years that I've been involved in these things. There's more middle class Mexican-Americans, more people going to college. People are poorer; there's more people on federal welfare. There's about a 1,000 percent increase of people on welfare; there's more poverty. There's more of both, you know. But also very, very good there's a lot of more awakening, a lot more.

In those years when I started organizing, the Mexican-American students used to make fun at us because we used to picket. The Mexican-American student was used as a strike breaker against us. If we had a picket line and we had Mexican women

in the picket line--our women--very few would get in the picket line in those years. People said they had to be a whore otherwise they couldn't possibly be in the picket line. This mentality has been erased. Picket lines have been made acceptable. And there's more kids now talking about change, a lot of confusion, but there's more talking. Those changes, but basically no basic changes, no real dent in the power structure. More repression, much more than. . . . Now we have it locally; we have it in Washington; we have it in the state. When we started we only had it locally, but we could deal with the state who would come in and defend us once in a while. The federal government, if they didn't pay attention to us, they wouldn't harass us. Now we're really boxed in. And you wait and see, if they get a Republican Congress, that's the end of us. The court is changing fast, and the only hope we had for bad legislation or bad deals in the courts here was to go to the Supreme Court and rest assured that we could get. . . . Well, that's changing, too. So it's pretty bad, but not bad enough to stop. I mean, we're not discouraged. It's an assessment, where we feel that it's more reason we work harder.

O'BRIEN: Well, we've covered a lot of ground. Is there anything, as you go back and reflections on Robert Kennedy's place in all this or Democratic politics, even going back to the Kennedy, the John Kennedy Administration? Is there anything that you think we should put in, that we missed? About 99 percent?

CHAVEZ: Yeah, I', sure we missed a lot, you know. I had a rough day in the office today so I'm very tired. That counts for a lot. What we should have done, we should have gotten everybody together. We should do that, get everybody together some day and just really reconstruct it. We can reconstruct from March to June, and really make a good tape and just save it..

O'BRIEN: That's a hell of a good idea. Why don't you tick off the people that you think might be well worth while putting together in a group like this.

CHAVEZ: About a hundred of them, I suppose, at least. Because the real story lies in the guys that were assigned on the precinct level, and that would be the real story coming up. Because everybody has his own stories. Like the guy--oh, this is funny--who gets lost, you know. One of the brothers got lost. Put him in the precinct and he had never been to the city before and he got lost and we had to send out a . . .

R. CHAVEZ: An APB [all points bulletin]. [Laughter]

CHAVEZ: . . . to find him, you know. And he was just walking around the block, "Well, I know I'm going to come to it because this is the block." That didn't make much sense, you know. So then every night we had to take count, roll call to make sure that everybody was there, and then get the leaders to count their guys, and their guys to count their guys to make sure we didn't have anybody lost. There are a lot of those funny stories. Or, well, some of the other. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: The thing that I remembered was that walking around the precincts, whoever was in charge, a lot of people would approach him and they would--this I remember very, very well on election day. It was in the afternoon, sometime about 3:00, 3:30, 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon. I went to this section of my precinct, which was kind of removed down a hill there and not too many houses. This was an Anglo lady. It was Mexican, well, mostly Mexican of course, but on a little street going in back of there were mostly Anglos there and I must have spent at least a half an hour with her. She said that she was all for Kennedy. She just loved him, but she wasn't going to vote because she was afraid that something might happen to him. And I'll never forget this because it was just hours before it happened. And I stayed there trying to convince her to vote. She said, "No, I don't want to be guilty if anything happens." This I'll never forget because just a few hours and it really happened. There were more Mexican people, too, who had said that they loved him so much they didn't want to see him as President. Not too many, but I mean scattered here and there. They just made up their mind they weren't going to vote for him because. . . .

CHAVEZ: A lot of people wouldn't say it, because a lot of people were afraid; very afraid. Well, I think all of us really silently were afraid, but you know how it is. You don't say these things until it happens. . . and you think, "Yeah. Well, I felt that way."

O'BRIEN: Well, I think that they probably won't do it for this thing on Robert Kennedy, but I know of some people that might be really interested in doing this and if they're not, I'll do it myself when I come back, if you'd like to sometime.

CHAVEZ: We should like to put that campaign, but it would have to be. . . . Well, all of us here we would have to get the leadership that went to Los Angeles and then also just the block--the ordinary guys, the block workers. I'm talking about the L.A. people. That would be a big organi-

zing drive to get them, but they come from just our own people. The other thing we found when we went to L.A. was that they really knew about our cause. They knew about us and about the cause and so it made it so easy. In fact, now, remember how we used to open the doors and meet them? 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." We used to open more doors just by. . . . So we had all those things going for us. And I don't think as long as we live, we'll ever get that combination again on a political election.