

Cesar Chavez's Fall from Grace, Part II

By Jeff Coplon

Fifteen years ago, Cesar Chavez was a revered figure of the left. A seventh-grade dropout who fasted for weeks and quoted St. Paul, he strove to empower the most exploited people in the nation: the farm workers who generate the \$14 billion empire of California agribusiness. After achieving some early success, Chavez fell on hard times—and out of liberal fashion. Once the broadest coalition in labor history, the United Farm Workers became increasingly isolated, even from its own people—symbolized by its move from Delano and the San Joaquin Valley to a headquarters deep in the Tehachapi Mountains. During a crucial referendum failed in 1976, Chavez withdrew even more, cutting away from old allies and making new and dubious friends. This is the second of two parts.

By 1977, the United Farm Workers seemed ready to dominate the farm labor scene in California. For all its cumbersome machinery, the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was working. And in March the union's only real rival, the Teamsters, finally decided to cut their losses and leave the fields.

The big prize—the state's 250,000 farm workers—was up for grabs. It was put up or shut up.

Then a funny thing happened.

The UFW stopped organizing. It grew passive, tentative, defensive. As the outside world beckoned, it turned inward.

At about the same time, not coincidentally, Cesar Chavez discovered a new role model: Charles Dederich, the founder and chairman of Synanon.

By 1977, Synanon was no longer the innovative drug therapy program that had drawn national acclaim a decade before. It was, in the words of *Time*, "a kooky cult." It forced its members to shave their heads, swap their spouses, and undergo abortions and vasectomies. Those who didn't flee were known for their absolute loyalty to their leader.

Dederich was a semireformed alcoholic and one of the great American megalomaniacs. He could be charming, coarse, or vicious, depending on his mood. Like Chavez, he was a drab public speaker, but he did have a way with words. He coined one famous expression: "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

Chavez met and befriended him in the 1950s, when they both worked in East Los Angeles. They fell out of touch until the Delano grape strike, when Dederich offered food and medical care to the strikers. The friendship was renewed. In 1976 Chavez visited Synanon's mountain retreat in Badger. He was dumbfounded. In contrast to La Paz, a rather ramshackle place, here was a perfectly controlled community. The cars all worked. The grounds were litter-free. All was neatness and efficiency, and totally under "Chuck's" domain.

Chavez fell in love with Badger. His treks became regular. In April 1977, a month after the Teamster truce, he scheduled a major UFW conference there. The announced topic: how to organize the state's vegetable industry and secure the union's future. But somehow the agenda was misplaced.

"The whole thing was crazy," said one ex-union staffer who attended. "I went into the potty with a *Sports Illustrated*, and I thought, great, this is the first normal thing I've done all weekend—and this voice comes over the loudspeaker. It was a woman who said it was the anniversary of the day she shaved her head, and how happy she was."

Chavez took the opportunity to introduce his people to The Game, a basic Synanon technique for group pressure and mind control. The rules were simple: a small group sits in a circle. The Game Master springs an attack on one partici-

nant for some alleged blunder or impropriety. Then the whole group joins in screaming at the hapless victim. Extra points were scored for obscenities (the wrong-doer was invariably an "asshole") or attacks on family members.

The victim's task was to parry with an apology, an excuse, or—best of all—a counterassault that deflected the storm onto someone else. This wasn't easy, since the charges might well be sheer fiction. It could also be humiliating, since The Game often played with personal matters, like whom you'd slept with the night before.

Soon Chavez imported The Game to La Paz. By 1978, organizers from throughout the state were meeting for weekly two-hour sessions. "It was very productive," Chavez told me recently. "We wanted a more open union. We wanted the staff to deal squarely with the leadership, and vice versa. . . . The Game gives you license to say anything."

with the press. . . . I wouldn't classify them as a cult."

And to this day, the UFW executive board still occasionally plays The Game. Long after Chavez stopped going to Badger, Dederich's spirit lived on in La Paz.

