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The World is Watching: The Meeting that Ended a Movement and Sparked a Revolution

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Abstract: This thesis examines how and why the meeting between Larry Itliong and Cesar Chavez failed to accomplish its original intentions. Through Marcos’s propaganda campaign, Chavez was disillusioned to see a romanticized perspective of martial law in the Philippines during this time. He did not question the words of a dictator, but instead marveled at the extravagant hotels, institutions, and sites as he traveled across the beautiful island country. Their similarities drove them together as a means to desperately repair their shortcomings as leaders, but for one the damage was irreparable. As Chavez made remarks that defended the Marcos regime, letters of protest rained down on the UFW office, demanding answers to this unexpected endorsement. When Chavez was given the opportunity to explain himself, he chose to make a public spectacle that only drove his union further apart. While these aspects explain a flawed moment in Chavez’s leadership, it offers a fresh perspective on the historical narrative and legacy of Cesar Chavez.

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“If you’re going to be a leader, you’ve **got** to be with the people. You’ve got to hear them. You’ve got to understand their point of view.”

- Larry Itliong

**INTRODUCTION**

It appeared to be another hot and humid day in Manila on July 24, 1977. At Manila International Airport, prominent figures in Philippine politics gathered as media crews set up their cameras at the VIP Kiosk. As Cesar Chavez stepped out of the plane and down the runway to make his way, cameras flashed, signaling what appeared to be a hero’s welcome. Cesar Chavez, founder and president of the United Farm Workers, was joined by brother Richard, his friend, and Filipino liaison Andy Imutan in celebrating their triumphant arrival. Chavez had been cordially invited by the Philippine government under President Ferdinand Marcos to come and accept an award of honor for the work he had done with founding and leading the United Farm Workers movement. They met in Malacanang Palace, the White House of the Philippines. Photographs of the encounter show Marcos, donning a modernly designed *barong* (an embroidered dress shirt) while handing the award to Cesar Chavez. Chavez, who also wore the customary barong, appeared elated to be present, to be representing the Filipino farmworkers in America and receiving the award in their honor. While this all appears to be a beautiful sight, Chavez and Marcos were only masking the desperation behind their actions.

Cesar Chavez is memorialized as a positive force that reshaped the American labor movement during the latter half of the 20th century. One biographer noted that “Cesar has become for Chicanos and many other Latinos what Martin Luther King is for African Americans - a model they took for leadership and inspiration.”[[1]](#footnote-1) His infectious charisma, perseverance, and his ability to reach out to diverse communities were traits that authors associated with Cesar Chavez’s legacy as the leader of the successful Delano Grape Strike in 1965.

One may be asking what the significance is of these two unlikely figures to be meeting in a stormy season of the Philippines in the summer of 1977. While it appears to be a grandiose affair when the Philippine government graciously thanked the former labor leader for advocating for Filipinos in America, this two-week journey could not be further from the underlying reason that brought them all together in Malacanang Palace that night. In reality, the trip was an act of desperation for Cesar Chavez, as the state of his union was breaking at the seams as Filipino-Mexican relations within the union were starting to deteriorate. Chavez believed that visiting the Philippines would publicly display his genuine care and concern for the Filipinos both at home and abroad. However, by doing so, Chavez only further demonstrated the lack of understanding he had for the people he led as well as deepening the rift between himself and the Filipino farmworkers who started and supported this movement.

Likewise, for Marcos, the visit was also an act of desperation as newspapers all over the world were beginning to catch on to his broken promises and acts of torture. When first elected, Marcos promised to revitalize the Philippine economy through land reform policies, maintaining law and order by keeping a firm stance against crime and creating a “New Society” that could bolster Filipino nationalism and pride.[[2]](#footnote-2) These ideas, however, were highly contested by human rights activists in the Philippines and abroad. Contestation was also dangerous. Activists that publicly spoke against the government mysteriously disappeared, and if found alive, later claimed being gruesomely tortured. Marcos wanted to improve his reputation, that he was not “the human rights violator” that activists at home and abroad had painted him out to be but rather a leader that was also concerned for his people.



Philippine President Marcos is greeting Cesar Chavez in Malacanang Palace in Manila, 1977. Courtesy of Reuther P. Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

Though this pairing seemed very unlikely, these two leaders from across two continents needed each other to prop up their leadership roles. They shared similar authoritarian tendencies through how they have consolidated power and diminished the significance of Filipino laborers, respectively. This meeting was an opportunistic moment for Marcos and Chavez. It was a public relations gold mine for both leaders as this two-week journey was a deliberately organized plan to redeem themselves to the world. The Marcos Administration orchestrated the trip so that Chavez could only see the positive aspects of his work such as the extravagant buildings and the pleased Filipino farmworkers, masking the student demonstrations in opposition of his dictatorship, and the growing number of political opponents being imprisoned as a result of his rule. While Chavez may argue that he believed he was doing the right thing, he was a puppet in Marcos's show, feeding reporters the praise that Marcos wanted the world to hear. Although the visit all seemed to go smoothly in the island country, Cesar Chavez’s praise of martial law stirred human rights activists around the world in a way he may not have expected.

This thesis examines how and why the meeting between these two unlikely characters failed to accomplish its original intentions. Through Marcos’s propaganda campaign, Chavez was disillusioned to see a romanticized perspective of martial law in the Philippines during this time. He did not question the words of a dictator, but instead marveled at the extravagant hotels, institutions, and sites as he traveled across the beautiful island country. Their similarities drove them together as a means to desperately repair their shortcomings as leaders, but for one the damage was irreparable. As Chavez made remarks that defended the Marcos regime, letters of protest rained down on the UFW office, demanding answers to this unexpected endorsement. When Chavez was given the opportunity to explain himself, he chose to make a public spectacle that only drove his union further apart. While these aspects explain a flawed moment in Chavez’s leadership, it offers a fresh perspective on the historical narrative and legacy of Cesar Chavez.

