



COLD ANGER

A STORY OF FAITH AND POWER POLITICS

MARY BETH ROGERS
With an Introduction by
BILL MOYERS

FEATURED
ON BILL MOYERS'
"WORLD OF IDEAS"

ROGERS

COLD ANGER

UNIT PAPERBACK

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We Are Willing to Sacrifice

La Meza, 1988

Five hundred miles south of Dallas is La Meza, Texas. A desolate little stop on a back road, La Meza is a Rio Grande Valley *colonia*, a neighborhood of 65 Hispanic families, perhaps 400 people in all. It is just outside of Mercedes, which has a population of 12,000 in the county of Hidalgo at the southern tip of Texas where the Rio Grande flows into the Gulf of Mexico. Here, the world seems to dwindle. Even the low, wide horizon, the orange groves, and the patchwork fields of onions, cabbage, or carrots cannot stop the feeling that you are in a land that shrinks its people, forcing them inward, isolating them from their nearest neighbors, from the rest of America, and perhaps even from themselves.

La Meza is directly across the road from the Sunrise Hill Park, a public park with picnic tables, playground equipment, and a sweeping sprinkler system to keep the grass a bright winter green. But unlike the park, La Meza's people, mostly migrant farmworkers, have no green grass. They have no water. Or sewers. Or paved streets. To drink, they must take a water jug to the Sunset Drive-In Grocery where the paved road by the park begins. At the grocery store, they pay the owner 25 cents to use an ordinary outdoor spigot to fill their water jugs. To wash their clothes or dishes or faces, they cannot afford the

tap water and so they fill their barrels from pools of water in the irrigation drainage ditches that hold the runoff from nearby vegetable fields. The ditches are full of pesticides and herbicides, and the people of La Meza know that water in the ditches is bad for them, but what else can they do? Water is water. And, sometimes, life itself.

Elida Bocanegra and 20 La Meza residents meet the van pulling into the parking lot of the Sunset Drive-In Grocery. Young couples with sniffling children are waiting. One woman holds a little girl of about 2 whose left eye is encrusted with a blackened tumor the size of a lemon. Several older men and women are in the crowd, the men in work clothes standing back and a little apart from the group, their wrinkles and calluses granting them rights to a certain skepticism that they wear on their faces like translucent masks. A boy of 6 holds a small sign, its message hand-lettered in red paint: "Help us Ann Richards. We need water to drink."

On this warm day in February, Texas Treasurer Ann Richards and a small group of state officials come to La Meza on a "fact-finding" mission.¹ Richards, the witty and attractive grandmother who had made her mark both in Texas and nationally, had been invited to tour the *colonias* by Valley Interfaith, a coalition of 40 Rio Grande Valley churches representing about 55,000 people who were waging a campaign to call national attention to the plight of people in the *colonias*. Perhaps Richards' ties to the financial networks in Texas and New York could help. But first, she wanted the facts.

Statistically, the four counties of the Rio Grande Valley contain the poorest people in the United States—the highest unemployment and the lowest per capita income in the nation.² Almost 100,000 people live in the Valley *colonias*, the 400-plus unincorporated rural communities unique to the 900-mile Texas-Mexican border. *Colonia* is a Spanish word for neighborhood, and along the Texas border, the *colonias* have come to signify a particular kind of rural slum with conditions more akin to Nicaragua or Honduras than the United States of America.

More facts: open sewer ditches, unpaved streets, no running water, and in some cases, no electricity. Clapboard houses often have dirt floors and wall-to-wall beds for growing families. Children have chronic dysentery, skin rashes, lice, and hepati-

tis; dark yellow stains mark their teeth from the chemical-laden drinking water. The Valley has the highest incidence of parasitic intestinal diseases outside of the Third World. Shallow water wells are frequently polluted by overflowing septic tanks. After heavy rains, people in the *colonias* literally drink their own sewage. It is a public health nightmare. But because fly-by-night developers established these unregulated subdivisions in rural areas outside of any Texas governmental jurisdiction, the water and sewer problems are suspended in a bureaucratic swamp that most politicians hesitate to enter.