"Chuck's bodyguards helped Cesar's guards learn martial arts, and Chuck put Cesar in the game," a former Synanon official told *The New York Times* a few years back. "Chuck baited him; Cesar said some of the people under him were giving him a bad time, and Chuck told him, 'If they don't do what you want, get rid of them, squeeze 'em out.'"

The squeeze had actually begun long before, in the late 1960s, when a dozen Anglo leftists—mostly harmless Maoists and Trotskyites who'd volunteered from the campuses—were forced to leave the union. In 1976, the purge accelerated.

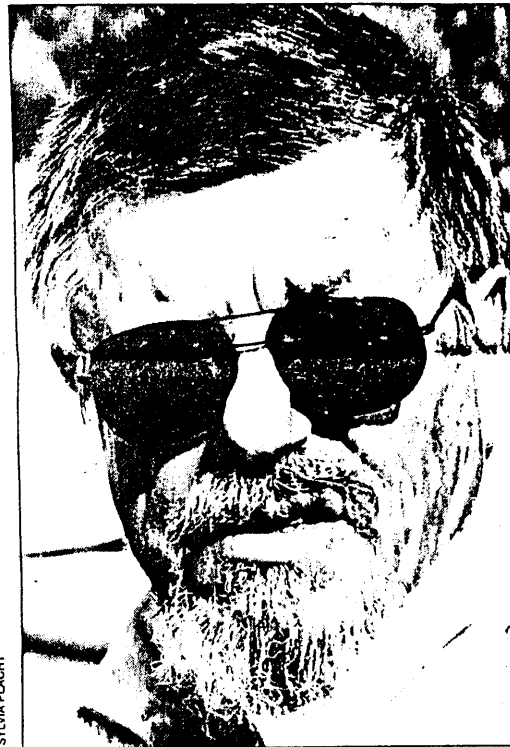
"There was a meeting at Cesar's house, and he started talking about Nick Jones —Nick this and Nick that," recalled one

In 1977 fully one-third of the central staff was fired. Everyone was replaceable, Chavez would tell people. The surviving Delano-era veterans hung on, praying that Cesar would get back to basics. Maybe the craziness would go away.

Instead, it engulfed the organization. In 1978 the grape and lettuce boycotts were dismantled, a move Chavez would later regret. All energy was channeled toward the Agricultural Labor Relations Board. "I think he became obsessed with the power he could get through the political system," said Bill Kircher, the recently retired director of organizing for the AFL-CIO.

It was top-down unionizing, and predictably it backfired. In fiscal 1976, the UFW won 214 elections. In 1978 it won 37; in 1980, only 10; in 1982, only eight.

Union services suffered. Health clinics were closed. The RFK Medical Plan ran a \$5 million surplus while workers waited months for reimbursement.



Cesar Chavez (left) was intrigued with Synanon founder Charles Dederich's (right) techniques for group pressure and mind control.

Other UFW leaders weren't so pleased. As a sensitivity session for addicts, The Game was said to get results. As an administrative "tool" in a union, it promoted gossip, hurt feelings, and sabotage. Players would find the things they said were later used against them—especially if they were on the outs with Chavez.

"We lost a lot of [staff] people," said Gil Padilla, then the secretary-treasurer. Thus preoccupied, the union seemed to drift away from the fields. Chavez pushed a motion through the executive board to defer new organizing for a period of "consolidation."

In 1978 Dederich was convicted of conspiracy to murder an attorney by having a rattlesnake stuffed in the lawyer's mailbox. He was sentenced to five years probation and ordered to sever his ties with Synanon. Ever loyal, Chavez voiced his support at a press conference. In 1980 he allowed a Synanon officer to pitch for money at the UFW's political conference in Los Angeles.

To this day, Chavez keeps the faith: "From what I can see, they [Synanon] are not violent. They got caught in a big fight

participant. "He said Nick was trying to sabotage the Proposition 13 campaign (to guarantee the future of the ALRA). I thought it was ridiculous"—as did other union leaders at the time.

Jones, the UFW's boycott director, resigned shortly after the referendum lost. He said he'd been accused of "harboring leftists and disrupters in the union," a charge he bitterly denied.