**THE RHETORICAL PUPPET**

Unaware to himself, Chavez played into Marco’s propaganda theatrics. Rhetorical strategies were nothing new for the Marcos regime. Ferdinand Marcos was elected as the Philippine President in 1965, and later enacted martial law in 1972 where it persisted for nine years until it was lifted in 1981. Martial law in the Philippines consisted of strict curfews, censored media, and the disappearance of thousands of Filipinos across the country. Scholars have noted that the careful use of rhetoric that contributed to the success of the Marcos takeover. Author Joseph McCallus explained that Marcos presented a choice to the Filipino people: there was a “false” Filipino who embodied a periled threat to the nation versus the “new” Filipino who was “based on the idea that the unfulfilled promises of the Filipino patriots (Mabinia, Rizal, etc.) were now realized in the New Society, where growth and opportunity were offered through an observance of personal and social discipline.”[[3]](#footnote-3) McCallus goes on to say that “Marcos obviously had to demonstrate that martial law and the New Society were morally, politically, and culturally correct. The rhetorical situation that faced Marcos and his writers were extreme: martial law restructured the entire political and social system, in effect creating a new country.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Marcos orchestrated the trip for Cesar Chavez to work in his favor by carefully feeding Chavez very selective information that only painted his regime in a positive light. This was done well in advance before Chavez’s departure, as the earlier drafts of the planned itinerary were mailed to the UFW office on July 13, 1977. “May aye (I) inform you his excellency President Ferdinand Marcos requested government agencies concerned to extend full cooperation and assistance for the fruitful and successful visit of Cesar Chavez…”[[5]](#footnote-5) The Philippine government was more than ready and willing to provide Chavez with the best hospitality possible, carefully ensuring that he was well familiarized with Philippine culture and a bias version of the country's history. In advance, Chavez was sent three *barongs*, Filipino traditional embroidered dress shirts for him and his guests, along with a packet of information that contained a planned itinerary and a skewed overview of Philippine history that is written to Marcos' advantage.

This packet attached to Chavez's welcoming gifts only further illustrate Marcos's careful introduction to his rhetoric. The document, simply labeled “TRIP TO PHILIPPINE ISLANDS," begins with a list of the participants, Cesar Chavez being the first name listed at the very top. Then the document continues with a detailed outline discussing the necessary logistical information of the Philippines like the geography and population.[[6]](#footnote-6) This history begins with the Paleolithic Age and on through the discovery of Ferdinand Magellan, but the facts begin to show bias when the first bullet point read, “President Ferdinand Marcos placed the country under martial law on September 21, 1972.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Right below were the two points: (1) “was done to save the Republic.” And (2) “six days later issued Presidential Decree #2 declaring land reform as being cornerstone of government.[[8]](#footnote-8) Chavez, having been a champion for farmworker rights for the past two decades, was familiar with land reform and how such a decree could potentially bring a positive impact to Filipino farmworkers if it were true.

On paper, Marcos stood for worthy causes. The third point under “Politics” noted: “[Marcos] declared martial law because he was faced with rebellion from the Maoist faction of the Communist party.”[[9]](#footnote-9) It went on to list the incidents that involve the Communist party with student demonstrations and bombings happening left and right, causing anarchy to ensue across the country. Marcos, faced with the ever-growing threat of Communism, an increasing amount of crime and lawlessness, felt that Congress was not speaking for the people. Marcos then boldly “dismissed Congress and proclaimed a new society with the cornerstone being the peasants and the workers.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Marcos then established the Department of Agrarian Reform which supposedly allowed a transfer of ownership to tenants farms who worked the fields. However, an article in the Interdisciplinary Journal for Southeast Asian Studies stated, “by the late 1970s the sluggishness in land reform implementation clearly rested less on the magnitude of the challenge and resistance of the landlords than on the president’s failure to issue guidelines.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This idea that Marcos had championed for the rights of farm workers to own land is a false narrative, but one that would seem appealing to Chavez considering he had fought for the rights of farmworkers for most of his career.

The official itinerary proved that the Marcos regime deliberately orchestrated Chavez’s trip to work in his favor. The places they went, the people they dined with, the workers they encountered - nearly every detail in Chavez’s itinerary was made so that he can solely interact with those that were supporters of President Marcos. This two-week excursion was a non-stop public relations fiasco as Chavez was whisked left and right to various speaking engagements that were broadcasted at every opportunity. Another draft of the itinerary addressed Chavez in second-person throughout the scheduled events. For example, “You will start off the day with wreath-laying ceremonies at the Rizal Park, then a luncheon meeting with labor leaders hosted by the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines… followed by a courtesy call on Labor Secretary Blas Ople and other labor officials.”[[12]](#footnote-12) From sunrise to nightfall, Chavez’s trip was dictated by government officials who directed him of where to go and whom to meet with.

The itinerary carefully kept negative information out of Chavez’s sight. According to declassified telegrams from the US Department of State, “Chavez didn’t come in contact with one person who challenged [the] martial law of Marcos. He never heard of Senator Ben Aquino or safehouses… [Upon] Receiving his honorary doctorate, the university chaplain had to cancel the regular 4:00 mass at the university because he had received word the students were going to turn the mass into a demonstration.”[[13]](#footnote-13) In the moments where an opportunity could have arisen for Chavez to witness the other side of the Marcos narrative, government officials were quick to redirect plans so that Chavez would not encounter them.

While Chavez was receiving all the preparatory materials for his excursion, he did not question the validity of Marcos's documents that were laced with bias. His willingness to accept Marcos without question, even despite all the prominent Filipino voices that told him otherwise, is seen to an even greater extent once his journey in the Philippines began.

**THE GRAND GESTURE**

Filipinos had been an integral part of the UFW since its founding. Though Chavez has been historically recognized for his leadership in the UFW movement, what is often overlooked are the Filipinos such as Larry Itliong, Philip Vera Cruz, and Pete Velasco who sparked the farmworker movement when they walked off the grape fields on September 8, 1965. Despite playing an essential role in the founding and preservation of the union, Filipinos were generally excluded, causing growing tensions between the Filipinos and the Mexican Americans. The death of Filipino labor leader Larry Itliong from the United Farm Workers and the showdown between Chavez and Vera Cruz signified a breaking point within this long standing rift between Filipinos and the union. This prompted Chavez to perform a grand gesture as an attempt to mend these failing relations. Matt Garcia noted that “In 1977, the union struggled to maintain its influence over Filipino workers, many of whom had trouble gaining a foothold in the new hiring halls after 1970.”[[14]](#footnote-14) That same year another significant figure of the movement, Philip Vera Cruz resigned from his position as one of the Vice Presidents of the UFW, but that also ended with his resignation after a long, ugly showdown with Chavez and other UFW Board Members. The movement that Chavez once skillfully led was now falling apart from within, and he needed to do something that would ultimately win his former allies back in his favor.

