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By Cesar Chavez

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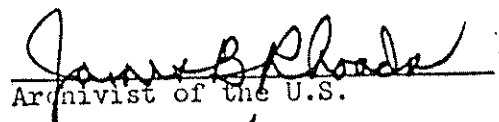
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Cesar Chavez

February 11, 1972  
Date

  
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March 3, 1972  
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Oral History Interview

with

CESAR CHAVEZ

January 28, 1970  
Delano, California

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the Robert F. Kennedy Oral History Program  
of the Kennedy Library

Also present: Richard Chavez and Mack Lyons

O'BRIEN: The logical place to begin in anything like this is just simply to ask you when you first met Senator [Robert F.] Kennedy.

CHAVEZ: I first met Senator Kennedy, it was late 1959 in Los Angeles. I was connected then with the Community Service Organization. We had been conducting voter registration drives in California among the Mexican-American population. We came in touch with him because they were concerned with a voter registration drive in preparation for the 1960 elections. So, that's where I first met him.

O'BRIEN: Did you meet, then Senator [John F.] Kennedy, President Kennedy, at that time as well?

CHAVEZ: No, I didn't meet him there. He wasn't there.

O'BRIEN: What did you talk about at that point? Did you have much of a chance to talk about what was needed to organize Mexican-Americans?

CHAVEZ: Oh, no. Yes, we did. In fact, we had--I've forgotten who was there. At that meeting there were some, four or five other people with him. We didn't see eye-to-eye on the registration because they didn't understand what we were doing, and they didn't know that we had been registering voters for about ten years up to that point. So we had a program all set up and ready to go and we had been

doing it. Well, the staff that came with him didn't understand what we were doing so we had some arguments, say, about how they were trying to change what they couldn't understand. The Senator didn't say much. He observed in the discussions. At one point he said, "Well, if he's been here for ten years, why can't he do it the way he wants to do it?" Then we talked about a few other things, particularly about the problems of the Spanish-speaking.

O'BRIEN: How were you doing it then? What was that program like?

CHAVEZ: I was saying that in order to get a lot of people registered to vote we had to have a drive to get deputy registrars. We had to have some organization. We just couldn't do it through the radio and the newspaper, while that was important and helpful. I knew that, in order to get people that never registered before to register to vote, and then to get them out to vote, we had to do it by knocking on doors and door-to-door. So I was outlining a campaign where we would go to every Spanish-speaking door in the state, minimizing the radio and newspaper and all that, saying that that wasn't going to get them to vote, to register.

Well, anyway, the program was approved as we suggested it and we got some money from labor, through their influence. We had the best voter registration drive in the history of our group and the biggest of any group in the state, and the biggest voter turnout for 1960 when John Kennedy ran.

O'BRIEN: How did he think it should be run at that point?

CHAVEZ: Who?

O'BRIEN: Senator Kennedy and these people around Senator Kennedy.

CHAVEZ: No. It wasn't Senator Kennedy. Senator Kennedy was observing. It was the other people around. See, I don't know who they were. I've forgotten who they were. They were trying to--they wanted a big, massive voter registration drive and they were pitching the public relations kind of approach. I was arguing with them that it couldn't be done that way.

O'BRIEN: Was this [Donald] Rose, Don Rose, in the Los Angeles Central Committee?

CHAVEZ: No, they were not L.A. people. They were all the people from the east coast. Young people. We

talked that evening; it was a very late meeting. I think it lasted till about 3 o'clock in the morning. We talked about the problems of the Mexican-American. And I talked to him then about the problems of the farm worker. Then I explained--I talked to him briefly about how we had registered the voters. See, he had a very good sense of understanding. After I gave my explanation. . . . He came in late. I'd already been hacking it out with these guys. He came in late and just listened for about forty-five minutes, then we'd talk some more, and then he said, "Well, what is it? Let him do it the way he's used to doing it. It's been effective."

O'BRIEN: Is this the beginning of, in 1960, the Viva Kennedy movement or does this lead into the Viva Kennedy movement?

CHAVEZ: No. The Viva Kennedy movement was just like a big PR [public relations] thing. No, the people who did the work were not. . . . No, see the people who really, really did the gut work in California among Mexican-Americans, they didn't have time to go to the luncheons and to all that stuff. They were out there in the barrios and turning the people on all over. Viva Kennedy just became sort of a, well, it became a catch phrase, and a lot of do-nothing people in the Mexican-American community who don't really do anything just got out there to the banquets and sort of. . . . But we got cleared of that. That was one of the restrictions: "We don't want any of those guys telling us what to do. We do it ourselves. We're judged on whether we did fail or we didn't, but we don't want any committee or anything in between us."