This was a sensitive issue for Chavez, who himself has been red-baited by everyone from the FBI to the John Birch Society. He had a stock response: he couldn't guarantee that Communists wouldn't "try to infiltrate our union," but he stood opposed to anyone in the UFW "with political hang-ups or hidden agendas."

To many, the issue was a red herring. Certainly Chavez had more than his share of real-life boogie men: the growers, the Teamsters, the rural sheriffs. But now he spoke darkly of "grower agents" and "conspiracies." For a time armed guards were posted at La Paz. "Enemies" were everywhere. "Loyalty" was everything

And Chavez? He seemed ever more distant. He'd fire off memos on high phone bills and stray dog shit at La Paz, but offer little guidance on contract talks. In the old days, an aide remembered, it was "really good to work with the guy because he had a really good mind. If you had a problem you could get him on the phone, and get a good perspective.

. . . But it came to the point where there was dead silence and 'Just do what you want.'"

It was as if he'd lost all confidence in his own decisions—and with it, any faith in others. The executive board became a threat, a challenge to his authority. The first to go, in 1978, was Eliseo Medina, a dynamic young comer whom some had seen as Chavez's logical successor. Then, in 1980, time was up for Padilla, the long-time number-two man.

"If there was an argument, you got accused of being negative," said Padilla, one of the few willing to speak on the record. "And if you're negative, you're against him [Chavez]. You're no longer fit, you're out of step. So he asked me to resign."

As the union had grown as a theology, so had dissent become heresy. The departed were "traitors" and "deserters." It was their fault *la causa* had stopped growing. Like Synanon, the UFW would treat its own "splitees" most harshly of all.

This was clearest in the case of Marshall Ganz. The son of a Bakersfield rabbi, Ganz came to the union in 1965, fresh from his work with SNCC in Mississippi. Short, balding, and self-assured, Ganz was a peerless organizer, and in 1973 won election to the executive board. He was particularly adept at developing rank and file leadership—at showing farm workers how to seize control of their lives. Yet he seemed without personal ambition. "Marshall was fanatically dedicated to Cesar first," Kircher said.

It was Ganz who led the lettuce strike of 1978-79, which brought 20,000 workers out of the fields in the Salinas Valley. It was Ganz who persisted after Chavez wanted to halt the strike and substitute a new boycott.

As usual, Ganz's instinct proved correct. The lettuce workers won the best contracts in UFW history; with piece-rate bonuses, some cutters could make up to \$20 an hour.

But the victory was pyrrhic. "Cesar became very fearful of Marshall," said one who knew them both. "It was really nutty. . . He didn't want any more contracts where Marshall was working."

Frustrated by the union's stagnation, Ganz resigned in 1981. So did his wife, Jessica Govea, another executive board member. So did Jerry Cohen, long considered one of the nation's top labor lawyers.

It wasn't over for Chavez, however. Several months later, after the union's first open dissent erupted in the Salinas Valley, Ganz was fingered as the villain. Chavez himself was discrete, referring only to "malignant forces . . . organized clandestinely . . . that are jointly struggling to destroy our union."

But Frank Ortiz, a charter Chavista, was heard by organizer Scott Washburn to claim that "the two Jews, Jerry and Marshall, are trying to take over the union." And Dolores Huerta, Chavez's sister-in-law and first vice president, told a group of workers that she and Chavez now knew "the person who is organizing a group to try and form another union. . . You know him very well. He is Marshall Ganz. . . He wants to destroy us." At best this was paranoid fantasy; at worst, character assassination. But when prompted at the time, Chavez said he didn't know whether such charges were true.

(Three years later, Huerta cannot be reached for comment. But Chavez is now more conciliatory. Ganz, he told me, left the union simply because he "wanted to do something else. . . As far as I'm concerned, [he] could come back at any time." Did Ganz ever betray the UFW? "No, the other assholes did, but not Marshall," Chavez replied.)

Today, of the nine persons on the UFW executive board, four are members of the Chavez family: Cesar; brother Richard; Richard's wife, Dolores Huerta; and Cesar's son-in-law, Artie Rodriguez. (That doesn't count Cesar's wife, Helen, who runs the UFW credit union, or son Paul, the legislative director.) The rest are devoted Chavistas. They include Oscar Mondragon, who improperly joined the board within five years of an arson conviction.