Andy Imutan was one of the original strikers of the Delano Grape Strike, and according to Philip Vera Cruz, the second most important representative of the Filipino workers in the community.[[15]](#footnote-15) He had served early on in the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) Board, but later on left the union to pursue other avenues in helping the Filipino American community in Stockton through his own medical clinic named Bayanihan. Imutan not only gave Chavez the idea that visiting Imutan's homeland would help repair these tensions between the Filipinos and the union, but offered to plan the trip for him as a personal guest to President and Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Although Imutan did not know the Philippine president personally, he aligned himself with his politics and openly supported Marcos’ political agenda. According to Vera Cruz’s 1992 memoir:

It looks like Andy is sort of Marcos’ man here in the valley. When you get federal and state funds, you are not supposed to take political sides, especially for a foreign government. People who have been to Andy’s office tells me that he has a picture of Marcos right there on the wall… He says he is trying to help Filipino farmworkers in the U.S., and then he supports a Philippine dictator who puts farmworkers in jail for organizing activities.[[16]](#footnote-16)

When asked in the summer of 1977, Richard, Chavez’s brother, did not foresee any issues that would arise from Chavez's trip to the Philippines. Richard told his brother in the UFW Board Meeting, "Cesar, I really don’t think much of the idea… I don’t think people here know too much about Marcos, and those that know would probably get turned off at the idea.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Chavez then decided to ask for the input of his executive board members. When asked, the first person to mutter a response was Jim Drake, an ordained minister as well as Chavez's aide, who quietly uttered that this might be good for the Filipinos, as it has been noted that Chavez had also paid visits to other countries such as Mexico to capture the admiration of the Mexican community. Drake believed that by going to the Philippines, Chavez would also be displaying that he genuinely cared about the Filipino farmworkers he had led throughout these years. However, there were no positive comments that followed. Chris Hartmire, also an ordained minister and religious presence of the UFW, was the first to disagree with Chavez, saying, "What are you going to talk about over there, the UFW? They don’t have free unions there, you know.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Chavez was not receptive to these warnings. He also asked Philip Vera Cruz what his thoughts were on visiting the Philippines. The usually silent philosopher of the group responded, “no, I don’t approve of it. I don’t like the form of government Marcos has created because it’s very oppressive. It’s a dictatorship. There are thousands of political prisoners, people are arrested without charges or benefit of trial.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Vera Cruz went on to cite the many human rights violations that Marcos has committed, the evidence of Filipinos being tortured, and also the complete prohibition of strikes and the imprisonment of virtually all labor leaders. Both Hartmire and Vera Cruz vocally cautioned the dangerous man that Marcos was, but Chavez was no longer interested in hearing their thoughts and quickly moved to other matters for the rest of that meeting.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Despite being warned of the type of leader he was about to meet, Chavez decided to go on the trip with the company of Imutan and his brother, Richard. The plans and itinerary had been finalized nine days before departure on July 22, 1977. This extensive list included the planned activities that were packed with speaking engagements, press conferences, and dinners with the most dignified of the Philippine government. It was certainly not a relaxing vacation for Chavez and his entourage. It was a meticulously organized and calculated trip that was designed to garner as much attention as possible. Thus, his arrival was not at all discreet. On July 22, Chavez, Andy, and Richard departed from San Francisco for the two-day journey to Manila. Sunday, July 24th, their entrance was met with great attention. Upon arrival, Chavez and his party was immediately introduced to representatives from the Office of Reform, Department of Labor, Department of Agrarian Reform, Department of Education and Culture, Departments of Tourism, and the Department of Local Governments as well as labor leaders (those who were not imprisoned), security, and most importantly - media representatives. That same night, a reception dinner was held and hosted by the Secretary of Labor, Blas Ople.

The trip took nearly three weeks to complete, with each week packed with speaking engagements and visits across the country. During the first week, Chavez and his entourage had no time to waste. According to his official itinerary, on Monday, July 25, the following day from his arrival, Chavez was instructed to “start off the day with wreath-laying ceremonies at Rizal Park, then a luncheon meeting with labor leaders hosted by the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines headed by Roberto Oca, followed by a courtesy call on Labor Secretary Black Ople and other labor officials.”[[21]](#footnote-21) He would later that evening have a reception dinner that was hosted by the Office of the President. In the morning, Chavez was given a courtesy call from the Secretary of Agrarian Reforms Conrado Estella, who hosted his luncheon for the day. Soon after, Chavez was scheduled to deliver a lecture at the University of the Philippines Law Center, sponsored by the Asian Labor Education Center. On Wednesday, Chavez was greeted in the morning by none other than “His Excellency, President Ferdinand E. Marcos” himself.[[22]](#footnote-22) That evening, during a ceremonial dinner, Chavez was scheduled to receive an award for his work as UFW on behalf of the Filipino farmworkers. This award, entitled the Public Service Award, was handed to Chavez by Tourism Secretary Jose Aspiras.



Chavez posing with rice field workers. July 1977. Courtesy of Reuther P. Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

On Thursday, July 28, Chavez gave a lecture at the University of the Philippines in Los Banos, Laguna. As it was described in the trip itinerary, the university “is the premier school of learning and agriculture in the Philippines.”[[23]](#footnote-23) After lunch, which was hosted by the Chancellor of the University, Abelardo Samonte, Chavez’s next stop was to the International Rice Research Institute, followed by the Rizal Shrine in Calamba Laguna, where the birthplace of the country’s national hero is placed. On July 29, Chavez was set to visit another agricultural-oriented institution, Central Luzon State University. The itinerary stated that the rest of his activities in Luzon would be arranged by the National Congress of Unions in the Sugar Industry of the Philippines (NACUSIP) and labor officials from Bacolod City.[[24]](#footnote-24) Later that evening, his entourage visited another farm in Pampanga, where a private dinner was held before heading back to Manila.

The trip organizers planned a lovely conclusion to Chavez’s tour. It seemed that he could now finally relax after the rigorous schedule of “You will leave for Baguio City, the summer capital of the Philippines… There will be a parade and review in your honor at the Philippine Military Academy, followed by lunch hosted by said Academy.”[[25]](#footnote-25) From the day he landed to the day of his departure, Chavez’s presence was met with overwhelming praise by the Philippine government.

Through the visit, Marcos was able to successfully show Chavez the Philippines that he wanted him to see - without the eyesores of people living in extreme poverty, the starving farmworkers, the countless students and religious leaders that were disappeared, battered, and tortured to death. Instead, Chavez bought into the beautiful sights, basked in the lavish dinners, not questioning the words of a dictator.

