

I WOULD PREFER NOT TO

THE BOYCOTT IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

By Michael Oates Palmer

THE BUMPER STICKER—OR MAYBE IT WAS A POSTER—hung on the refrigerator, pinned by magnets. I was four, an age when you take words at their most literal. I was also a new reader: cereal boxes, the labels on jars, and slogans.

The phone rang. My mother took the call. On the other end was my nursery school: My mother needed to come get me.

What happened?

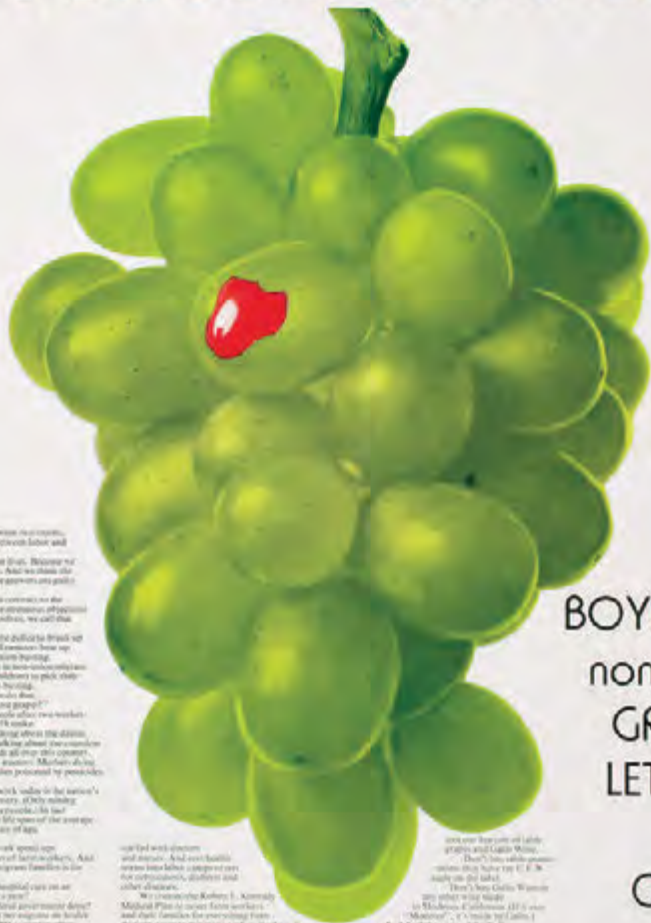
I made another child cry.

How?

My classmate opened his lunchbox. I told him there was blood on those grapes.

CESAR CHAVEZ, co-founder of the United Farm Workers, did not invent the boycott. The organized withdrawal of consumer support has been a means of protest in this country from even before it was a country: Patrick Henry, upset by Stamp Act tax levies, advocated a boycott on British goods in 1765. But when Chavez and Dolores Huerta used the mass action to help force the hand of table grape growers in California—landing the United Farm Workers their first labor contract in 1970—they brought the national boycott into the modern era. Since then, Americans have frequently staged boycotts to protest how companies handle their products or treat their employees. It's no coincidence that food companies are especially susceptible to boycotts: If

"THERE'S BLOOD ON THOSE GRAPES"



BOYCOTT
non-UFW
GRAPES
LETTUCE
and
GALLO
WINE

This isn't a fight between two crops. It's a fight to win a fight between labor and management.

We're fighting for our lives. Because we need our unions to survive. And we want the Gallos and the other grape growers to give us union benefits.

We've been awarded a contract in the 1970s and the thousands of grapes of the farm workers themselves, we can't have union benefits.

When they called in the police to break up peaceful picket lines and thousands have lost our people, we can't have union benefits.

And when they bring in non-union workers from other states to pick our grapes, we can't have union benefits.

And we can't have union benefits.

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we'll work against and against. And we'll fight for our lives. Because we need our unions to survive. And we want the Gallos and the other grape growers to give us union benefits.