Mrs. Bocanegra, 60ish, small, and serious in her turquoise cotton pants suit, calls the group together, makes polite introductions, and tells the state officials about the problems of La Meza. She has the facts they want. There is a water main along the county road a few hundred yards from the homes of La Meza. She has the figures they need. It would take only \$29,000 to extend a line from the main water pipe to provide hookups for the residents of La Meza. She has questions. "How is it possible to go without water in the richest nation in the world?" she asks.

Mrs. Bocanegra's words are echoed by old Father José Mateus, whose mismatched clothes, scuffed shoes, and kindly smile indicate that he might be a true Christian of the Roman and Rio Grande Valley Catholic church. The church was joining with Valley Interfaith in this quest for water and good sense. A powerful endorsement. But whereas it may have been Father Mateus and the Catholic church that supported her, it was Ernesto Cortes and Valley Interfaith that had given Mrs. Bocanegra and the residents of La Meza the tools to act. Tools that allow Mrs. Bocanegra to confront the officials before her. She does not shrink from the encounter. In fact, Mrs. Bocanegra seems to expand as she speaks. Her voice gains strength. Her shoulders rise and arch with her composure. Her black eyes fix on the group with determination. She is like a fourth-grade teacher patiently explaining the logic of the multiplication tables. It is simply illogical for the people of La Meza to have no water.

"We are willing to pay whatever we can," Mrs. Bocanegra says. "We are willing to sacrifice, if we just have the chance."

The group listens to Mrs. Bocanegra. They ask questions.

They look at the spigot, the houses, the road. They commiserate with the residents. They shake hands, and they leave.

In the old days in Texas, a trip like this would soon be forgotten; after all, what could you do with such bureaucracy, such poverty! But the state officials cannot forget. For one thing, their hearts are touched, and their consciences pricked. For another, Valley Interfaith was developed by the Industrial Areas Foundation, and its organizations in Texas are not to be trifled with. The Valley Interfaith invitation to see and help the *colonias* is not extended or accepted casually. When Valley Interfaith issues an invitation like this and when a politician accepts it, it means that each agrees to be held accountable for both words and deeds, to strip away the public show that often passes for politics, and to get down to public business. Which, in this case, is to find a way to deal with the public health needs of thousands of Texans in the Rio Grande Valley. Ann Richards is a wise enough politician to understand the unwritten contract. "I'm not going to promise you anything I can't deliver," she tells the La Meza residents. "But I will stand by you and work with you to do what we can *together*."

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We Need Power to Protect What We Value

Austin, 1988

Charles "Lefty" Morris and I spot Ernie Cortes walking ahead of us into the Texas French Bread Bakery and Deli. We are going to meet him for a late lunch. Morris is a successful attorney and former president of the Texas Trial Lawyers Association who has recently grown disenchanted with the gritty little skirmishes of political combat and has been seeking ideas about how to change the structure of the war itself. He had heard about Cortes and wanted to know more about him.

Cortes has just come from a doctor's appointment, where he was warned one more time to shed a few pounds. Only about 5 feet 7 inches tall, Cortes' genetic tendency to be overweight worries his wife Oralia, but his obvious comfort with his teddy-bear body belies worry and lends a surprisingly sensual air to him. It is hard not to be drawn to his dark eyes, which compete with a bushy, graying mustache to dominate his face. Physically, he is almost oblivious of himself. His attire is conservative, but he is as mindful of his clothes as a 3-year-old. During the day, his shirttail might work its way out of his trousers, his tie might be witness to his meals, or the unnoticed string of a price tag might dangle from his sleeve. No matter—to him or to anyone else. Cortes clearly does not dress to be the center of attention. In fact, throughout his career, he has tried to deflect the