"None of those board members will ever say no to Cesar," said Padilla. "He can say the earthquake in Coalinga wasn't an earthquake—that Marshall Ganz engineered it—and they would believe it."

By all outside assessments, the talent that left the union has yet to be replaced. "I've been working since 1941, in all 50 states, with every union of any consequence in the AFL-CIO," Kircher noted. "If you asked me to name the most able union organizer-reps, I couldn't name 10 without including Cohen, Padilla, and Ganz."

Cohen's legal department was "very

tough, but at least you could reason with them," recalled Andrew Church, a Salinas attorney who represents growers in contract negotiations. "We had some horrendous fights, but the door was always open. Now it's closed tighter than a drum."

A major complaint is that the new negotiators must consult with La Paz on even the most trifling points. The growers have their own derisive name for UFW headquarters. They call it "Magic Mountain."

Manuel Chavez was always different. It was apparent even as a young boy, when he came to live with his cousins in Arizona. Where Cesar and Richard were round and densely built, he was angular. Where they were outwardly placid, he brimmed with nervous energy. Two years older than Cesar, he was more a brother than a cousin—and a big brother at that, someone Cesar looked up to and confided in, an alter ego who never showed self-doubt.

Manuel grew up to be a brawling, backslapping macho man. He was kicked out of the Navy during World War II after striking an officer. By the time of the Delano grape strike, his police record would fill a full page. In 1964 he entered the state penitentiary for 15 months on a forgery rap.

None of this kept Cesar from calling him to help *la causa* take wing. Cesar knew his man. As a used-car salesman in San Diego, Manuel had cleared \$2000 a month. He knew when to coax and when to intimidate. He'd use the same skills to become a successful organizer.

But Manuel was never a dull boy. "I don't save no money," he'd say. "Money's to roll. That's why they make it round." Even in the early, egalitarian days, he was always more equal. While other staffers made do on \$5 a week, Manuel would blow three times that much at the corner tavern. He never seemed to lack for a new car or sharp clothes.

As the war with the growers escalated, Manuel's other talents bloomed. He became the Peck's bad boy of the UFW, a goon's goon. "Sure, I believe a little bit in nonviolence, but not all the way," he'd say. "Sometimes you got to put on a little pressure." And sometimes it got just a little out of hand. Sometimes Manuel forgot to distinguish between a Teamster thug and a contentious farm worker. If they got in his way, they got pushed. And no one—certainly not Cesar—would tell Manuel when to stop pushing.

Is he really your cousin? the union president once was asked.

"Sometimes," Chavez replied.

When it got really embarrassing, Cesar would lash Manuel publicly, send him into exile, then call again when he needed a *job*—say, to organize Coca-Cola in Florida.

But Manuel liked it best back in the Imperial Valley and the border area near Yuma. In 1973, he was named area director for Arizona. A year later, as Cesar met in a private audience with Pope Paul VI, Manuel was careering toward one of the worst scandals in labor history.

It started with a citrus strike against the Yuma-area growers. Under Manuel's direction, more than 2000 workers left the fields. The entire border town of San Luis, Sonora, where the growers got much of their labor, was respecting the strike. Four and five weeks passed, and no one would pick. The oranges swelled on the trees till their branches snapped.

The growers were desperate. They advertised in Mexican newspapers 2000 miles into the interior, offering premium wages. By October 1974 a scab work force was assembled. Some, surely were undocumented workers. Others were legal green-carders; still others, Anglo transients from Colorado. But in classic UFW fashion, it was the "illegals" who would be scapegoated. (Three years earlier, the union had endorsed the Arnett Bill, which would have fined California employers for hiring undocumented workers.)