**THE UNLIKELY DUO**

At first glance, it appears there could hardly be any similarities between Marcos and Chavez, as one has been remembered as a labor hero and the other as a dictator respectively. However, both leaders used fear to remain in power and silence opposing voices in their respective spheres of influence, as well as their meeting. The intentions behind this meeting can be seen through how both leaders used fear to consolidate their power and exclude opposing opinions. Recognizing their similarities helps us understand why Chavez was inclined to meet with President Marcos, and how these similar actions led them to their meeting in the first place.

Both leaders used the rhetoric of fear, as a means to consolidate power under the guise of resisting communism during the height of the Cold War. With the establishment of the union, Chavez was afraid of being associated with Communism, so that became a common fear among those in the union as well[[26]](#footnote-26). When rumors of Communism threatened the union, Chavez began his “purges” as a means to remain in control and dispel any notions of Communist affiliation. He strictly urged union members not to associate themselves with any other political affiliation or they would be forced out of the union. Chavez had been quoted in a UFW meeting saying, “Any SOB comes in with his own political or social agenda and tries to impose that agenda on the union, we will kick him out.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Chavez could not trust anyone, and thus, he often took matters into his own hands and did not rely on anyone else.

During Chavez’s visit, Marcos too played on this witch-hunt rhetoric to justify his consolidation of power through the intel Marcos sent to Chavez before hand. The informational packet sent to Chavez in July 1977, read that President Marcos “declared martial law because he was faced with a rebellion from the Maoist factor of the Communist party.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Marcos played on the fear of complete anarchy, claiming that he was faced with massive unemployment, a Muslim rebellion, and complete lawlessness. On the ninth day of Chavez’s journey, Marcos’ military presence reinforced the threat of the Muslim rebellion in order to justify Marcos’ need to declare martial law.[[29]](#footnote-29) Chavez’s travel notes recorded that his entourage watched a video that showcased the strength of the Philippine army and how these forces were fighting both the Muslims and the Communist Chinese. With Chavez and Marcos wanting to disassociate themselves from Communism during the height of the Cold War, they both used the threat of a Communist takeover as a means to distinguish themselves as leaders and take control of their respective spaces.

Both leaders also used fear as a means to silence opposing voices. With this fear, Chavez combined the threat of Communism and internal conflict to create one common enemy - Filipino leader and then UFW Vice President Philip Vera Cruz. Vera Cruz, being highly critical of Chavez’s one-man leadership, was publicly harassed in a UFW Board Meeting in early July 1977, just weeks before Chavez was set to depart for the Philippines. When rumors spread that Vera Cruz was planning to write an all-telling book on the UFW, Chavez and UFW attorney Jerry Cohen drafted a non-disclosure form for Vera Cruz to sign as a way to prevent him from moving forward. Part of the oath read, “In consideration of the mutual promises made herein covenant with each other and with the UFW AFL-CIO and agree not to disclose the matters discussed at today’s meeting in any matter whether by written publication or orally.”[[30]](#footnote-30) When Vera Cruz refused to sign the form, “Chavez’s trumpeted his refusal as evidence of the Filipino’s treachery, whipping the crowd into a frenzy like a revivalist preacher.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Vera Cruz was hurled with hurtful accusations of working with Communists and being a traitor to the point that the seventy-three year old exclaimed that he could no longer think straight - all while “Chavez hung back as the indictments flew at Vera Cruz at all angles, diminishing a man who had served the union since its founding twelve years earlier.”[[32]](#footnote-32) After humiliating the elderly Filipino leader, Chavez and the rest of the UFW Board called for Vera Cruz to forcibly retire and also called for a break in their meeting so he could gather his things and leave indefinitely. The clash between Chavez and Vera Cruz not only displayed how Chavez used fear to silence his opposition, but also signified the dysfunctional state of the union. It was this public confrontation that further illustrated Chavez’s desperate gamble to regain Filipino support.

Marcos also silenced his opposition to an extreme degree through the use of fear, intimidation, and torture. An example is seen in the case of Jessica Sales, a University of the Philippines graduate student that went missing in the summer of 1977. Known for her affiliation with student activist groups and her research on Filipino farmworkers, it was reported that she was arrested by Philippine military intelligence operatives between July 29 and August 1, 1977. The report, issued by the Campaign for the Abolition of Torture, stated that American intelligence “knows of the cases of several people who have disappeared following arrest. Some have reappeared after spending several months in “safehouses” (illegal detention and interrogation centers), while others have never been located, up to two years after being reported missing.”[[33]](#footnote-33) These allegations would only grow greater in number, while Marcos continued to sell Filipinos on his empty promises of land reform and a new society void of Communism and corruption.

Both Chavez and Marcos struggled in their leadership roles and used similar tactics as a means to remain in control. Chavez failed to mend the deepening rift between Filipinos and the union by publicly shaming Philip Vera Cruz for critiquing his leadership. Meanwhile, Marcos was responsible for the disappearance of activists and political opponents because of their conflicting ideas. As a result of the backlash, this meeting showcased the desperate intentions these two men have to bolster their leadership roles. Although it seemed this trip would benefit both parties, Chavez was mistakenly given the short end of a deal when he publicly supported Marcos’s regime to reporters in the Philippines and the United States.

