

# 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 PAPER

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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

spotlight from himself to the people who hold his organizations together. With each of his successes, however, that has been harder to do.

We order salads and sandwiches, none of us yielding to the whiffs that fill the air of fresh-baked sugar-and-cinnamon concoctions. And we talk. With Cortes, talk is always more compelling than sugar. His conversation is colorful and gossipy, yet informed and infused with ideas. In an hour, his topics can cover the decline of the American manufacturing system, the Liberation Theology, Thomas Jefferson, Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the clumsy infidelities of a well-known public official, and a confession that he once shaved his trademark mustache because his daughter, then 7 years old, would not kiss him until he did. But today, the talk is about his church-based organizing in politics.

"The work we do is about power and about building power and teaching people how to organize around their own interests, how to be effective," Cortes tells Morris.

The "we" Cortes describes is the Industrial Areas Foundation network of church-based organizations that represent at least 400,000 people in Texas. Nationally, they are linked with similar organizations in New York, California, Maryland, New Jersey, and other states, and they reach more than a million people through their affiliations. Cortes serves as the peripatetic manager of the Texas network, as well as its lead fundraiser. He is also one of the five members of the governing cabinet of the IAF, which has developed both the philosophy and organizing techniques underlying Cortes' successes. Successes that mean changes in the lives of ordinary men and women, not necessarily fame or fortune for Cortes.

Although I had known Cortes when I lived in San Antonio in the 1960s, I had only a vague notion that he was behind some of the public school reform efforts in Texas in 1984 and that he played a role in the dramatic political and social transformation that San Antonio had been experiencing since the mid-1970s. Now something new was happening in Texas politics to cause thousands of church people—ministers, priests, nuns, and lay people—to flood the public arena, operating with the same Bible in hand but with an entirely different social agenda from the religious fundamentalists who were thundering into Amer-

ican politics from the right. Something out-of-the-ordinary was happening when 10,000 Texas church members rallied on the State Capitol steps to demand more state money for poor schools in places like Mercedes, Edgewood, and Socorro—and to pledge themselves to work for the taxes to raise it. Or, when Houston church leaders brought petitions bearing 30,000 signatures to the state Public Utility Commission to stop a local electric rate increase. Or, when 1,800 Rio Grande Valley church members confronted federal Environmental Protection Agency officials over the dumping of PCB-laden toxic wastes in the Gulf of Mexico. Or, when San Antonio's church activists defeated a "Proposition 13"—style city-wide referendum to put a cap on public spending—widely seen as hurting the city's poor residents. Or, when every major statewide elected official in Texas trooped down to the *colonias* and promised to help Valley Interfaith improve conditions there.

Something was happening all right, but not many of us involved in Texas politics knew exactly what it was. And it was not because Ernesto Cortes was secretive or in hiding. It was only that he did not seek the limelight or the company of political party operatives or send out a stream of press releases announcing his victories or intentions. That was simply not his style. When I rediscovered Cortes again in 1985, I came to realize that he was like one of those dark strong stars pushed so far back in the universe that its pulsations are charted and considered with awe long before its presence is fully defined. I and thousands of others were feeling the pulsations put out by Cortes, sensing the depth and mass of his new kind of politics, without knowing exactly what he was doing or why.

But I did recognize change. During the 10 years I lived in San Antonio in the 1960s, someone drowned in a flood almost every time there was a torrential downpour. But that no longer happens because Communities Organized for Public Service, or COPS, under Cortes, got the city to spend more than \$500 million for West Side improvements, including storm sewer systems that have virtually ended flooding there. In El Paso, children don't have to drink or bathe in contaminated water because one of the IAF organizations got the city to extend water and sewer hookups to 20,000 people in a *colonia*. Houston has more neighborhood police patrols in the black inner city,

and flooding is no longer a problem in some predominantly black neighborhoods. Austin police have cleaned up public housing dope dens. Fort Worth has more school crossing guards and training programs to get parents of poor children involved in the schools. All across Texas, young pregnant women who are poor now get prenatal care in state health clinics because the local IAF groups joined forces at the state level to get legislators to approve a model indigent health-care bill helping 200,000 people. Working poor people convinced millionaire Ross Perot that his plans for education reform would be incomplete in 1984 unless he joined them to get the legislature to pump more than \$800 million into poor school districts in yet another attempt to "equalize" the money Texas spent on its schools from one district to another. The Texas Legislature in 1989 authorized a \$100 million bond package for sewer and water improvements for the *colonias*, and 60 percent of Texas voters approved the program in a statewide vote.<sup>1</sup> Even Mrs. Bocanegra and the residents of La Meza now have water to drink.<sup>2</sup>