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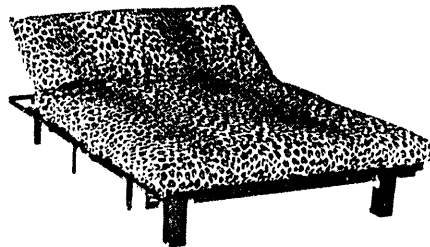
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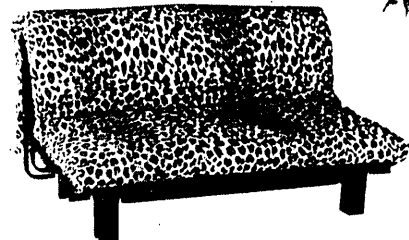
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What Manuel accomplished was the dream of every Grand Dragon and Imperial Wizard: a private border patrol. The locals dubbed it "the Wet Line." Tents were pitched every 100 yards or so. Strikers guarded the fence and desert on either side of the San Luis checkpoint, 24 hours a day, about 20 feet inside the border. The idea, at least originally, was to persuade potential strikebreakers of their folly. Failing that, the union would report them to the INS for deportation.

But it didn't quite work out that way, according to Travis Yancy, then the sheriff of Yuma County. "They'd catch any 'wet' coming through and beat the hell out of them," Yancy said.

"They just went apeshit," added Gus Gutierrez, a former UFW staffer in Arizona at the time. "They just went wild. Manuel was too busy out drinking, and he just lost control of the strike. There were people in charge who shouldn't have been. They thought everybody was a threat."

For at least two months, according to witnesses and news reports, the UFW conducted a campaign of random terror against anyone hapless enough to fall into its net. In the loyal town of San Luis, houses were firebombed, cars smashed. Gutierrez later talked to officials on the Mexican side, and heard tales to turn his stomach: rapes and castrations, broomsticks with nails shoved up people's anuses. "They said people had marks on their backs, beaten with barbed wire and chains," said Gutierrez. "We met one victim whose arm was cut up."

There were even rumors, heard too often to be easily dismissed, that more than one person had died on the Wet Line. "We got families in Querétaro who never had people come back. They had three people who just disappeared," said Lupe Sanchez, another ex-UFW organizer and now president of the Arizona Farm Workers, whose membership is 90 percent undocumented.

A delegation "went up [to La Paz] to see Cesar about the way Manuel was handling the strike," Sanchez added. "They were sent back. Cesar basically said, 'Manuel has my blessing.'"

Almost 10 years later, Chavez remains sensitive about his cousin. When asked about reports of brutality on the Wet Line, he responded: "It's a big fat lie. It's crap, made up by those elements which are trying to do a job on this union. We did it [the Wet Line] for two or three nights, and then we got pretty strict orders from the Mafia—the *contrabandistas*—that we couldn't be there."

Manuel, Cesar insisted, hadn't worked for the union "for ages.... His last job was in 1970 or '71, when we won the grape boycott. After that he disappeared." Since then, Chavez said, Manuel had resurfaced "a few times for a few weeks. I haven't seen him for several months.... I don't know where he is."

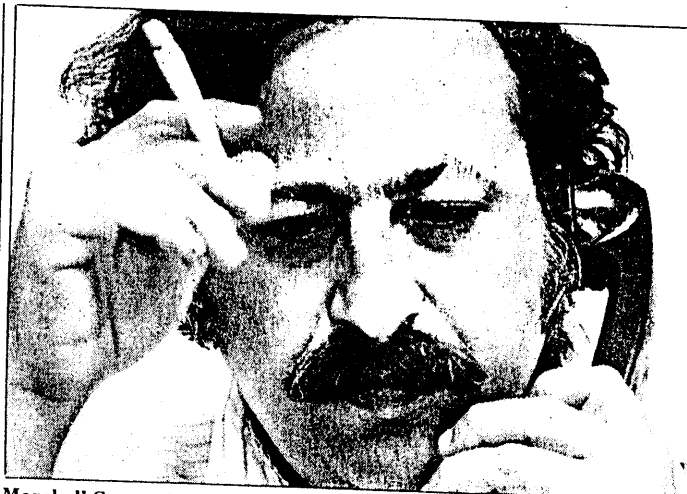
But others say Manuel still runs the UFW's border operation, that he still controls member benefits throughout the Imperial Valley. In the UFW office in Calexico, director Gilbert Rodriguez confirmed that Manuel works for the union. "Some days he's here, some days he's in New York or Chicago," Rodriguez said. "Yeah, he organizes.... He operates from the Valley."