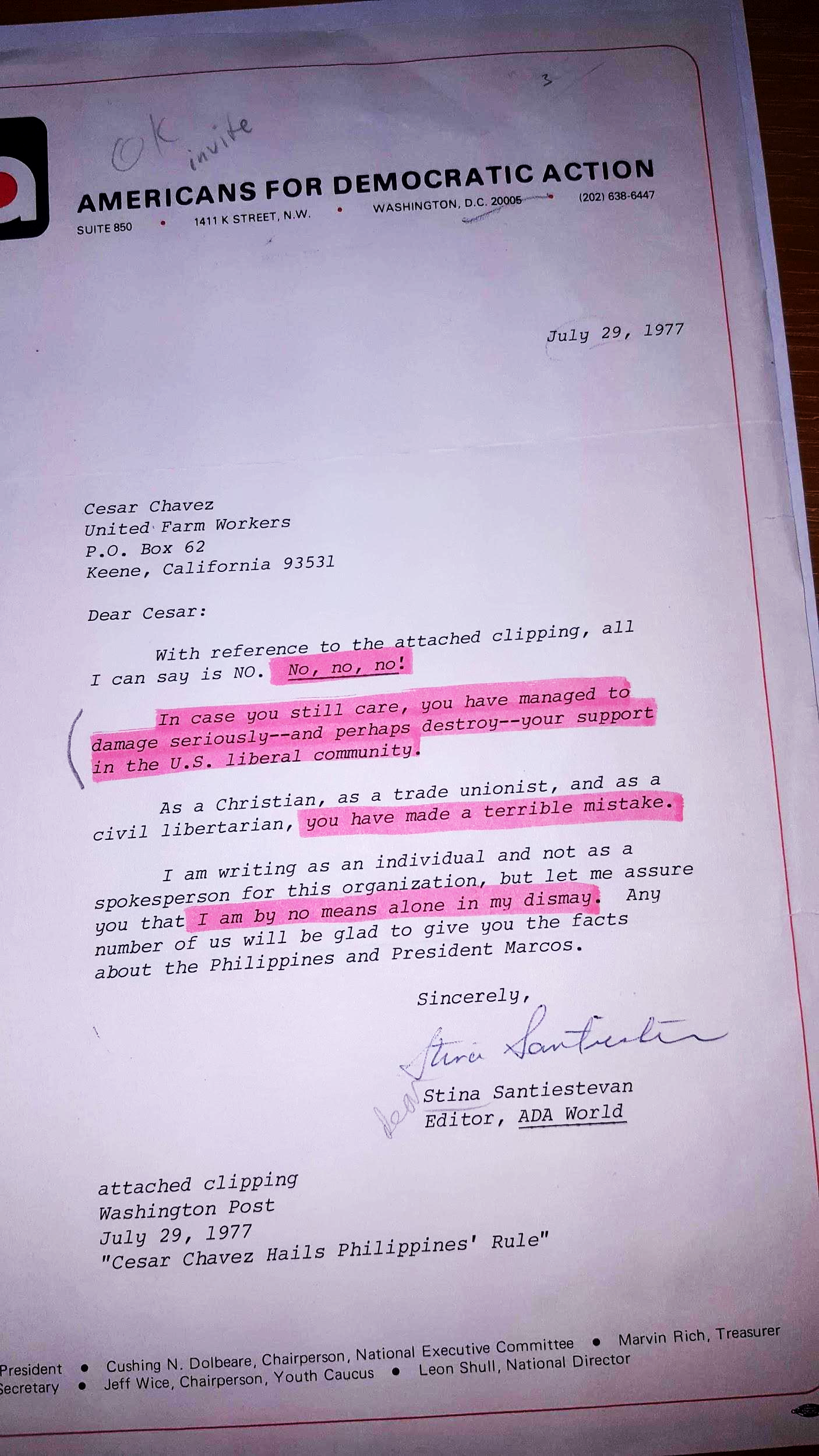
**“THE LABOR LEADER MOST UNLIKELY”**

Chavez’s defense of Marcos during his Philippines visit only further damaged his reputation. "Chavez Hails Philippines' Rule," a July 28, 1977 headline read in The Washington Post. "Cesar Chavez, leader of the United Farm Workers Union in the United States, said today that he was impressed by what he has seen of martial law in the Philippines," wrote journalist Bernard Wideman. This all-telling news article is what sparked one of the largest scandals in Chavez's career. Wideman wrote, "Chavez, who was given the award yesterday by President Ferdinand Marcos for improving the lot of Filipino migrant workers in California, said that he talked with about 60 union leaders here and every single one of them said that, it's a hell of a lot better now [under martial law] than it was before."[[34]](#footnote-34) The article exposed Chavez’s ignorance of martial law and the effect it was having on the Filipino people. The Bulletin of One People, a Philippine newspaper that was still heavily censored by martial law, had a piece written by Letty Masanoc that highlighted Chavez and his visit. In this article, Chavez has been quoted saying, “President Marcos is a wonderful man; his sincerity comes through for the workers. The Martial Law administration here is unique. It’s different in terms of the American concept of martial law. I didn’t believe it from Filipino friends who told me until I got here.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Both media outlets displayed Chavez leaving positive remarks from his stay in the Philippines, but it was Wideman's article that caught the attention of the world and brought critical acclaim.

Chavez's defense of Marcos sparked outrage at home and abroad. The letters came flooding into the UFW Office. At first, Chavez believed that he could set the record straight by responding to his initial critics. Through these responses, he expressed his frustration at the misinterpretation of his words, but the handwritten drafts of Chavez's letters reiterate the point that he was disillusioned by President Marcos. Chavez wrote to a critic, "The Wash Post Story you refer to is a deliberate distortion of fact. I have never supported martial law in the Philippines, and I do not intend to change that position."[[36]](#footnote-36) What followed was a line that Chavez crossed out that read, "I did not see many things during my short stay in the Philippines."[[37]](#footnote-37) More accurately, he only saw what Marcos wanted him to see. Chavez was speaking from a very skewed perspective of what he's seen in the Philippines. If Chavez thought a few words of clarification would put an end to the criticism, he soon found out differently.

**THE GRAPES OF WRATH**

At home and abroad, the responses to Chavez’s statements shared similar sentiments of initial shock and disbelief. The condemnation of Chavez's words was overwhelming. Letters flooded into the UFW Office, to the point that UFW spokesperson Marc Grossman could not keep up with all the correspondence. After Chavez made those remarks, there was a negative response on both a national and international scale and shared three common sentiments: (1) to educate Chavez on the truth of martial law and President Marcos’ torture campaign, (2) to express extreme disappointment in Chavez’s contradictory actions, and (3) demand for Chavez’s response to clarify his stance on martial law and President Marco’s dictatorial regime. Analyzing these letters are key to understanding the magnitude upon which this trip affected communities beyond what Chavez anticipated and further demonstrated his decline in popularity as a result a result of their meeting.



An example of the kind of response Chavez received as a result of his positive remarks on martial law. Letter was written by a representative for Americans for Democratic Action dated July 29, 1977. Courtesy of Reuther P. Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan.

