



Cesar Chavez.

Sal Si Puedes

Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution.

By Peter Matthiessen.

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By STEVEN V. ROBERTS

"Sal si puedes," Spanish for "escape if you can," is the self-mocking name that Mexican-Americans call the *barrio* in San Jose where Cesar Chavez spent part of his childhood. The rest of those years were spent tramping the back roads and fields of California's verdant San Joaquin Valley, a member of the faceless, nomadic army who pick the fruits and vegetables most Americans seem to think appear by magic in their supermarkets. What made Cesar Chavez different was that he accepted the challenge of "sal si puedes." He has tried to escape, and take his people with him.

Mr. Roberts, The Times Bureau chief in Los Angeles, has written extensively about Cesar Chavez and the farm workers.

Chavez is the head of the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee, the most recent in a long series of unions that have tried, with little success, to organize the poverty-ridden farm workers. For more than four years the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee has been striking the growers of California table grapes, and for almost two years it has been promoting a nationwide boycott against the fruit.

In the process, the union has attracted support ranging from the labor establishment to the Black Panthers. Housewives have traded bridge clubs for picket lines; Charlotte Ford and George Plimpton have raised money at chic cocktail parties; clergymen of all faiths have preached that not eating a grape is a holy act. Since the death of

Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez has become the nation's favorite radical.

What is the source of the union's strength? What lies behind the mystique of Cesar Chavez? In his excellent new account of Chavez and his movement, Peter Matthiessen offers this perceptive explanation: "Chavez is the only leader in the nation who has gained the fierce allegiance of the New Left without appeasing it. The students and the black militants are not drawn to Chavez the Revolutionary or Iconoclast or Political Innovator or even Radical Intellectual — he is none of these. In an ever more polluted and dehumanized world, they are drawn to him, apparently, because he is a true leader, not a politician: because his speech is free of the flatulent rhetoric and cant on which younger voters have gagged: because in a time starved for simplicity he is, simply, a man."

Matthiessen is not a political writer but a novelist (his last novel was "At Play in the Fields of the Lord") and a naturalist. (Some of the book's most eloquent sections describe the despoliation of California by irrigation and pesticides.) He focuses on Chavez as a personality, and that is an important part of the story. For Chavez is a truly humble man, a man of the land and the people who are close to it. When he refuses to wear a tie, when he accepts only \$5 a week in expense money, when his tastes for luxury extend to Diet-Rite soda and matzos, it is not merely for the effect. That is the way he is.

He has been accused in recent years of a nascent messiah complex, and he does wear a Jewish mezuzah because he thinks Christ wore one. ("He certainly didn't wear a cross," Chavez explains.) But when he looks at his family and says, "Beautiful! Three generations of poverty!" there is more pride than bitterness in his words. (He is also a man of great gaiety. Matthiessen remembers leaving Chavez at the headquarters of the San Francisco archdiocese. Moments later the author heard a rapping sound and there was Chavez, silhouetted in a window high above the street, dancing and clowning for his friend below.)

Chavez is more than a humble man. He is an exceptionally shrewd organizer. He opposes *chicanos* who glorify *la raza*, the Mexican race, when he sniffs even a hint of racism. At a time when white liberals have been ousted from the civil-rights movement, he has not only recognized their good intentions but given them something concrete to do. And at a time when violence seems to have become a fact of public life, Chavez has maintained the principles of nonviolence. A deep admirer of Gandhi, he rejects the current notion that a group's militancy should be equated with the number of guns

it has stashed away. "We are as militant as anybody," he once told me, and he is right.

For the real importance of Chavez lies in what is happening to the membership of the union. While others talked about participatory democracy, the farm workers were practicing it. "He wanted the people who did the work to make the decision," said Dolores Huerta, Chavez's able chief lieutenant. "He wanted the workers to participate, and he still does, because without that the Union has no real strength. This is why he would never accept outside money until the strike began: he wanted the workers to see that they could pay for their own union."

Chavez is not averse to asserting leadership, and even ruling by fiat — as he did the night he prohibited Mexican-Americans from discriminating against the union's Filipino minority — but by and large the decisions flow from the bottom up. "Whether he wins *La Huelga* (the strike) or not," Matthiessen quotes one observer, "Cesar Chavez . . . has taught his people to do for themselves."

Learning to do things for themselves has changed the farm workers. People with little formal schooling are organizing successful boycotts across the country. Moreover, they are losing the sense of shame society hammered into them for so long. Today they are proud to be *chicanos*, though five years ago, as Chavez remarked, "They wanted to be anything but *chicanos*."

They are demanding equality and dignity in communities where the growers have ruled them like feudal lords, and they are gaining a new sense of their own potential. "It's so great when people participate," enthused Chavez when he saw the art work in the union's new headquarters. "It's only a very small revolution, but we see this art beginning to come forth. When people begin to discover themselves like this, they begin to appreciate some of the other things in life."

One of the criticisms of Chavez, however, is that he has not thought enough about the "other things in life." While working to improve the life of the farm worker, he has not done much to help some of the young people leave the farms and get the education they are clearly capable of absorbing.

At times, success seems very far away. The boycott has made an impact, but the growers have shown little sign of giving in, and the Nixon Administration offers no prospect of outside help. The Defense Department even dramatically increased its quota of grapes for the troops in Vietnam. Many workers, moreover, are still too poor and insecure to join a union. Yet the struggle goes on. "We can't go back," Chavez's cousin once said: "We got nothing to go back to." ■