O'BRIEN: Now that was in 1960 or '68?

CHAVEZ: No, that was '59.

O'BRIEN: In '59 that you. . . .

CHAVEZ: It must have been in late November or early December because it was at a board meeting of the CSO in Santa Barbara in 1959, November, that this. . . . There was a fellow that used to work with him. His name was--used to work with John Kennedy. Spanish-speaking, well, his father was. From Santa Barbara. Carlos. What was his name?

O'BRIEN: Oh, he was from California?

CHAVEZ: Yeah, he was from Santa Barbara. He's, I think, a

son-in-law to [Ralph] Estrada, the fellow out of Arizona with the-- what's the name of that Mexican-American group? The Alianza Hispana Americana. Estrada was the name of the guy in Tucson.

R. CHAVEZ: McCormick?

O'BRIEN: McCormick.

CHAVEZ: What's his first name?

O'BRIEN: I don't know.

CHAVEZ: Carlos McCormick, I think. Carlos McCormick. But his mother is Mexican and she belonged to our group in Santa Barbara. And he came; she brought him. He was working as an aide to John Kennedy in Washington and when he came to Santa Barbara on that Sunday we were having a meeting--she was a very active member--so she brought him. When he heard about the voter registration he was really elated. He right then called Washington and then we arranged that meeting for L.A. in about--must have been about two or three weeks later.

O'BRIEN: Do you have any contact with Jesse Unruh at this point on problems of voter registration in Los Angeles?

CHAVEZ: I hadn't talked to Jesse about that, no. We had contact, but. . . . We had contact for many years, but I hadn't talked to him lately about that.

O'BRIEN: Then when do you see Senator Kennedy again?

CHAVEZ: Actually I didn't see him again until--I saw him in, oh well, in '66. I saw him in March of '66 when he came to Delano to the hearings that were held there. He was here for almost a day.

O'BRIEN: This is with Senator [Harrison A., Jr.] Williams.

CHAVEZ: And Senator [George L.] Murphy.

O'BRIEN: What do you recall about that day he was here. Where did he go? I understand you had some kind of a. . . . You took him on a tour, didn't you, out in the fields?

CHAVEZ: Yes. Well, first of all, Senator Murphy was kind of put off because all the attention was given to

Senator Kennedy when he came to the Mexican, the farm worker. They'd just completely ignore him. But Senator Kennedy had enough--how should I put it? In the midst of all of these people and pushing and so forth he didn't forget about Senator Murphy who was way behind out there by himself. He stopped and he went and brought him back and he brought him in. He introduced him to the crowds so he made him a part of the. . . . And I thought it was a real kind and real good gesture, because that was probably the only way that they would accept Senator Murphy. The only way people would talk to him was because Senator Kennedy had introduced him. Otherwise, he would have been completely ignored.

He came and we picked him up at the airport. We took him, first, on a tour of the vineyards, and then took him to the picket lines. He went, and I think he shook the hand of everyone in that picket line. There were a lot of people there. Then we formed a car caravan from about ten miles south and came down to--in those days there were two unions--the AWOC [American Federation of Labor--Congress of Industrial Organizations Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee] union first. No, we came down to our union first. Then we took him to a little hall we had out there and out to the camp where we had our strike kitchen; then came back to the Filipino Hall and spoke briefly there. From there we went to the high school to the--Is the high school where the hearings were held?

R. CHAVEZ: Yes. High school auditorium.

CHAVEZ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: That day what kind of a reaction did you get out of--the visit of these people, Senator Kennedy and Williams and Murphy--the growers?

CHAVEZ: By the time the hearing ended Senator Kennedy was like a thousand percent behind us endorsing our efforts. There's no question--there was no dilly-dallying in our mind, his mind, or the grower's mind where he stood. That was what was so beautiful about it because usually what happens is you have a politician who's always trying to please both sides. Senator Kennedy just came right down to the issue. We briefed--Dolores [Hyerta] briefed him for about five minutes. And just in about five minutes without notes--he had never been to Delano before--he got the total picture and had enough to really ask the pointed questions that had to be asked.

There's that famous exchange with the sheriff, Sheriff Galian. That was the highlight of the whole hearings. The high school was jam packed. There were workers inside and outside and crawling out the windows and in the doors. Senator

Williams had to give--well, asked us to please give the growers a little room to come in because it was just jam packed with our people. And we did. We cleared some seats for them. The growers were very hostile, you know.