As letters expressed shock in response to the Washington Post article, multiple people used their letter as an opportunity to lead Chavez to the truth about martial law and the Marcos dictatorship. Individuals who wrote to Chavez saw the hardships of martial law first hand and listed all the inconsistencies with Chavez’s praise versus the reality they experienced. Elizabeth Freeman, a Peace Corp volunteer from Pennsylvania wrote, “You were invited to the Philippines by Marcos and talked to union leaders he picked out for you to talk to… There are no civil liberties for anyone at the moment in the Philippines; no freedom of speech, of the press, and strikes are illegal as well as mass demonstration. Political prisoners have been tortured.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Freeman visited over eight provinces and from her experience she did not see the country progressing forward contrary to Chavez’s impression that the Philippines is in a much better state than it was prior to the enactment of martial law. In fact, what she noticed was a deepening divide between social classes as the rich grew richer and the poor became poorer. Freeman was not alone in expressing these sentiments as others who visited the Philippines during the martial law period wrote to Chavez sharing similar experiences, hoping that Chavez would read their letters and see the truth about the Marcos regime.

Additionally, letters that were sent to Chavez also expressed their overwhelming disappointment with Chavez’s contradictory statements. Reverend Francis Xavier H. of Seoul Korea wrote, “I had thought you to be a defender of the rights of the oppressed.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Meanwhile another letter from Chogoria, Kenya read “After having followed you on many marches, after having stood with the UFW on many picket lines, after having spent many months serving the farmworkers at Rodrigo Terrones Memorial Clinic, I must regretfully withdraw my support from the UFWA as long as you remain in leadership.”[[40]](#footnote-40) These letters from two different continents signify that Chavez’s words not only affected the Filipino diasporic community, but severed relations from those that supported him earlier on in his career as the UFW leader.

The responses that flooded Chavez’s mailbox expressed more than just disappointment, but demanded that Chavez clarify his previous remarks on the Marcos regime. The National Convergence of Justice and Peace Center in Milwaukee wrote, “We do not understand the lack of response from you on this matter. I have held off with any sort of public press release or communications pending clarification from you. But I feel irreparable harm is being done now.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Organizations from across the country wrote to Chavez with the intent that he would explain himself while others hoped he’d retract his statements. The North Americans for Human Rights in Argentina wrote, “we urge you to immediately and publicly withdraw all support for the Marcos government.”[[42]](#footnote-42) These imperative letters illustrate that activist groups and religious organizations were growing impatient with Chavez’s lack of response further decreasing his popularity.

Lastly, it is important to note that not all of the letters that were received by the UFW Office in La Paz were negative to Chavez's trip and statements. There were few that showed praise to Chavez for his efforts to meet with President Marcos and the Philippine government. Jeremias Montemayor, one of the political figures Chavez met with during his stay, for example, wrote a six-page letter on behalf of the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) that the Marcos government has done nothing but progressive things for the Filipino people. With the FFF under the control of the Marcos government, Montemayor also stressed that going to the Philippines was the right thing for Chavez to do. Montemayor wrote, "I cannot understand why so many of your critics, including priests and sisters, make such false statements and irresponsibly sweeping accusations (like those of torture) relative to conditions in our country. I cannot comment now on all of them, for it will unduly prolong my letter. However, in case you want to verify my point, please let me know, and I will tell you all about it."[[43]](#footnote-43) The essence of Montemayor's letter was to assure Chavez that he did good by visiting his country and that Marcos's decision to persist with martial law was only to maintain the well-being and reinvigoration of the Filipino people.

While Chavez’s trip was believed to encourage his popularity with Filipinos in the union, the letters that were sent to the UFW office further prove his declining popularity as a result of this meeting with Marcos. As an anonymous letter put it, “the grapes of wrath are on your head. This is not an act of revenge. Only an appeal: that if you don’t know what workers are undergoing in a Martial Law situation like ours, there is only one thing to do: shut up!”[[44]](#footnote-44) While this person urged Chavez to stay silent, it was too late now for Chavez to remain quiet. He would have to face his remarks head on, and did so in a way that captured the attention of many.

**THE WORLD IS WATCHING**

While many remained outraged with Chavez and his lack of response, the Anti-Martial Law Coalition (AMLC) based in the Philippines, worked closely alongside with the Friends of the Filipino People (also called FFP and the most significant U.S. anti-Marcos Filipino group) to set up a private meeting with Chavez so they could convince him of Marcos wrongdoings before going public with their disagreements. Initially, the groups were shocked to find that Chavez had visited the Philippines because, since 1972, the UFW has passed on past opportunities to do so because of the union's disdain for martial law. That changed however when word rang out that Chavez had made plans, and so while the FFP sent Walden Bello as their representative to gather more information about Chavez's intentions, Chavez's assistant Marc Grossman lied to him as a report about the encounter reads "Walden Bello, West Coast Coordinator of the Friends of the Filipino People, was informed by Mr. Mark Grossman, UFW Executive Secretary, that Mr. Chavez had not received any invitation from either the Philippine Government… In fact, Grossman denied that Chavez had any intention of going to the Philippines."[[45]](#footnote-45) After the news rang out of Chavez's visit, the FFP made numerous attempts to reach out to Chavez. The report indicated that Mr. Grossman had told Bello "that Mr. Chavez knew nothing about an award before leaving the United States and that he went to the Philippines for the sole purpose of 'talking to Filipino farmworkers."[[46]](#footnote-46) This immediate response set the tone for how Chavez would respond to his critics - with denial and defensive behavior.

In the face of all the protest letters that expressed grave concerns for his actions, Chavez denied his previous statements yet still defended martial law. Weeks after returning from his trip in September 1977, he highlighted his trip to the Philippines at the UFW's third constitutional convention in Fresno, where he did not consult the Executive Board beforehand about the agenda for this meeting. In the past the Agenda was usually discussed among UFW Executive Board members such as Vice Presidents Dolores Huerta, Philip Vera Cruz, Pete Velasco, Jerry Cohen, Chris Hartmire, and so on. Instead, he bombarded his constituents with the information, expecting that everyone would be supportive of his plans. While Vera Cruz was forced to leave the UFW Board meeting prior to Chavez’s trip, the status of Vera Cruz’s role in the UFW was ambiguous as no public statements were made in regards to his forced retirement. Still, he recalled, “at that meeting, Cesar was telling us what we had to do during the convention. It was then he told us that the Consul General of the Philippines would be the guest speaker on the first day of the convention… Cesar never before brought any of this up to the board. He never asked for my opinion on this. He just told us at that special meeting that's the way it will be."[[47]](#footnote-47) By inviting prominent political figures from the Marcos administration, Chavez continued to believe he was building relations, but not the right ones to fix this public showdown.

