

A legacy of action against poverty

By Gene Nichol

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Many Americans recently paused to remember the remarkable Cesar Chavez, the civil rights, Latino and farm labor leader who Robert Kennedy regarded as the truly “heroic figure” of their shared, turbulent times. Chavez’s 85th birthday, noted by a recent presidential proclamation, would have been last month.

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Chavez, who died in 1993, both inherited and honed the strategies of his lodestars, Gandhi and King. Like them, he was a spiritualist committed to action. “Talk is cheap,” he chided, “it is the way we organize and use our lives that tells what we believe in.”

In 1972, the Arizona legislature pushed through a bill denying farmworkers the right to strike during harvest. The United Farmworkers asked to meet with the governor, Jack Williams, to plea for veto. Williams, instead, ordered the state troopers to deliver the bill immediately so he could sign within the hour.

He explained, in candor, “as far as I’m concerned, those people don’t exist.” It wasn’t enough to continue the tradition of treating the farmworkers as invisible. The stakes had been raised. Now it was time to declare, from the governor’s chair, their official nonexistence.

The echoes are, of course, familiar. The near-nominee of one political party brags he’s “not concerned about the very poor.” He makes patent his view that it’s impolite to discuss poverty and economic injustice in political discourse. These matters, if ever broached, are meant only for “our private rooms.”

On the home front, our speaker of the North Carolina House announces his aim “to divide and conquer people on assistance.” We need “to show respect for that woman who has cerebral palsy... and get [her] to look down [on] people who choose to get in a condition that makes them dependent on government.”

Another stalwart legislator claims, flatly, unapologetically, in committee hearing, “we have no one in the state of North Carolina living in extreme poverty.” He rejected the Census Bureau’s finding that over a half million Tar Heels, and about 300,000 of our children, live in deep poverty. Nor was he moved, one guesses, by the determination that over 10 percent of the kids in his home county (Onslow) endure extreme poverty.

“Poverty is when you’re out there living on a dollar and a half a day,” he assured. The federal standard – requiring a person to have less than about \$7 a day to qualify – is too generous. Two or three or four dollars daily, somehow, leaves room to spare.

And now the U.S. Supreme Court gives potent indication it is poised to strike down the health care reform bill. The most important anti-poverty measure passed by the Congress in over four decades, extending coverage to some 30 million uninsured Americans, will likely fall to a rule previously unannounced and unknown to our constitutional jurisprudence.

It would be hard to conjure up a group less well informed about the chilling challenges faced by poor and

low-income citizens excluded from our lavish health care system than the members of the Supreme Court. Not impossible, I'll concede, but it would take some studied effort.

And the frank but impolitic to express truth is this: if the individual mandate central to President Barack Obama's health care bill had been proffered and pursued by a Republican president, the Supreme Court would validate it on a 9-0 vote. Gamesmanship trumps crushing need. Politics trumps even death.

Cesar Chavez responded to an earlier brutal Arizona governor by mobilizing legions of labor, religious and community activists – and by launching a dangerous 25-day fast. When pressed with its futility, with the understandable claim that nothing could be done, he lifted his head slightly from the bed, urging, famously, “Si, si se puede.”

I've thought, for much of the past two decades, that the way to alleviate the scourge of poverty in the richest nation on earth was to make it visible to a much wider swath of the populace – relying, finally, on a confidence in our generosity and our desire to actually live by the commitments we constantly profess. Increasingly, I have my doubts.

It's tough work to remove the economic interests of the bottom half from the political calculus in our corridors of power. Tough work, but we've managed it. Frederick Douglass was undoubtedly right that “power concedes nothing without demand.” It “never did and it never will.” Chavez would say: don't pay me tribute – “organize,” “organize.”

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