The exchange would be just before the break for lunch. In that exchange with the sheriff--the issue was that forty-four of our people had been arrested--Senator Kennedy asked the sheriff, "Well, I understand you arrested forty-four people about three months ago and I also hear that they were peaceful; they were non-violent; they were picketing lawfully. Why did you arrest them?" The sheriff said, "Well, I got a call from a supervisor of this company who told me that these people who were out there earning a living. . . ." These honorable people who were out there earning a living had told him that if we didn't get the picket line out of there--which means out of the road where we were picketing in the road--they were going to come out and cut their hearts out. "So I came and removed the cause--to counter the effect." The cause of what?" This is the Senator asking the sheriff. The sheriff said, "Well, cause of the problem." So the Senator asked him, "So you came and you arrested forty-four people because somebody else was going to come and attack them?" He said, "Yes."

I've forgotten the essentials, but at any rate the key line to that was when the Senator said, "We're going to take a break for lunch and I would suggest to the sheriff that in this lunch break he take time to read the Constitution of the United States." So it went over real well. It was well put and timely and really gave the sheriff a real test. For instance, he said at one point, "Amazing. Amazing how you can arrest people if somebody is going to attack them."

By that time he was really completely involved, totally immersed in it. He had so much broad experience about these conflicts that I guess, one, they're all the same. So, just by getting the little briefing that he got from Dolores he was able to carry through the whole day.

O'BRIEN: At that time there was some legislation in Congress. I believe in was Senate. It was the minimum wage, as I recall, and some other legislative things, too, National Advisory [Commission on Civil Disorder recommendations] council and--oh, it slips me. Did you have much contact, did you yourself, or people who were working with the farm workers, have much contact in attempting to get some national legislation through?

CHAVEZ: Most of our contacts were with Senator Williams who had been carrying this bill from, I guess, eight or ten years before. But after that there was a lot of contact with the Senator [Kennedy], not so much in legis-

lation because the legislation being proposed wasn't something that appealed to us, but on a lot of the problems that came about. He did some fundraising for us and did a lot of, well, a lot of the favors that you need, a lot of the work that can be done by a Senator who is interested. He did that for us.

So Dolores testified at the hearing here. At the end-- he asked some very good questions--on the testimony Dolores was testifying with, I think, three or four farm workers-- he said, "Thank you for your presentation. It's been very enlightening." He told the growers, "It's not in my mind that you're going to win. I would suggest, of course, in terms of this committee, that you sit down and negotiate before the thing gets any worse, because the workers are going to win." The result of that was electrifying because, see, the growers had been putting us under with the threat they would smear us and with frightening people with arrests and, well, you know, the way that they do things.

O'BRIEN: Sure.

CHAVEZ: Well, when he came, and came totally and completely on our side, this gave the people a real--well, jacked them up, you know. People that had been away from the union, people that were afraid were coming and they were saying, "Senator Kennedy says that the union's a good thing." And we were saying, "We've always said that." "Well, he's saying it. I believe it now." It wasn't an endorsement, but it was endorsement in fact.

And of course, we used it to full advantage. I think it was a 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 it just didn't--see, people just wouldn't believe them any more. Of course, we got his statements and just spread it all over the valley, everywhere we know, with his picture and everything. They couldn't, they just couldn't, get through. People didn't believe them any more.

O'BRIEN: Well, did you talk with him at that point about what was happening in Texas? You had those problems down in Starr County about that time.

CHAVEZ: No. No, we didn't.

O'BRIEN: Or was that a little later?

CHAVEZ: That was later, yes. No, I hadn't started. No, I did talk to him about Delano. I did talk to him about some of the pressing problems. One is



the harrassment. The other one was the courts, the bias of the courts. The other one was the "Red-baiting" campaign that the growers were having against us. He spoke very directly to the three points--very good, very strong. So we talked about the wages and about the working conditions and all these things.

O'BRIEN: Do you recall any of his staff people, people like Peter Edelman?

CHAVEZ: Oh, yes. That's where we met Peter Edelman. Yes, we've gone very well becuase he's, well, a very good guy and we hit it off very well. Our guys hit it off very well with him, and also we established a very good friendship there.

O'BRIEN: Was [Adam] Walinsky along with him at that time?

CHAVEZ: Adam?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

CHAVEZ: I don't remember. I just remember Edelman and the Senator. There were two others--what was the other guy? No, it wasn't Walinsky I don't think. Who was the other guy who was with him? He was slender and sort of tall--blonde.

O'BRIEN: I don't know who that would be.

CHAVEZ: I'd remember. Maybe it was Walinsky. I don't know.

O'BRIEN: It's no matter. When do you see him again after that?

CHAVEZ: Well, I talked to him in between several times, phoning Washington. I didn't see him again until-- when was that big fundraiser up in Marin County? Must have been in '67.