Mario Bustamante grew up with the union. In 1970, when he was 22 years old, he attended the UFW's first meeting in Salinas. He became shop steward at his ranch and got fired for his trouble.

"The work we lost didn't mean that much to us," said Bustamante, a husky man with a bushy moustache and large Spanish features. "We weren't just fighting for money. We were fighting for our dignity." In 1978 his father was buried in the union flag.

After the lettuce strike was won, new contracts provided for paid union reps at each ranch. By understanding with La Paz, these jobs were filled by ranch committee presidents—the people who'd built the union.

It wasn't the dream job Bustamante



Marshall Ganz, talented and loyal, resigned from the UFW in frustration.

had imagined. The district office lacked adequate staff for grievances and arbitrations. Workers besieged him with complaints about the medical plan. And while Salinas was the union's stronghold, with more than 7000 member jobs in the area, La Paz declined to open a credit union there.

After reports to the leadership went unheeded, the reps decided to take their case to the 1981 convention in Fresno. That summer they formed a statewide grass roots slate to challenge three executive board candidates hand-picked by Chavez. The slate was headed by Jose Renteria, a mild-mannered, somewhat idealistic young man who'd previously directed the Salinas area office.

That was Bustamante's mistake, as far as La Paz was concerned. What ensued was an old-fashioned power play that would have made a Teamster blush. The Salinas delegates were seated at the rear of the convention hall, furthest from the mikes. The Chavistas circulated a leaflet denouncing Ganz and "outside forces" which sought "to force our President Cesar Chavez to resign." A hastily drafted constitutional amendment was pushed through, binding Renteria delegates to the Chavez slate via some dubious petitions.

With that, the insurgents—about 50 of the 350 delegates present—walked out. "Viva Chavez!" the Chavistas roared. "Down with the traitors!"

Days later, back in Salinas, three men forced Bustamante's nine-year-old son into a car and threatened him with death if his father "didn't stop complaining."

Then nine of the paid reps, including Bustamante, were "fired" by Chavez without so much as a formal charge against them. The reps struck back in court, charging that their posts were elective and not subject to summary dismissal. In November 1982, a federal judge found in their favor. (A final decision on the case is pending.) Three days later, La Paz slapped the reps with a \$25 million

slander and libel suit, claiming they had falsely accused Huerta and other board members of campaigning with union funds.

Finally, last October, La Paz sent a letter to Mann Packing of Salinas, demanding the immediate suspension of three workers. Their crime: refusal to pay their Citizen Participation Day "dues," holiday pay which is funneled toward UFW political contributions.

What made the move suspicious was that well over 100 workers weren't paying the CPD fund, including more than 30 holdouts at Mann-Packing. Of the three men tagged for suspension (the company plans to fight the union in arbitration), one was Mann's dissident paid rep, Rigoberto Peres. A second was a close supporter, Antonio Sopo.

Didn't it appear, I asked Chavez, that the union is targeting the dissidents?

Chavez responded angrily. "If you put that in the paper in writing, you'll be making a mistake. If you publish that, you're going to have some problems with us.... We don't screw workers in the union just because they don't agree." Then he softened and said he'd check into it: "If what you say is true, it's wrong."

Two days later, he was back on the phone with Robert de la Cruz, the Salinas manager for the vegetable division. De la Cruz told me the union had sent two suspension letters to Mann Packing. The first, dated October 26, involved Peres, Sopo, and a third man who'd since paid up. The second letter listed 31 other workers. And when was the second letter sent? Let's see, said de la Cruz. It was hand delivered November 17—or one day after my first conversation on the subject with Chavez.

But the growers are laughing last. Since 1981, the UFW has lost more than 2000 jobs in the Salinas Valley. The largest unionized company, Sun Harvest, has gone out of business. Others are laying off or cutting workers back to 20 hours a



Cesar Chavez (left) with his cousin, Manuel Chavez

week, to the point where a lettuce cutter is lucky to make \$10,000 a year. Because they must pay more than their competitors, the union's growers are at an acute disadvantage. By failing to seek new contracts after its landmark victories of 1979, the UFW has strangled the old ones.