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UNITED FARM WORKERS OF AMERICA—AFL-CIO



food is our most regular and consistent purchase, whether at the market or restaurant, then the withdrawal of that purchase can make the greatest impact. (In 1977, activists called a boycott against Nestlé for aggressively marketing baby formula in developing nations. My education in conglomerates began near the grocer's freezer, as my mother explained why we couldn't buy Stouffer's French Bread Pizza, with the word Nestlé hidden in tiny print on the side of the box.)

Today, boycotts are just as likely to target companies for what their owners say in interviews or do with their wealth as they are to target wages or working conditions. In the 1980s, the National Organization of Women called for a boycott of Domino's Pizza, because then-owner and founder Tom Monaghan was giving large sums of money to anti-abortion organizations. ("Buy a pizza in a box, put a woman in a box," went one slogan.)

And there's a flip side. A boycott today can be answered with a buy-in, where consumers with opposing opinions double down their dollars on products others have boycotted. The restaurant chain Chick-fil-A benefited from this counter-boycott strategy in a 2012 dustup over gay rights and gay marriage. And when it was all over, both sides claimed victory.

IN 1946, S. TRUETT CATHY OPENED The Dwarf Grill in the Atlanta suburb of Hapeville. From almost its very beginning, the company that would become Chick-fil-A was synonymous with its founder's Southern Baptist beliefs, heralded in the company's mission statement: "to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us." All who love Chick-fil-A's chicken sandwiches and waffle fries know that those cravings can't be sated on a Sunday, when the chain's locations are closed. And the family-supported WinShape Foundation funded anti-gay rights groups like the Family Research Council.

In 2012, those practices became part of a national debate when Don Cathy, Chick-fil-A's president and the son of S. Truett, responded to the advance of gay marriage by declaring, "We are inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, 'We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage.'" He followed this with tweets criticizing the Supreme Court dismissal of the Defense of Marriage Act.

Reaction from the left was swift. Several mayors threatened to block Chick-fil-A from opening restaurants in their cities. “Chick-fil-A values are not Chicago values,” said Rahm Emanuel, Chicago’s newly elected mayor. “There is no place for discrimination on Boston’s Freedom Trail and no place for your company alongside it,” wrote Boston mayor Thomas Menino in a letter to Don Cathy. The Jim Henson Company, which had licensed its Pajanimals characters to Chick-fil-A kids’ meals, ceased its relationship with the restaurant. Petitions were circulated, boycotts were called.

In response, former Arkansas governor and presidential candidate Mike Huckabee called for a Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day in August, wherein consumers would show their support. (Sales spiked almost 30 percent that day.) Sarah Palin posted a photograph to Facebook in which she and her husband posed at a location near Houston, offering a big thumbs-up while holding bags full of chicken sandwiches. Ann Coulter and Rick Santorum voiced their support on talking-head television shows and Twitter.

The strangest boycott moment of 2012 came when supporters of the buy-in suggested a boycott of Republican Presidential nominee Mitt Romney, who ducked the Chick-fil-A controversy by saying that “those are not things that are part of my campaign.” That didn’t fly with the right wing of the Republican Party. Pat Buchanan didn’t understand why “Mitt Romney doesn’t just get his Secret Service detail and take his press corps down to a Chick-fil-A and show solidarity with these people.” Catholic League President Bill Donohue, one of the most strident voices against gay marriage, declared, “Social conservatives have to make up their mind whether they should just simply stay at home, or go out there and vote for Romney.”

Chick-fil-A sales soared 12 percent that year, to \$4.6 billion. By March of 2014, however, tax filings revealed that Chick-fil-A’s charitable arms had cut off funding to almost all of the organizations they had been criticized for supporting. The company released this statement: “The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity, and respect—regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation, or gender.”

Did the boycott succeed or fail? The answer depends on who tells the story.

A BOYCOTT IS A PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE MEANS of social protest. It's non-violent. It's non-present. Action comes through absence. Rather than throw a garbage can through the pizza-parlor window in protest, boycotters take the money off the seller's counter. If civil disobedience demands showing up—or sitting in—the boycott has always required less risk for its participants. While an individual may choose to reject a company's goods or services, only through an organized effort that connects consumers with a common cause can a boycott force change, beyond the clearing of one's conscience.