R. CHAVEZ: No, '66.

CHAVEZ: Late '66? It must have been late '66 then. Must have been around September? No, October?

R. CHAVEZ: It was in the fall sometime.

CHAVEZ: In the fall of '66. He came out to Marin County and appeared at a fundraising party we had to raise money for the clinic. So I saw him there.

O'BRIEN: What came up in discussion then? Did you recall anything in particular that you took up with him?

CHAVEZ: Well, one of the problems was that the press was there and we didn't have much time to talk to one another because the press was bugging him. But he asked about the strikers, wanted to know how the contract was working out--by that time we had gotten a contract--and wanted to know if there was anything he could do for us in Washington. I raised the question of the illegals and the "green cards" who were breaking the strike and asking him if we could do something with the Department of Labor or the Immigration Service to help us with the problem. That's why I raised it the first time. But we didn't have much time to talk about the strike because there were a lot of people and so everybody wanted to talk to him. We did talk in groups, generally about the problem.

O'BRIEN: Did he ever, at this point, either by phone or letter or in person, that year, talk to you about [Edmund G.] Pat Brown's election? Was he concerned about it?

CHAVEZ: Oh, that's right. I forgot about that. No. There was something that I don't remember wherever it happened, but anyway there was something where he was--he didn't express disgust, but he expressed like he couldn't believe, when we told him we had gone to Sacramento and that the Governor wasn't there. He like said--he didn't say it but he kind of--like I would say, "How dumb. How can he be that stupid?" He didn't say it. He just like said, "Well, why would he do a thing like that?" meaning that it was as much to his benefit as to ours if the Governor had been there.

O'BRIEN: Well, this was during the march?

CHAVEZ: No. See, he came to Delano for the hearings. They were here on the 16th of March. The following day, on the 17th, we started the march to Sacramento. Then, twenty-five days later the Governor wasn't there. Then in the fall--it was '66, in the fall of '66--that's when I met with him and that's when he said about the Governor, "Well, why wouldn't he be there?" like he couldn't understand that. But he put it in such a way to indicate to me that it was as much to the Governor's benefit as it was to our benefit for him to have been there to receive us. No, he never approached me to ask support for the Governor. No, he never said that we should support him or we should vote for him or express concern. I told him that it was very bad for the Governor to have done that

because how can we go out now and try and get people to vote for him.

O'BRIEN: Well, outside of Senator Kennedy's office, were you working or attempting to get anyone else to put pressure--in the [Lyndon B.] Johnson Administration or anywhere--on the Immigration people and the Labor people to . . .

CHAVEZ: Yeah.

O'BRIEN: Were you getting any response on this at all?

CHAVEZ: No. We had a meeting out here. This was later on. This must have been in '68. No, we had a score of Congressmen and maybe two or three other Senators, but we never--in fact, even today, the thing is worse today than it was then, but it still was never sold.

O'BRIEN: Well, how about in 1967 now, the following year. Do you see him again or talk to him much on the phone?

CHAVEZ: I went to Washington and I talked to him. I didn't see him personally, but I called his office from where I was staying and talked to Peter. I didn't talk to him, I just talked to Peter; he wasn't in. I think I had correspondence for that year with him. That was in '67. When was the last, '68? The last was '68. Yeah.

O'BRIEN: What are the major things you're talking about that year, basically the "green cards" and. . . .

CHAVEZ: And, well, stuff related to the movement, the "green cards" and. . . . Oh yes, another big thing we're talking about is getting the Department of Labor to certify the strikes and to get enough personnel out here to do it. He helped us on that. Also we're now talking about Texas, too, because by that time it's going; it's on. But it started in May or June of '66, after his first visit to Delano. Oh, yes, sure. Over in the Bay area we talked to him about the Texas Rangers. I remember, yeah. We also talked to him about an investigation by the Justice Department on the abuse of the Texas Rangers against our picket lines over there.

O'BRIEN: How did he feel? That was a pretty vicious situation in Texas. How did he feel about that?

CHAVEZ: No, well, he was very, very concerned about. . . . See, for instance, when we talked about police or court abuses, and infringements on rights of

peoples, he, you could see, would immediately get--you'd see a reaction of his concern much more than if we talked about, well, other things. Those are the things that really got to him.

O'BRIEN: Does the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] become involved in any of these things at any time, in investigations?

CHAVEZ: No.

O'BRIEN: Are they on the sidelines at all?

CHAVEZ: No, there have never been any investigations by the FBI that I know of. Oh, I'm sure that we've been investigated from the other end. The only time that we had the FBI here was when--that was during the. . . . That must have been. . . . Was that after or before Senator Kennedy's death? Remember the FBI came down to--there was some kind of an appointment or something.