"If the union grows," Bustamante predicted, "it will not be in places where the people who fought to build it will benefit. It will be where they don't know the union. Where people believed in God like we believed in God."

We are very loyal to the people we support. But also, when we get double-crossed, we can be pretty mean.

—Cesar Chavez

Not so long ago, Art Torres was the UFW's fair-haired boy. In 1972, when he was only 26, the union ran him in a state Senate primary against Democrat Alex Garcia, who'd angered Chavez with a weak stand on a bill to outlaw secondary boycotts. After Torres lost, he lobbied for the UFW in Sacramento. In 1974, with Chavez's staunch support, he won an Assembly seat. He hardly seemed to change jobs. He was there for the union in every big fight.

But in 1980 Torres crossed the line. In a clash over the Assembly speakership, he wound up backing compromise candidate Willie Brown over Howard Berman, the UFW's choice. After Brown won, he named Torres chairman of the Assembly Health Committee.

Torres's maneuvering was the stuff of everyday politics, a matter of pragmatism. To most neutral observers, it seemed that Brown's record on farm worker issues was at least as good as Berman's. But Chavez was not a neutral observer. Once again, he'd been betrayed. Torres became a preppier version of Mario Bustamante: a spittee, a *bandido*, a very dangerous precedent. If he couldn't be controlled, he'd have to be punished.

"For the first time, a key Latino leader opposed what Chavez wanted," said Richard Santillan, a student of Chicano politics and professor at Cal State-Pomona. "If Art got away with it, Chavez thought he'd lose other people.... It was all political revenge."

The pay-back came in 1982, when Torres again challenged Garcia in a primary. This time he looked like a winner. He'd been a visible leader in the barrio, a quick study at the capitol. The smart guys pegged him as the first statewide Chicano officeholder.

By contrast, Garcia was a middle-aged bungler, an old-style ethnic pol who opposed busing and abortion and had campaigned with Ronald Reagan in 1980. He had a pathetic attendance record. A newspaper poll pegged him as the least effective lawmaker in Sacramento. He seemed plucked and dressed for oblivion.

Then Garcia picked up a formidable ally: Cesar Chavez. How could the UFW support such a man? How could it desert such an ally as Torres?

"It was the other way around," Chavez would explain. "Art was with us 100 percent at first. Our objection was that Art didn't keep his commitment to us.... Garcia gave us a bad vote in '72 and we almost defeated him. He learned his lesson, and ever since then he never voted against us. He's 100 percent with us."

In the Garcia primary, the UFW contributed \$100,000, including \$30,000 in loans that were reported late or not at all. (The state Fair Political Practices Commission later fined the union \$25,000, the second highest penalty in its history.)

That kind of money can bankroll one hell of a state senate campaign, and so it did—the dirtiest race in California memory. Torres was attacked for his Baptist religion and his supposed inability to speak Spanish. Garcia's masterpiece was an 11th-hour, foldout brochure. It alleged that Torres and his wife of 11 years, a television journalist named Yolanda Nava, were not married—and that Nava wasn't the mother of his two children.

Continued on page 22

Continued from page 20

On election day, 500 UFW workers were bused into Los Angeles to get out the vote. Rarely have so many done so much for so little. Torres, declaring "a new generation of leadership," won with 54 per cent. So did Gloria Molina, a former Torres aide who overcame Chavez's opposition to become the first Latino woman in the Assembly. So did Larry Gonzales, another Torres aide who won a seat on the L.A. school board—again, defeating the UFW candidate.

Torres says he's "not a vengeful person," but he doesn't appear ready to kiss and make up. The Garcia campaign, he said, "reflected the intensity of the hated Cesar and Dolores [Huerta] had for me. . . . I know they were behind it."

