

Transcript of a Speech Delivered by Cesar Chavez at a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Rally in Exposition Park, Los Angeles on May 2, 1971

A transcript of this impromptu speech is in the United Farm Workers Papers, Wayne State University.

Thank you for inviting me to participate in this meeting. It is hard for me because we in the farm workers movement have been so absorbed in our own struggle that we have not participated actively in the battle against the war.

In thinking about the memorial service I keep thinking about the women in Washington, D.C., who participated in the veterans' protest against the war. The L.A. Times reported it as follows:

Anna Pine of Trenton, NJ, wanted to discard her dead son Fred's Air Medal & Bronze Star and Purple Heart and a half-dozen other awards for heroism. But she had already turned away crying when the first former soldier announced hands trembling, "And so we cast away these symbols of dishonor, shame and inhumanity."

"My son would be here," Mrs. Pine said. "He would throw these things away. But where do I throw them," she wondered, peering through tears about the crowd that had edged her away from the veterans. An hour passed, the crowd dispersed, Mrs. Pine approached the fence. Digging into a big plastic bag, she grabbed a handful of medals and threw them against the statue."

I have eight children. It is almost impossible to imagine the pain of seeing your own child die for a cause that neither of you believe in---especially when there are so many needs in the world and so many specific ways to work for change.

What causes our children to take up guns to fight their brothers in lands far away?

In our case thousands and thousands of poor, brown, and black farm workers go off to war to kill other poor farm workers in Southeast Asia. Why does it happen? Perhaps they are afraid or perhaps they have come to believe that in order to be fully men, to gain respect from other men and to have their way in the world, they must take up the gun and use brute force against other men.

They have had plenty of examples: In Delano and Salinas and Coachella all the growers carry gun racks and guns in their trucks. The police all carry guns and use them to get their way. The security guards (rent-a-cops) carry guns and nightsticks. The stores sell guns of all shapes and sizes.

It would be easy to put all the blame on the generals and the police and the growers and the other bosses. Or on violence in TV or the movies or war toys.

But we are also responsible. Some husbands prove to their children that might makes right by the way they beat on their own wives. Most of us honor violence in one way or another, in sports if not at home. We insist on our own way, grab for security and trample on other people in the process.

But we are responsible in another, more basic way. We have not shown our children how to sacrifice for justice. Say all that you will about the army but in time of crises the army and the navy demand hard work, discipline and sacrifice. And so too often our sons go off to war grasping for their manhood at the end of a gun and trained to work and to sacrifice for war.

For the poor it is a terrible irony that they should rise out of their misery to do battle against other poor people when the same sacrifices could be turned against the causes of their poverty. But what have we done to demonstrate another way? Talk is cheap and our young people know it best of all. It is the way we organize and use our lives every day that tells what we believe in.

Farm workers are at last struggling out of their poverty and powerlessness. They are saying no to an agricultural system that has condemned them to a life of economic slavery.

At the same time they are making a new way of life for themselves and their children. They are turning their sacrifices and their suffering into a powerful campaign for dignity and for justice.

Their nonviolent struggle is not soft or easy. It requires hard work and discipline more than anything else. It means giving up on economic security. It requires patience and determination. Farm workers are working to build a nonviolent army trained and ready to sacrifice in order to change conditions for all of our brothers in the fields.

Our opponents are at work every day to crush us or to get us off target or to out-manuever us with the American public. There is no way to defeat them unless we also are at work every day-week after week, month after month, and year after year if necessary, outlasting the opposition and defeating them with time if necessary.

That is what it takes to bring change in America today. Nothing less than organized, disciplined nonviolent action that goes on every day will challenge the power of the corporations and the generals.

The problem is that people have to decide to do it. Individuals have to decide to give their lives over to the struggle for specific and meaningful social change. And as they do that others will join them, and the young will join too.

If we provide alternatives for our young out of the way we use the energies and resources of our own lives, perhaps fewer and fewer of them will seek their manhood in affluence and war.

Perhaps we can bring the day when children will learn from their earliest days that being fully man and fully woman means to give one's life to the liberation of the brother who suffers. It is up to each one of us. It won't happen unless we decide to use our own lives to show the way.