R. CHAVEZ: That was before his. . . .

CHAVEZ: That was before. The only time the FBI, that we know of, has come was I think in late '67, early '68 when they came to investigate. It was some kind of an appointment that I didn't know anything about, and they came to investigate. They talked to everybody--a lot of people in the strike. Finally, I stopped it and said, "The hell with it. We're not going to answer questions when we don't know what they're doing." So I called the agent. I said, "Look, we're not going to answer your questions unless we know what you want." He said, "Well, it's about an appointment for you." I said, "I don't want an appointment." He looks at me. "I don't want any appointments. That's the last thing I want." So he looked at me and he says, "Well, in that case." He closes his--he had a briefcase; closed it up. "See you." He left.

O'BRIEN: Well, in 1967 we've got the war going on in Vietnam. How do you see this in 1967? Are you concerned about the war?

CHAVEZ: Sure. In 1965 we started to strike. We're already concerned. Well, we're all concerned about the war. The leadership of the union was very concerned in NFWA [National Farm Workers Association]. Gilbert Padilla is leading the Tulare County part of the strike. He's one of the vice presidents. And after the picket line gets settled, he begins to talk to the workers and begins to express concern

about the war in Vietnam. The workers, at that point, are brand new in the union; they're just beginning to strike and they get pretty frightened and pretty worried. It's at the time that we're really being hit with the "Red-baiting" stuff.

So I had a group of workers, who were itinerant workers, come to see me. They wanted to find out if we're really Communists or not. So I say, "Why?" "Well, everybody is talking against the government about the war. Is this loyal?" So we sat down and we had a long, three-hour session with them. At that point it wasn't so much in the war; it was in the right of people to say what they wanted to say. I said, "Well, are you fighting the growers because you want to have a right to say things? Well, how can you turn around and not meet this man?"

That was then, and the workers, well, they had to be educated. But they made a 100 percent turn. They're completely, against now, of course--but in those days we were pretty concerned, but we didn't have the workers behind us on that issue. They didn't know; they were new; they were frightened. They thought it was being disloyal to be--I think they didn't want the war, but it was a question of if they speak out, "I'm being disloyal," and this is very pronounced with the Mexicans, you know. With other groups, too. I'm sure other groups that are minority groups are not able to express things. Of course, all that has changed completely.

O'BRIEN: Are you talking to Senator Kennedy about the war at any time during 1967, urging him, let's say, perhaps, to get in a race for President?

CHAVEZ: No, what has happened--Oh, yeah. On the race for President. Sure. We're saying even when he comes-- I think it's in '56, in '66 rather--that he's got to run for President. In fact, weren't there some bumper stickers made? We had bumper stickers made for Kennedy in '68, wasn't it?

LYONS: I don't remember. We had some made. I know it was before '68.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, it was well before '68.

LYONS: Yeah. And, you know, we were talking about, "Is he going to run for President or what?"

CHAVEZ: Remember, we made some bumper stickers.

LYONS: We made the bumper stickers.

R. CHAVEZ: And I remember some picket signs inside the hall in the Senate investigation. "Kennedy for President in sixty- . . ."

CHAVEZ: Yeah, we had all that.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

CHAVEZ: Oh, yeah. I think we were the first organized group in the country that--We were so sure he was going to run. To us, he never said he was going to run, but we were sure he was going to run. I mean, we thought, we couldn't see how he couldn't run. With us it was a foregone conclusion that he would.

O'BRIEN: Did he or Peter or any of these people see these things?

CHAVEZ: Oh, sure, sure.

O'BRIEN: How did they react to them?

CHAVEZ: I think it was Peter who talked to--see, to get the whole story you'd have to talk to all our guys because I'm just giving you my own thing and it's very limited because there's a lot of people coming and they want me to introduce them to the Senator and I'm trying to talk to them and I'm mostly just standing by while he's talking to other people. But you have to talk to all the others to get a real--well, like they're saying, I'd forgotten about the signs. Trying to get everybody together would have been good.

But anyway Peter does talk to Jim [Rev. James Drake] and he says, "Do these people really mean it?" And Jim says, "Sure we mean it." Jim--that's Jim Drake, my assistant--said, "Not only do they mean it, but it's going to happen." I think Peter said, "Do you think so? Do you really think so?" But it was kind of. . . . There was never any doubt in our minds.

Oh, Richard, over there, remember? Over there when we started shouting when he came into the hearings and we got up and we were saying, "Kennedy for '68." Remember? Or "We want Kennedy '68?" The workers were saying that.

R. CHAVEZ: And then there were also some signs.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, some signs at the hall.