All told, the UFW spent \$750,000 in the 1982 elections, including \$50,000 to Willie Brown, of all people. The total placed it second among the state's special interest groups—just behind the doctors, but well ahead of the realtors, lawyers, bankers, and insurance lobby. It spent more, in fact, than the state's AFL-CIO political action committee.

The same sum might have supported 75 full-time organizers or a full-service farm worker clinic for a year. Instead, it served mainly to dissolve the union's clout. If Art Torres could take Cesar's worst punch, why should a liberal Anglo worry about the union? Chavez was exposed as an emperor with no urban constituency—and 90 per cent of Chicanos live in the cities. It wasn't so surprising, then, when the state senate voted last February to confirm a bitter Chavez enemy as general counsel for the ALRB: David Sterling, the Republican appointee who'd already gutted the agency with staff and budget cuts.

It now takes the ALRB an average of 142 days to decide whether to litigate an unfair labor practice; 348 days to resolve a contested representation election. And even when the UFW wins at the polls, it finds growers in no hurry to bargain.



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO

Alex Garcia: headed for oblivion, until picked by Chavez

Without the leverage of a strike or boycott, it can take up to six years to negotiate a single contract. By that time a grower has won by default. His workers are too cynical to care.

"I don't think I'll vote for the union any more," said Esperanza, a picker at Tex-Cal, a union-certified ranch with no contract since last summer. "It's just a lot of talk."

Cesar Chavez has been arrested more than 50 times. He's been threatened with assassination, seen his office firebombed and his oldest son shot at.

And still he clocks 50,000 miles each year in search of his lost *causa*, and each year it proves more elusive. As he struggles to save the gains of the past, he loses his chance for the future. Even a moral crusade has "got to get more blood, you got to grow, like any organization," noted Stephen Roberson, a Florida organizer who said he resigned after the union dis-



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO

Art Torres: won despite attacks against him

couraged new contracts. "If you stop organizing, you're going to shrink."

To some, the fall was inevitable—a failure of insufficient militance. "The problem was there from the very beginning," said Epifanio Camacho, the old rose grafter who's now organizing a Communist-led farm workers union with the Progressive Labor Party. "In 1965 the strike was very strong. But since the union was pacifist, the growers took advantage and brought in scabs from Arizona—legal residents—to break the strike."

Others say Chavez was a victim of his own mythology. It's one thing to be the living legend of a young, galvanic movement. But if victory isn't quick, and the legend isn't martyred, he's got big problems. He can't risk being wrong, because everyone's watching. He can't be debated, only blasphemed. It's a rock-heavy burden, and Chavez was never equipped to handle it.

"Gandhi was a big influence on him,

and Gandhi was always *risking*," said one who knew Chavez well. "I don't think Cesar ever was really fearless in that way. He was never able to quite measure up. Inside he was always a little bit afraid."

In the main, however, it's hard to find insiders who will publicly criticize Chavez. They aren't anxious to join the enemy list, but it's more than fear that's keeping them silent. For those who fought with or near Chavez, there's an abiding loyalty, not merely to the union but to *themselves*, to a time when they felt most vital and optimistic—when they were like water running downhill.

"The union took a community that was undereducated, underpaid, and underworked," said Alberto Saldomando, director of California Rural Legal Assistance, a long-time UFW ally. "It made them understand *how* they were being exploited, and *how* to use the power of their beings to improve their conditions. That was an incredible feat."

"Chavez has made some real damn mistakes and bad judgments," added Kircher, who'd helped midwife the infant UFW despite the indifference of George Meany. "So did Reuther and Meany. I'll be damned if I'm going to single out Chavez. He did what no one else could ever do."

But while most farm workers are surely better off than they were 20 years ago, they have little to celebrate. With an average income of \$4000, they're as far as ever from the good life. The men still pull plows in Devil's Canyon while the horses break for lunch. The women with angina still faint in the swamps of Salinas broccoli. The aged still get laid off for picking too slow in pesticide-laden groves.

And last year in a Delano labor camp, where conditions have scarcely changed since the days of Tom Joad, a 16-month-old girl drowned in an open sewage pipe. There were no speeches, no press releases, no shrines to martyrdom at the Forty Acres. But she was mourned by her people just the same.