

**Testimony of Joe R. Hicks
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural resources**

Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public lands

March 29, 2007

I thank you for this opportunity to testify in opposition to H.R. 359. I do not think that the proposed special resource study of sites associated with the Life of Cesar Chavez would be a wise use of public funds. Unlike other Americans honored in such a manner, there has normally been a consensus on the contributions of such persons among the American people. No such consensus exists regarding the life and legacy of Cesar Chavez. In fact, no such consensus on Chavez's contributions exists even among farm workers, the population it is claimed that he and the United Farm Workers (UFW) represented.

I am not before you to argue that Chavez accomplished nothing, or that he is not a person of significance. He clearly is. However, what remains disputable is whether or not his work and his beliefs are worthy of recognition by all Americans.

The Bill under discussion today appears to presume this to be the case, but may in fact be based on biased information. The Bill also appears at a time when many supporters of Chavez are agitating for a national holiday in his honor. In this light, H.R. 359 may be simply a way to pave the road for such a national holiday.

Honoring national figures in this way is something that should be carefully considered. The obvious comparison is with the decision to make the birthday of Martin Luther King a national holiday. This was done after contentious national debate about the character and contributions of Dr. King. Questions were raised about King's personal life and the politics of some of his close aides. King's legacy survived this test because there was a consensus that King's life-long commitment to nonviolence and equal opportunity was unassailable. Whenever violence broke out at demonstrations he presided over, Dr. King rebuked transgressors of his non-violent stance in the strongest of terms – as he did of Black Power radicals who challenged his vision of a color-neutral society.

This, however, must be compared and contrasted with how Cesar Chavez dealt with violence as his UFW organizers often made use of strong-arm tactics against field workers in California's Central and Coachella Valleys. One field organizer said he remembers seeing "loyal Chavez followers bash the heads of reluctant field laborers." He said the organizers "visited the fields, intimidating peasants with threats and violence." Despite the public persona as a man of peace and nonviolence, Chavez did or said little to reign in the violence, which may explain why it's difficult to find farm workers who have

anything good to say about him or the UFW. In fact, labor leaders who lead non-UFW farm worker associations hotly dispute the notion that Chavez or the UFW ever represented their views and challenge what they see as “mythology” surrounding Chavez.

Oddly, as Chavez has become an iconic figure among elements of the nations left activists, “immigrant’s rights” organizers, and purveyors of identity politics, his views on illegal immigration are also in dispute. Despite his hero status among activists and those advocating on behalf of *La Raza*, Chavez often complained that the Immigration & Naturalization Service (INS) wasn’t tough enough.

As Ruben Navarrette Jr. reported in the Arizona Republic: “*Cesar Chavez, a labor leader intent on protecting union membership, was as effective a surrogate for the INS as ever existed. Indeed, Chavez and the United Farm Workers he headed routinely reported, to the INS, for deportation, suspected illegal immigrant workers who served as strike breakers or refused to unionize.*”

In fact, Chavez led a march in 1969 from the Coachella and Imperial Valleys to the Mexican border to underscore his position of opposition to undocumented labor.

I must make it very clear that I am not opposed to private efforts to commemorate or honor the life of Cesar Chavez. Privately-funded museums, or other such forms of recognition, would not be opposed by the vast majority of the American people. However, in this case, the record is too murky, the politics too contentious, the life contributions too shrouded in mythology to justify expending scarce public funds to “study” national sites associated with Chavez’s life.

I come before you as someone intimately familiar with the organizing work and the tactics of the UFW and its leader Cesar Chavez. During the 1970s, the height of the UFW’s efforts to organize field workers throughout the Southwest, I was an active member of this nation’s leftist political forces. In 1976, I spent time in the then-Soviet Union and was a member of the Communist party USA. I was in the company of Chavez on several occasions, interacted with his organizers on a routine basis, trained UFW activists in my “revolutionary theory” classes, and came to view Chavez’s organizers as simply another arm of our movement to radicalize and overthrow the existing political order in our nation.

In the mid-1980s I was the communications director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California (the largest ACLU chapter in the nation) and during the early 1990s served as the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Los Angeles, the civil rights organization founded by Martin Luther King, Jr.

While still a leftist in 1993, although rapidly becoming a skeptic, I marched arm-in-arm with the Reverend Jesse Jackson at the funeral of Chavez in Delano, California. At the well-attended event, I remembered thinking that, while Chavez was laid to rest and eulogized as a man of peace and nonviolence, almost none of his followers – those that I

had known and worked with – has eschewed the use of violence against those who opposed them and their tactics. It was also clear to me that they believed that Chavez quietly approved of their heavy-handed tactics – in the main employed against impoverished agricultural field workers.

I don't say this to infer that Chavez was himself a violent man or ideologically a communist, but raise this only as additional context for a labor leader that presided over an organization that harbored deep hostility and resentment about the American nation.

All sides of the debate regarding the Cesar Estrada Chavez Study Act must be considered. It is critical that this Committee not be swayed by those arguing for some larger recognition of Cesar Chavez based on grounds of ethnic pride or that he be honored because of the growing Latino population nor the growing political clout of this nation's diverse Hispanic communities.

When Chavez's life is examined in closer detail, a darker side emerges. Free from the leftist prism through which I viewed the world for all-too-many years, I see his contributions in a far more clear and balanced way. How should the life of Cesar Chavez and the UFW be viewed by the American people? Is there a settled opinion on this? I argue that there is not. Therefore, I come today to state my opposition to the special resource study. Thank you.