R. CHAVEZ: Inside the hall, yes.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, but I'm talking about at the high school, at the auditorium when we were shouting, "Kennedy for '68."

O'BRIEN: Well, in that time, 1967, particularly right after Senator [Eugene J.] McCarthy gets in the thing, do the McCarthy people try to come to you and feel you out or get any kind of support for Senator McCarthy?

CHAVEZ: Yeah. Well, see, we liked him very much, but it was just not. . . . The people didn't--I think they respect him, but they just didn't. . . . It wasn't their idol. Nothing like Senator Kennedy. I'll tell you a little bit about--We had some elections prior to the. . . . We'll go into that later on. I'll explain it.

O'BRIEN: Well, there's a number of people that are trying to get Senator Kennedy to run, in early 1968, for President and they're having some meetings back East. Do any of them try to get you into it, some of the people around him like Adam, Peter, as well as some of the older people like [Theodore C.] Sorenson, [Frederick G.] Dutton?

CHAVEZ: This must have been when, around?

O'BRIEN: I would have been in late December of '67 and early '68, January, February. As early as that. Jess Unruh would have sort of floated in as I understand.

CHAVEZ: Yeah. I think that there was--I didn't talk to him, but I think Peter and Jim had conversations. I was pretty much out by then. I started that fast in February, so I don't remember. I think Paul Schrade talked to me about it. I don't remember it.

But we're saying that we're convinced he's going to run. And when McCarthy announced he was going to run and when he starts preparing for the election in New Hampshire, we started getting worried here that the Senator is not coming out. I think then we began to be pretty concerned about running, and I think we had some meetings about asking him to run.

What did we do? Remember, we had a big meeting about. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: When?

CHAVEZ: That's just--the publicity's coming out about New Hampshire, just beginning. We began to get word he is not declaring, openly running. I remember that

was the first time that we were worried. That election was in March?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

CHAVEZ: Well, I was just . . .

O'BRIEN: Late February. Yeah, it was in late February.

CHAVEZ: Late February, yes. Because it's in March about the fifteenth that he declared--the twelfth?

O'BRIEN: Yes. Then he came here with Paul Schrade about the tenth, didn't he, when you were--the fast.

CHAVEZ: The tenth.

O'BRIEN: What do you recall about that?

CHAVEZ: I was out there at the Forty Acres and I was pretty weak then. So, he told me he was coming. And everybody's very happy that he's going to be here.

I guess it was before he came I asked, I think it was Leroy [Chatfield] or Richard [Chavez], one of them, "Well, what am I going to tell him? What do I want to talk to him about?" I mean, I'm in bed, you know. And I wanted to get up. I didn't want him meeting me laying in bed. And they said, "No, you can stay. He didn't mind." So he came and he said. . . . Oh, I heard later on that he had asked someone, one of his aides, "What do you tell a man who's on a fast?" And I was asking the same thing here, "What do I tell him?" I just didn't know what to say. So anyway, he came and he said, "Hello. How are you?" And I said, "Fine, Senator." And I must have been kind of nervous because I turned around--there was a little silence, and I wanted to get the conversation going--and I introduced him to Paul Schrade who had been with him on the trip from Los Angeles down here. So that broke the silence. They started laughing because I was introducing him to Paul.

R. CHAVEZ: I was there--he walked in and he said, "Cesar, how are you? How are you feeling?" That's what he said. That's when you started talking to him. He wouldn't sit down; he stood up. He was offered a chair and he wouldn't sit down. He just stood there right by the bedside.

CHAVEZ: Then he left and he was going looking at the chapel we had there. He wanted a drink of water and there was no water. He wanted to use the restroom; the restrooms were locked.



R. CHAVEZ: Nobody thought of getting a cold drink, a soda or some ice water. We just weren't thinking about that. We were thinking about something else I guess. He asked for a drink of water, there was no water. Then he wanted to use the restroom, and the restrooms were locked and we looked all over for the keys and nobody had the keys. All of the keys were out. And this thing. . . . But it worked out fine.

CHAVEZ: It was awfully messed up. Oh, he liked it. He joked.

O'BRIEN: Well, he got a pretty good reception then, didn't he?

CHAVEZ: Oh, sure. Anytime he came he got a good reception. Not only that, anytime we came to the. . . . Oh, I know in my experience John Kennedy had a real good reception among the minorities, but nothing like Bobby, no. See, with John Kennedy it was probably like--the relationship was like--how can I describe it?--a very good relationship, like probably the poor would have had with [Franklin D.] Roosevelt at the height of their real depression, like a lot of hope.