His authoritarian nature was on full display. He invited the figures from the Marcos government that were very accommodating to him during his stay. These government officials included Blas Ople, Marcos's Secretary of Labor, and Roman Arguelles, who was the Philippine consul general. Chavez appeared confident that with the invitation of these Philippine dignitaries, he was achieving his goal of garnering more Filipino support. Included in this crowd of support were the elderly Manongs of Agbayani Village. UFW Biographer Frank Bardacke wrote, "doing everything he could to mobilize Filipino support for the union despite the scant number of Filipino delegates to the convention, Chavez also arranged for Fred Abad, one of the Filipino leaders of the 1965 strike, to be the only person to nominate him for reelection as president."[[48]](#footnote-48) It was apparent that the reason behind Chavez's acts of desperation for unified support was so he can be reelected as the UFW President to remain in control. However, Chavez's efforts were not convincing long-time Vera Cruz. Vera Cruz recalled, "It was obvious that Cesar was making a big push to impress the Filipinos at this convention, but in my opinion, it was all show. There was no real substance of Filipino rank-and-file support for what Cesar was doing. The only Filipinos he was impressing besides Andy (Imutan) were those from the Philippines, the Marcos supporters."[[49]](#footnote-49)

The convention exposed Chavez's controlling character. When Debbie Volmer, Vera Cruz's wife, shouted: "*Abajo con martial law*" (Down with martial law), she was promptly escorted out of the building by security staff. Vera Cruz could not take Chavez's hypocrisy any longer. An oral history interview of Philip Vera Cruz revealed his frustration looking at that moment retrospectively, he said:

Okay, then, also, when we have the convention, then we have the Marcos' people. There were speakers in the goddamn convention after the visit, the city where they come in because they were invited by Cesar…. I could not take it. Because we have always been saying, down the dictatorship… Debajo de dictatorship and here at the convention, the resolution the dictatorship of Samoa, and here you have speakers from another dictatorship -Marcos! It was a direct contradiction to the principles of freedom.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Finally, after a back and forth exchange between martial law opposers and Marcos's men, Vera Cruz stood before the mic and was ready to speak his piece. This was the final rupture between Chavez and Vera Cruz, although he was normally the quiet observer of such events, Vera Cruz did not hold back his sentiments towards Chavez.

He started by announcing his resignation from the union, debunking the rumors that he was planning to retire peacefully from the UFW. Vera Cruz pointed out the hypocrisy in Chavez's leadership to condemn the Nicaraguan dictatorship yet support martial law in the Philippines. His words rang with indignation as Vera Cruz continued, "I hit martial law really hard because I had to. All the contradictions of Cesar's actions over the past few weeks and months were actions that I felt were a slap in the face to our farmworkers struggle."[[51]](#footnote-51) While the crowd roared at Vera Cruz's rallying speech, it was at that moment that he was able to release the years of thoughts and feelings he kept suppressed inside. Immediately after Vera Cruz was done speaking, he was publicly replaced by Eliseo Medina, a younger Mexican American as the Vice President of the UFW, formally ending his career with the UFW.

Chavez's true dictatorial nature was beginning to show through to the members of the UFW, as it also became more apparent who were his most loyal supporters and who were not. Debbie Adair, a former UFW member, recalled:

There was quite a discussion about it. Warnings about criticizing Cesar. Cesar is making decisions for the good of everyone, they said. And I remember Ellen Starbird stood up and said something about embracing the dictator, and she was going to be gone. And other people stood up and said, I cannot accept this. This is something I cannot live with. And then Max Avalos stood up and said, "If Cesar tells me that wall is black, then that wall is black. He was pointing at a white wall. And then there was silence. Everyone knew right then. Kaboom. It was the last brick to fall into place.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

This trip to the Philippines and Chavez's defensive behavior ultimately illuminated the dying state of the union, as his defensive remarks creating a polarizing environment for union members to pick sides. As a result, the union appeared more divided than ever before.

Despite the fiasco that occurred at the convention, Chavez remained unapologetic and continued to defend his remarks in a public forum he organized himself. The Anti-Martial Law Coalition (AMLC) continually reached out to Chavez to have a private meeting where they can discuss what was said about martial law. The intention of the AMLC was to convince Chavez to retract his statements because they felt that his words impacted the U.S. decision to increase military spending to the Philippine government, thus institutionally supporting martial law. Notes of the AMLC point out that the news of Chavez's visit "was particularly devastating because it was in the middle of delicate maneuvers to get the U.S Senate to approve a reduction of 17 percent in the military assistance program for the Marcos Government on human rights considerations...Several days later, both the Appropriations Committee of the Senate and the full Senate floor refused to approve the House measure. It is clear that the publicity around the Chavez visit contributed to this outcome."[[53]](#footnote-53) This was a case that both the AMLC and the FFP (Friends of the Filipino People) had been fighting for quite some time, and with Chavez's public endorsement, matters were made more difficult for these organizations to help the Filipino people. Comments made by the AMLC showcased the irreversible consequences of this trip.

Still, the AMLC insisted on meeting with Chavez even though he rebuffed all their previous efforts. Instead of a private meeting, Chavez again thought that he could use the same tactics he used at the UFW Convention by announcing his plans last minute without any consideration for the AMLC's requests. A letter addressed to Chavez days before the proposed meeting read, "We had requested a meeting format and had objected to any 'debate' to be conducted 'in front of' officials in your union. Only this week, we have been informed that the setting of the 'meeting' is on a stage in a Delano High School auditorium."[[54]](#footnote-54) As a result, the AMLC boycotted the public forum because they could not in good conscience agree to the terms that Chavez established. Matt Garcia points out that "rather than use the event as an opportunity to heal wounds and draw attention to the plight of farmworkers in the Philippines, Chavez unilaterally invited representatives from the Philippine Consulate in Los Angeles to provide a pro- Marcos position just three days before the meeting."[[55]](#footnote-55) Chavez’s rigidness to explain himself in his own way ruined his chances of working with the AMLC to redeem himself.

In addition to the speakers, Chavez also did not mention that Andy Imutan brought along with him a busload of pro-Marcos Filipino staffers to mobilize against the protestors. What resulted was a public platform upon which Chavez continued to allow Marcos representatives to defend martial law to the divided crowd. In Chavez's opening statements, he made it clear that he was not there to apologize to anyone as he reiterated that he did not praise martial law, but he did not find anything wrong during his trip. Garcia noted that an observer noticed "that Chavez told the group 'how fucking pissed off' he was at the media for obsessing about Marcos's political prisoners and ignoring the Philippine leader's great strides in land reform."[[56]](#footnote-56) The meeting ended with a few solidifying their disassociation with the UFW. Rather than seizing the opportunity to mend the broken ties between the anti-martial law groups and the Pinoy protestors, Chavez decidedly pushed Marco's agenda while remaining unapologetic for his words and actions. It was through these events that the public was able to see Chavez's duplicitous nature.