One Texas journal said the presence of the IAF groups had "changed the equations of power at the Capitol."<sup>3</sup> But the real significance of the IAF's accomplishments is that the political dialogue is shifting in Texas. The questions are no longer whether to help the *colonias*, but *how to do it*; not whether to shift state money from rich to poor school districts, but *how to do it*; not whether to provide health care to poor women and children, but *how to do it*. And Cortes and the IAF organizations, which are training a new group of political leaders, like Elida Bocanegra, make it possible for these public discussions to be taken seriously. So seriously, in fact, that when I told my son I was going to write about Ernesto Cortes, Jr., he warned me, "Watch out, Mom. He's a tough sonofabitch."

In 1984, Billy Rogers had seen a Cortes explosion of anger in then-Texas Governor Mark White's office when a top White assistant failed to keep a promise to Cortes. Cortes had been indelicate enough to raise his voice, even cause a scene in the reception room where other visitors waited to see the governor. The tirade terrorized the governor's aide. In only a matter of minutes, he had ushered Cortes into an inner office, and Billy Rogers had made an important decision: He would make darn

sure he never promised Ernesto Cortes, Jr. anything he could not deliver.

Incidents like this have caused a lot of people to come to the same conclusion. Most savvy Texas politicians respect Cortes. Some even fear him—a fear he acknowledges, even encourages. Yet sometimes he wishes it were not so. "It's unfortunate that fear is the only way to get some politicians to respect your power," Cortes says. "They refuse to give you respect. They don't recognize your dignity. So we have to act in ways to get their attention. We don't always choose fear. In some areas, what we have going for us is the *amount* of fear we can generate. We got where we are because people fear and loathe us. They fear us not just because we turn out votes for them, but for what we can do to them."<sup>4</sup>

This is tough talk. But not idle. Cortes' power comes because his voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives have repeatedly demonstrated election-day clout. He knows—and teaches—nitty-gritty electoral politics, paying attention to precinct analysis, understanding polls and strategic planning, and using telephone banks and door-to-door canvasses. But Cortes also teaches something more basic: that politicians work for the people who elect them. Which means that his organizations respect an officeholder for performance, not for position. Defiance is out of the question.

"When you've got somebody working for you, you don't bow and scrape," said a Cortes-trained leader of one of the organizations.<sup>5</sup> So the groups watch, remind, persist, confront, and challenge public officials to respond to public needs. And if officials fail to act, the IAF groups do not hesitate to expose their inattention, insincerity, or incompetence—in public. San Antonio's COPS once slammed then-Mayor Henry Cisneros with a sarcastically critical "A-Ya-Toll-A" award for hobnobbing with foreign dignitaries and ignoring San Antonio's citizens. And Cisneros was one of COPS' closest political allies!<sup>6</sup>

The elaborately staged "accountability" sessions of the IAF groups have become notorious. Officeholders are usually seated on a stage in an auditorium facing several hundred, or even thousands, of church people waving banners and revved up for action. One of the group's leaders reads a statement or asks a series of specific questions, and the officials have only

about three to five minutes to respond. There is no time for equivocation. A simple “yes” or “no” is about all that is allowed. Many elected officials talk privately about how much they hate the “adversarial nature” of the sessions, which generate an almost paranoiac dread among some politicians—even at the national level. In the 1984 presidential election, Walter Mondale agreed to meet with Valley Interfaith leaders while he was on a campaign swing through South Texas. But he had been so thoroughly forewarned about the organization’s confrontational tactics that he pulled one of Valley Interfaith’s leaders aside and said, “Just don’t do anything to embarrass me in front of the media.”<sup>7</sup>

“There are only two ways to build power like this,” Cortes tells Morris. “It takes organized money or organized people. We’re obviously not going to have a huge concentration of money, so when we’re talking about power as a social concept, we’re talking about two or more people coming together with a plan and acting on it.”

“Well, if you get power,” Morris asks, “aren’t you going to be corrupted like everyone else?”

“We may be,” Cortes admits. “But we’re trying to teach a system of internal accountability so that won’t happen.”

As I listen to Cortes talk about power and accountability, I remember one of the first internal evaluation sessions I saw him conduct for members of the Metropolitan Congregational Alliance (MCA) in San Antonio.<sup>8</sup> It was after a meeting at which about 500 MCA members and other neighborhood representatives had challenged San Antonio’s popular Mayor Cisneros to reevaluate the city’s growth and annexation policies. Even though Cisneros differed with calls for restraints on new North Side development, he agreed to attend the meeting because he had a long and deep relationship with MCA’s sister organization, the West Side COPS, which some political observers believed helped him in 1981 to become the city’s first Hispanic mayor in 150 years. But MCA almost lost control of the meeting with Cisneros because the non-MCA members from the neighborhoods cornered the mayor and disrupted the agenda.