O'BRIEN: Yeah. Is there a Spanish word that might apply?

CHAVEZ: I'm sure there's a Spanish word. Well, maybe I can explain it this way. They had all this tremendous respect and admiration for John Kennedy. There were a lot of reasons for it. He was young and he came across really well. He was Catholic. Every time that he got put down for being a Catholic this made points with the Mexicans who are all Catholic. But they looked at him as sort of the minority kind of person himself. I don't know; maybe I'm wrong, but with Bobby it was like an entirely different thing. With Senator Robert Kennedy it was like he was ours.

I think, for instance, that we would never have dreamt of making a demand on President Kennedy, the kind that we wouldn't think twice of making on Senator Kennedy. 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. While the other would be like we wouldn't touch him, although we respect him. We liked him very--we loved him very much.

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. It was a mixture of a. . . . It's probably all wrapped up in. . . . 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. People who were with him really had this kind of. . . . Well, to give you an idea, we spent more money on the get-out-the-vote campaign for President Kennedy. We had less people working for him. We spent, from the groups that I worked with, about a tenth of the money for Bobby Kennedy. For every man working for John Kennedy we must have had about fifty men working for Bobby. It was electrifying. I mean, like just everybody was out there. The polls will show you. That line is very seldom crossed. 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 . . . [Interruption]

I was getting to that one. We had a rough time keeping the crowds back.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

CHAVEZ: I wish I could explain it. You can't even attempt to do it because you would try to compare it with other people, then it gives a different meaning. It would have been a combination of a bishop coming to visit the Mexican-American people for the old people, and like the kind of stuff that would turn on the kids like . . . [Interruption] . . . with something like John Kennedy as a President.

See, the amazing thing was that he could turn everybody on from this extreme to this extreme in ages, the young and the old. It's something; it was a phenomenon that can't be explained. See, there's always--sure, there are people who are admired, but there's a reserve, you know, they'll just go so far. But this was, no, this was just like there's no limit to the. . . .

O'BRIEN: Well, at that point does he give you any indication of whether he's going to run for President? This is in March.

CHAVEZ: Well, yes. Yes, he does. See, we came and I didn't get there until just before we started because I'm very weak and I can't take too much; the sun's hot. But we sit there at the front and it's a very long program, the Mass and then I want to talk to him, but I'm very weak. I have a headache and the sun is getting me and stuff. People are too close in. It's stuffy. I remember telling him that. . . . Well, they were pressing pretty hard and they were pushing from the back where he was sitting, and they were tipping his chair up. So I sort of turned over and I said, "We're pretty lousy in controlling crowds." And with his typical quickness he says, "The important thing is that they're here."

One of the ABC [American Broadcasting Company] national commentators gets trapped in this. . . . Right in front of the truck where the altar is we made a space for the press. But this guy gets trapped in back over there. The ABC crew and NBC [National Broadcasting Company] and CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] and all the others are roving the cameras and taking the pictures and those poor guys are trapped over there.

R. CHAVEZ: It's a human chain.

CHAVEZ: Yeah. And they won't let him through. So I look up and see the guy's over there and I say, "Gee, ABC, poor guys." And the guy's pleading and nobody--they said, "Nothing doing." So I got Leroy, who's in charge, and I said, "Let him through." So the guy gets through and sets up the camera and he comes to the Senator and says, "Senator, I'm going to ask you for one of the silliest requests you ever had. Will you please give him another piece of bread." Because the Senator got a piece of bread and gave it to me and I broke the fast that way. So then what came out on ABC was really the second time.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

CHAVEZ: Then he leaves. He gets up and speaks. It's a very short speech, but by that time he's really caught up with the spirit. There's a lot of spirit there. They're calling him to run and it's just. . . .

R. CHAVEZ: They went wild.

CHAVEZ: His hands were bleeding. Remember, they were trying to--there were scratches and they were trying to get him, touch him.

R. CHAVEZ: Somebody mentioned that and I can't remember.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, well, I didn't see, but people wanted to just touch his hand and that's all they wanted, but there was this tremendous. . . . So his hands were scratched, people trying to touch him. They weren't doing it. . . . It was one of those things when they're all fighting to touch him, but. . . .

Well, Mack [Lyons] is in on that. He's assigned to take him over--he and the other guys--to the car, and there's just this. . . . He went that way and then they put me in a car to take me out. But from what I hear from Jim is that people just pranced around him. And they'd fight their way to get to the car. It must have taken about fifteen minutes. It's just

like unbelievable. And when they get to the car they open the door and have to push people back. Finally, he gets in the car and no sooner he's in the car when he jumps out of the car. [Laughter] And Jim says, "Oh, God!" He gets on top of the car. I don't know whether it was the hood or the . . .