The damage done as a result of Chavez's doing was irreparable. While human rights activists and radical organizations choose to no longer support the leadership of Cesar Chavez, the UFW also lost a significant amount of support from religious organizations across various denominations. The Catholic Church played an integral role in making a union a reality for Cesar Chavez. Chavez had built the movement through instilling Catholic "principles of sacrifice and nonviolence present in the most progressive wing of the Church." Many priests and nuns had stood by him, and now his support of Marcos had left these formerly established relationships in disarray.[[57]](#footnote-57) Likewise, many Filipinos, another group of long-time supporters for the farmworker cause, lost trust in Chavez that day. The public forum in Delano High School further reinforced Chavez’s unwillingness to admit his shortcomings. Instead of acknowledging that he’s made a terrible mistake he, just like Marcos, made a spectacle out of the issue only furthering the divide between Filipino and Mexican workers.

It wasn’t long until the Philippines trip also exposed another scandal within Chavez’s former entourage. Shortly after the public forum, an investigation done on Andy Imutan for allegedly misusing federal funds as a means to possibly fund the trip for himself and Chavez to come to the Philippines. The Pilipino Bayanihan Clinic (PBI) is a self-service agency that was designed to aid the elderly Filipino population and received about $600,000 of federal funding for its operations. *Ang Katipunan*, a newspaper written by the Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino, covered the story on October 15, 1977, stating, "Upon return from the Philippines, a special edition of the Ang Pilipino newspaper was devoted solely to the trip and obviously favoring the repressive regime of President Marcos in its coverage."[[58]](#footnote-58) Not long after these allegations were made public, Imutan resigned from the Executive Director position of the Bayanihan clinic. Ironically enough, one of the criticisms that Imutan faced before deciding to resign was that he ran the clinic like a one-person show very similar to the way Chavez ran the union. A later article from Ang Katipunan notes, "Employees complain that he is inconsiderate and does not heed their problems. Those who use PBI services voice that he is not using the agency to service the community." Though Imutan would not admit that his resignation was related to these allegations, the correlation between the two seemed very clear. Imutan’s own controversial scandal exposed how similar he, Chavez, and Marcos were when it came to their leadership practices. While each person went about it in different ways, the three men similarly did not really listen to the people they lead and that is what ultimately led to their downfall.

Everything fell apart within the summer of 1977. Though Chavez believed in Andy’s assumption that going to the Philippines would repair Filipino-UFW relations, his authoritarian nature combined with his unwillingness to admit fault contributed to the final rupture between Vera Cruz and Chavez, following the exodus of Filipinos from the union. The backlash from the public forum in the form of written and verbal protest solidified the end of the multi-ethnic union.

**CONCLUSION**

Following the Philippine trip scandal, Cesar Chavez continued to lead the UFW until his death in 1993. Though he remained the President of the UFW, the union was never the same with the mass exodus of Filipino presence. Garcia marked 1977 as one of the most critical years for the UFW to remain stable. However, due to the trip along with "the lack of democracy and the reliance on Chavez's charismatic leadership permitted him to pursue a path that doomed the union to failure."[[59]](#footnote-59) The meeting in the Philippines between Chavez and Marcos marked the early steps of breaking relations within the once multi-ethnic union.

While the Philippines trip showcased a major flaw in Chavez’s leadership, the meeting is often overlooked when learning about Chavez’s admirable legacy. There is a divergence in how both Chavez and Filipino leaders are treated and seen historically. While the trip generated a decline in Chavez's popularity, popular history has memorialized him as the well-loved labor leader and champion for farmworker rights. The love and adoration for Cesar Chavez are manifested in the various parks, streets, and schools that are named in his honor.



Cesar Chavez Plaza in Sacramento, California is one of many places that are named in Chavez’s honor. Image courtesy of the City of Sacramento.

However, what is largely omitted from the telling of Cesar Chavez's legacy is the contribution of Filipino farmworkers that ignited the movement and remained loyal to Chavez despite their diminished role. In stark contrast to Chavez’s historical significance, Filipino farm workers have largely been excluded from this narrative until recent years when grass roots organizations like the Filipino American National Historical Society (FAHNS) Delano chapter share the story of the Filipino *manongs* through a guided tour of Delano and Agbayani Village where many of the original strikers retired. Sid Amores Valledor, author Philip Vera Cruz’s Original Writings, stated, “Filipino farm workers are at best treated in passing as incidental actors serving as props to give the scene an air of multi-ethnicity.”[[60]](#footnote-60)

The story of Chavez and President Marcos’s fascinating encounter stresses the importance of examining the legacy of our heroes. While his charisma, charm, and ability to bring people together was what made him an effective leader, Chavez failed to listen to all the voices in his union. As Larry Itliong once said, "If you're gonna be a leader, you gotta be with the people. You gotta hear them. You gotta understand their point of view."[[61]](#footnote-61) It is crucial to remember that allowing one person to represent a multi-faceted movement can be problematic. When the legacy of a movement rests entirely one on man, we face the problem of collective erasure and excluded narratives.

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This thesis is dedicated to my family that has loved me and supported me along the way. Mom, Dad, Kuya - there are not enough words on this page that could express how much I appreciate your love and all that you’ve done for me. Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to Ofelia Magallanes, my ninety year old grandmother. *Ate, ikaw ang dahilan kung bakit nag-aral ako ng History dahil ang iyong kwento ay mahalaga, at gagawin ko ang aking makakaya upang maibahagi ito sa mundo.*

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55. Matt Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 270 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, 271 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ganz, Marshall, *Why David sometimes wins: leadership, organization, and strategy in the California farm worker movement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 254 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. “Stockton Controversy Continues: Imutan Resigns from Bayanihan,” *Ang Katipunan,* October 15, 1977, George Kagiwada Library, University of California Davis. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Garcia, *From the Jaws of Victory*, p. 288 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Sid Amores Valledor, *The Original Writings of Philip Vera Cruz,* p. 82 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Larry Itliong to Pete Velasco, recorded conversation, audio cassette, Pete Velasco Collection, Box 17, UFW Archive. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)