An hour before the rally at the Colonial Hills United Meth-

odist Church, neighborhood representatives insisted on changing the meeting agenda, demanding to confront the mayor on issues that had not been scheduled for discussion. MCA leaders were appalled, and they threatened to call off the meeting even as hundreds of people began to arrive. But a last-minute compromise allowed one of the neighborhood leaders to present her concerns to the mayor, which she did in a long harangue that forced the mayor to agree to a separate meeting with her group.

The experience left a residue of frustration among MCA leaders, and they wanted to talk with Cortes about it. “We lost control of the action because they were the ones who had the people there,” one leader told Cortes.

“What does that tell you?” Cortes asked.

“We didn’t do our homework,” someone said. “We didn’t turn out our own people.”

“We also totally misread the situation,” another MCA leader said. “We thought the neighborhood associations would follow our lead.”

“I question my own leadership for not knowing how to handle this,” one of the meeting organizers added.

Then, Cortes cut off the self-recrimination and shifted to a more constructive analysis. “Don’t be too hard on yourselves,” he advised. “You made some mistakes, but you averted a disaster. The blunder was in not having your own people there and depending on the neighborhood groups to generate your crowd.”

But the real problem with the meeting, Cortes explained, was the situation in which they placed Mayor Cisneros. “He came to the meeting for you—not for the neighborhood association. And you should have protected him. He’s got demands on his time; he can’t meet with every block association in town. Yet we put him in a position where he had to agree to a meeting just to get that neighborhood lady off the microphone. So, in a sense, we let him down. After all, he meets with us because he needs us, just like we need him. He needs us to do what we do because it helps him keep the developers from running roughshod over him . . . and the city. He can say to the developers, ‘I’ve got those crazy Mexicans on my tail, I can’t let you do this or that.’

We understand this and can work with him. The neighborhood groups don't. They're in it for just one issue, for the short term, while we're going to be around a long time."

I remember that evaluation session vividly because it recalled for me the hundreds of frustrating and fruitless political meetings I had attended over 25 years. In my circles, we rarely made any kind of thoughtful analysis of our failures and certainly never worked through with our leaders any kind of understanding of how things might have been handled differently. We also rarely questioned how a meeting might relate to our long-range goals (did we have them?) or to our particular relationship with someone in power. In my politics—party politics, caucus politics, personality politics—if you learned, you learned on your own. If you challenged the leadership's ability to run the meeting, you had a bloodbath. If you admitted any sign of weakness, your cohorts would sprout vulture wings and circle in for the kill. And so when something went wrong, you picked a scapegoat or commiserated over a beer with a few trusted friends. Or, if it really mattered to you, you plotted a secretive action against your colleagues to wrest control of the organization for yourself and your cronies.

This was different. The evaluation was serious and supportive of the people who participated. There were no surprises or attacks. People were simply looking for a way to be more effective—individually and as an organization. They wanted to learn from their mistakes, take credit for their successes, and even accept responsibility for their failures. The process seemed not only to strengthen the men and women who participated, but to ensure the integrity of the organization as a whole.

One leader said of this kind of evaluation and soul-searching, "The blow-hards get weeded out real fast. . . . There is no place to hide."<sup>9</sup>

Maybe this is the accountability Cortes is talking about over lunch today. Maybe this is the safeguard against corruption. But Lefty Morris is not easily persuaded. "I'm beginning to think that even when we elect good people to office, they get so caught up in their need for flattery and attention that they lose sight of what is important," Morris says. "There is something in

the political system itself that corrupts them. They just become useless and greedy."

"Some of them do," Cortes agrees. "But just as we know that power tends to corrupt, we also know that powerlessness corrupts. We've got a lot of people who've never developed an understanding of power. They've been institutionally trained to be passive. Power is nothing more than the ability to act in your own behalf, to act for your own interest."

"But people don't even know their own interests anymore," Morris insists.

"Unfortunately that is true," Cortes says. "But the only way we even *think* we can change this is by trying to teach about power and real self-interest. We get discouraged by the same things that bother you so we try to think in terms of long-term change. That's why we organize people around their values—not just issues. The issues fade and they lose interest. But what they really care about remains—family, dignity, justice, and hope. And we need power to protect what we value."