Just as technology enabled the globalization of commerce—revolutionizing shopping, manufacturing, and shipping—so has it paved the way for a new breed of boycott. Protesters can organize across larger territory. Witness the viral video and the mass e-mail list, unthinkable a



generation ago, now essential tactics of grassroots organizing. Boycotts were once about depressing demand, hitting companies in their ledgers; now boycotts are just as often about sullyng reputation, which can also strike at a company's bottom line. (Privately owned Chick-fil-A, without shareholders to scare, may have been more immune to these pressures.)

As the Chick-fil-A controversy demonstrated, a consumer boycott in a globalized age does not even require consumers withholding consumption. Americans now lend support to causes without consuming in the first place. With one click of a mouse, one share or like of a post, we can trumpet our beliefs without changing our consumer behavior. Back in 2012, I watched on Facebook as friends from states where the chains of choice were Carl's Jr. or Roy Rogers rallied their followers to boycott Chick-fil-A. They lived nowhere near a Chick-fil-A. They had never given the company a dime. It didn't matter. My friends were part of an Internet-fueled court of public opinion, and their belief was that they could still pressure Chick-fil-A devotees in Memphis or Montgomery out of that next drive-through chicken biscuit. (In Los Angeles, where I live, Chick-fil-A had only just planted its flag, opening a Hollywood location shortly before the controversy.)

Watching Californians call for boycotts against a Southern company four years after Golden State voters had passed Proposition 8, outlawing gay marriage, I thought of how the North viewed the South during the Civil Rights Movement—and how Dr. King faced great resistance once he took the cause to the slums of Chicago. It's easier to support an action if you can shirk culpability for the circumstances that necessitate it.

THE BOYCOTT TODAY IS A PROTEST that does not require presence, attendance at a rally or march, or personal risk. In some cases, it does not require any change in consumer behavior. At a time when technology has cut down on the distances of our everyday lives, it also allows information to be spread to inform, organize, execute. And if the boycott as a tool of protest is now more disembodied, more detached than ever, doesn't that match and mimic the decentralized, global companies that it targets?

A decade before I shamed my preschool classmate over the grapes in his lunchbox, Senator Robert Kennedy met and marched with Cesar Chavez in California. The meeting was one of the moments said to

transform Kennedy into a prominent fighter for social justice. It also helped raise Chavez's national profile, and that of farm workers and their struggles.

In a globalized era, the ultimate gauge of a popular movement might be that it no longer requires a celebrity like Kennedy to shine a spotlight on a cause. In a Cape Town speech in 1966, the same year he met Chavez, Senator Kennedy spoke of how a "tiny ripple of hope" could build into a current, "which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

What if in 2014, that current might take the form of a hundred thousand likes or ten thousand re-tweets? It's easy to be cynical about a mass action that puts its participants at far less risk than the march on Selma or the strike on Delano. But should we measure protest by what the participants risk and sacrifice or by the results the protest achieves? If the modern boycott is an effective method to make change in our globalized age, the ends might justify the means.

For every Chick-fil-A controversy that suggests a stalemate, you can find successes: The actions organized by Florida's Coalition of Immokalee Workers have achieved gains for farm workers by pressuring companies at the top of the tomato supply chain. Could it be possible that, in an age when technology has democratized the ability to spread the word, you can marshal opposition and do enough damage to a company's reputation that it changes its ways?

Maybe. Or, as Dolores Huerta might put it: "*Si, se puede.*" 🍷

Michael Oates Palmer is a writer whose television credits include The West Wing, Army Wives, and Crossbones. He previously wrote for Gravy about the friendship and correspondence of Eudora Welty and William Maxwell.

IMAGE, PAGE 36, *courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California. Unknown maker, There's Blood on Those Grapes, circa 1974. Offset lithograph, 22.5 x 17.5 in. Collection of the Oakland Museum of California, All of Us or None of Us Archive. Gift of the Rossman family.*

PAINTING, PAGE 39, *by Emily Wallace.*