

TEACHER GUIDE

1968 DOC. #2: Robert Kennedy with César Chávez Article

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

New York Senator Robert Kennedy, President John Kennedy’s younger brother, became a candidate in the Democratic primary contests in March 1968. Kennedy ran opposing the Vietnam War following the lead of Senator Eugene McCarthy. He had won several primary contests and was a serious contender for the nomination when he was assassinated in June, just after winning the California primary. His death left Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the front runner and the eventual Democratic candidate.

César Chávez was the founder of the United Farm Workers (UFW) union that struggled for the rights of migrant Filipino and Mexican laborers. Chávez believed in nonviolence, using strikes, boycotts, and sit-ins to pressure farm owners to recognize the union. In the spring of 1968, Chávez began a fast to dissuade his followers from turning to violence and to draw national attention to the farm workers’ strike.

As a Senator, Robert Kennedy had supported the strike and boycott campaign. After 25 days of fasting Chávez was becoming very weak and Robert Kennedy went to join him in Delano, California. Some of Kennedy’s advisors cautioned him that such a move might appear to be grandstanding. Kennedy said that he must go “out of respect for one of the heroic figures of our time.”

When Chávez broke his fast on March 10, his wife, Helen, and Senator Kennedy were at his side. Chávez had agreed to end it after his followers had renewed their commitment to nonviolence. Six days later Kennedy officially entered the Presidential race. While Kennedy never lived to see it, in 1970 the growers finally signed contracts with the UFW, recognizing the union and increasing wages and benefits for farm workers.

> **Distribute** the handout and ask students to read the text.

This handout is a portion of an article that appeared in the *New York Times* on March 11, 1968, the day after Chávez ended his fast.

> **Project** the document.

QUESTION What information about César Chávez is communicated in this article? Give evidence to support your answer.

SUGGESTED ANSWER He fasted to bring attention to the cause of the farm workers and to demonstrate commitment to nonviolence.

EVIDENCE text about Chávez fasting: “when I saw the pain and suffering of the farm workers”; and “his sacrifice was in behalf of nonviolence”

QUESTION What information about Robert Kennedy is communicated in this article? Give evidence to support your answer.

SUGGESTED ANSWER Kennedy supports Chávez, Mexican-Americans, and farm workers. He believes in nonviolence.

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Robert Kennedy with César Chávez Article

PowerPoint Slide
Text on student handout

EVIDENCE Kennedy flew to California from Iowa to be with Chávez; Kennedy quote “the migrant farm worker...is coming into his own right”; Kennedy “repeated the Chávez warning that ‘violence is no answer’”

QUESTION **Which voters might be encouraged to support Kennedy as a result of this article?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Mexican Americans, supporters of the labor and civil rights struggles, and believers in nonviolence would be encouraged to support Kennedy.

QUESTION **Does this article predominately use facts or opinions?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The article is mostly made up of facts.

EVIDENCE nearly all the information in the article is provable fact with the exception of the phrases, “emotionally packed, religion oriented,” “large” cross, “colorful” procession, and “successful” rally

QUESTION **Does the *New York Times* take any position on Chávez and Kennedy or is this objective unopinionated reporting?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER All news reporting takes a position. Although this article includes few opinions, the choice of what facts, quotes, and images to use and which to leave out gives it, like all news reporting, a position. For instance, Kennedy and Chávez were pictured and quoted but the growers were not. The reporter chose not to mention the criticism that Kennedy may have been meeting Chávez merely for publicity purposes. Also, the *New York Times*’ choice to even cover the meeting between the two men reflects a position. Their decision to run a two-column article with a photo on page 22, as opposed to a one-paragraph article on page 40 or a front-page story, also reflects an editorial position.

SEE NOTE →

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Was it appropriate for Kennedy to appear publicly at such an event since some might feel that he was merely using Chávez’ suffering to get votes? Why or why not?

Could Chávez also have been using Kennedy and the media to advance his cause?

Should candidates appear publicly at religious events and speak of their religious faith during campaigns for secular office? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL INFO

César Chávez helped to turn out the Mexican American vote for Kennedy during the primaries. He was also present at the Ambassador Hotel when Kennedy was assassinated after his California primary win.

Chávez went on another 25-day fast in 1972. In 1988, at the age of 61, he endured a 36-day “Fast for Life” to shed light on the harmful impact of pesticides on farm workers and their children.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

**Media Bias
Reaching Voters**

(newspaper article)

NOTE

By most standards this article is a good example of “objective journalism,” but no reporting comes without making editorial decisions that reflect the point of view and the opinion of the creators of the news. These choices establish what the *New York Times*, arguably the most influential newspaper in the world, considers newsworthy.