R. CHAVEZ: Right up on top.

CHAVEZ: On top, right up on top, and he says, "Viva la Causa," or "Viva la Huelga," or something like that.

R. CHAVEZ: Yeah. And something else. At his speech--I just think this is the place that he spoke in Spanish.

CHAVEZ: Yeah.

R. CHAVEZ: That's why I wanted to mention it.

LYONS: And Dolores translated for him.

O'BRIEN: Go ahead.

LYONS: Could I say something on this?

O'BRIEN: Sure, go ahead.

LYONS: The Senator gets up there and he starts trying to speak Spanish with his Boston accent and I swear to God I didn't understand what he was trying to. . . [Laughter] I thought he was speaking French or some foreign language. And all of a sudden they started clapping. Somebody must have caught what he was trying to say, but it was really--I mean, it wasn't anything close to it.

O'BRIEN: Can you give any approximation of how it sounded?

LYONS: Oh, gees. Spanish with a Boston accent. [Laughter] Really.

R. CHAVEZ: Dolores was translating. She was speaking the Spanish.

LYONS: Oh, the other thing. He had something . . .

R. CHAVEZ: It was written out in Spanish.

LYONS: Right. See, it was written. His speech was written and he was going to read out and Dolores--both in

Spanish and English--was just going to read one but he just put that aside, and completely different. It was just sentences that Dolores had written down.

R. CHAVEZ: That was very good. That part was very good.

CHAVEZ: No, he looked over and he said, "I'm murdering the language, Cesar, is that right?" I said, "Yes."

R. CHAVEZ: Everybody just loved him for it. They just went wild. They just loved him for it. He came across very, very well.

O'BRIEN: Now there are other groups here that represent Mexican-Americans. I was thinking of the Mexican-American Political Association. That's Bert Corona, as I understand it.

CHAVEZ: Yes.

O'BRIEN: How do these people feel towards Kennedy and towards him going for the Presidency?

CHAVEZ: Oh, great. No, there's no. . . . It was very hard to find. . . . I saw a group the day of the election, a small group of Mexicans in East L.A.--about thirty--marching. And they were for McCarthy. In East L.A., about twenty of them. There must have been about a thousand people ready to skin them.

O'BRIEN: Is that right?

CHAVEZ: Oh, I'm telling you it was like those heated elections they have south of the border. Like the guys marching with McCarthy things, they just have a very stupid thing to do. You don't do that in East L.A. or any place where there's blacks or browns. But anyway they did it. And just in an organized mob of people, about a thousand people. We remember because we went by there. We had the truck. See, we moved the headquarters to L.A. because that's where the big group is, the big vote. There was about a thousand people out there, "Traitors."

See, he got up out of the car and jumped on top to respond, because people said, "We want Kennedy. You've got to run. Tell us when you're going to run." So he got out to respond I guess. He didn't say, "I'm going to run," "I'm not going to run," but he thanked them again and said, "Viva la Causa." He got in the car and then they drove away. As he was driving

away he said--he didn't tell anyone exactly, but he was in the back seat and Jim Drake was next to him and he said, "Yeah, I think I'll run. Maybe I'll run. Yeah, I think I'm going to run." To us, when Jim reported that, in our minds we knew he was going to run. I don't know why, but our minds were made up. It's a very strange kind of--that when you make up your mind something's going to happen. So we had no--we knew he was going to run, like we knew that he knew that he had to run. That kind of. No, Bert Corona, everybody was just about as elated as we were.

O'BRIEN: Now, when they set up the organization for California and Jesse Unruh takes over as the campaign manager, did you have any reservations in the way that campaign was organized?

CHAVEZ: No, we work independently. What we did was--see, I was called by Schrade the first time to ask me if I wanted to be a delegate--What do you call it? Not delegate, but a . . .

O'BRIEN: You mean to the convention in California?

CHAVEZ: No, no. To the . . .

O'BRIEN: The [Democratic] National Convention?

CHAVEZ: No. To Kennedy's--what do you call them? As a sponsor. They need so many names. What is it?

R. CHAVEZ: Candidate's slate or something.

O'BRIEN: You mean the slate?

R. CHAVEZ: Yeah.

CHAVEZ: What is it called?

R. CHAVEZ: That's all I know is the slate.

CHAVEZ: It's an endorsement, that's what it is. You have to register your name with the Secretary of State here in California. What is it called?

O'BRIEN: Slate is the slang term, but there is another term for it. What is it? You have to file for the elector for the Presidential primary.

CHAVEZ: Yeah, elector. So I tell Paul, "Well, gee, if I do