



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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Moses and Paul:

The World's Greatest Organizers

Dallas, 1986

"Anybody remember Moses?" Ernesto Cortes Jr. asks a group of farmers and farm activists from 40 states who have come to Dallas to discuss their problems and hear Cortes speak at a Farm Crisis Workers Conference.¹ A few members of the audience nod and look at each other as if to say, "Who the hell is this and what have we gotten ourselves into?"

Cortes is the coordinator of a dozen or so Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) organizations in Texas, such as San Antonio's COPS and the Rio Grande Valley Interfaith. Because of his 20-year community organizing career in Texas and around the nation, Cortes has become a legend among American political activists and a source on Hispanic politics for journalists from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a slew of other publications. The prestigious MacArthur Foundation gave him one of its "genius" grants and \$204,000 to do with as he saw fit. *Esquire* identified him as one of the people who represented America "at its best."² *Texas Business* magazine called Cortes one of the most powerful people in Texas—along with Ross Perot and corporate raider extraordinaire T. Boone Pickens.³ Somehow, with all of this, you don't expect him to be talking about Moses.

"The two greatest organizers historically were Moses and

Paul," Cortes begins his remarks to the farmers. "Both men knew how to build networks and build broad-based organizations. Both understood the politics of organization. But Moses had a crisis on his hands when he brought the chosen people out of Egypt and they spent all those years just wandering around in the desert. He's got all these folks coming at him saying, 'You know, things were a lot better in Egypt. We had a lot of good times—what are you offering us here? Nothing but crummy food. We want some chitlins . . . we want some tamales . . .'"⁴

People in the audience begin to laugh. Obviously, this is to be no ordinary Bible lesson. Cortes also loosens up. With eyes shining like black marbles, he becomes almost impish as he paces in front of the group in his ambling professorial manner. His smile breaks the heavy spell cast by his weighty bulk and bearing; he looks like a freight train about to sprout wings and leave the fast track for more fanciful ventures. He leans into the crowd.

"So what's Moses' reaction to this crisis?" he asks as he peers over his glasses and waits a moment before answering his own question. "Well, old Moses says, 'It's too heavy for me, but it's *my* burden. It's *my* problem.'"

Cortes waits for the farmers to work through this thought with him, to participate in the moment. "Why is it his burden and why is it his problem?" he asks.

But the audience is still unsure what Cortes expects of them, and they are silent. So Cortes answers his own question again. "Because he's allowed people to dump all of their problems on him. Everybody comes to Moses and says, 'Okay, now you solve it, Moses. Listen, you're our big leader, you're our big organizer, you're the guy who led us out, you've got the business, you've got all this relationship with Yahweh, so you're the guy who's got to solve this particular problem. You've solved every other problem.'"

Cortes again tries to entice his audience to respond. "But what else is going on here?"

"They were all lazy," a farmer finally responds.

Someone else shouts, "They were depending on Moses more than they should have done and they should have been depending more on themselves."

Cortes almost leaps at the response, "Yeah! that's right!" With excitement in his voice, he begins to enunciate his words very slowly and deliberately. "You see, there's an Iron Rule in organizing. It is a little different from the Golden Rule. The Iron Rule says: Never, ever, do for people what they can do for themselves. And it's a very difficult rule to follow. Moses had been historically violating the Iron Rule. He was doing *for* people. He was solving their problems. He was servicing and maintaining them. He was meeting their every need. He was doing all their thinking for them." Cortes pauses and looks around to make sure the farmers are still with him.

"When people have a charismatic leader who does all their thinking, they become dependent," Cortes says. "They become passive. They lack initiative. Their anger turns in on themselves and it's no use to them. So in this situation what did God say to Moses?"

"You haven't got a choice," an audience member shouts.

"Well, he didn't say just that, but you're perceptive anyway. No, the Lord said unto Moses," Cortes reads from a Bible he had placed on the table beside him, "Gather unto me seventy men who thou knowest to be the elders of the people . . . and I will come down and . . . take of the spirit which is upon thee and will put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with thee. that thou shalt not bear it by thyself alone."⁵

"Now what did old Moses say to this?" Cortes asks. "Did he say 'Great idea God, you got it.' Right? No. He resists, like we would do. But this time the Lord gets a little angry. He says, 'Moses, you're a jerk.'"

"Did God say that?" someone shouts amid crowd laughter.

"Well, no. That's just my exegesis of what he said," Cortes laughs with the crowd. "But Moses finally obeys, and the Lord 'took of the spirit and gave it to the seventy.' And they go off and organize a hunting party for quail or something and Moses doesn't have to do all the work. Now, the times were not unique, the people were not unique. They were just like you and me. So what's the point of the story for us today in the United States?"

"We need to organize a hunting party?" an audience member responds.

"Well maybe . . . but you farmers have a crisis—I don't have

a crisis—you've got a crisis. Go back and read the Bible, read about how Moses felt, with the world on his shoulders, losing his sense of humor, not seeing that this crisis was an opportunity to test out his organizations, to develop leadership. The Chinese symbol for crisis is what? Danger and opportunity. We can see this crisis as an opportunity to do some strategic planning or thinking and ask some fundamental questions about the nature of the real crisis."

Then, Cortes becomes more deliberate. The freight train returns to the fast track of his destination. "For me, the crisis is a misunderstanding of power, a naïveté about power and a total unwillingness of people to appreciate the importance of politics. Politics, not in the electoral sense, not in the sense of electing men and women to public office, not the kind of politics that we have in this country which is not really politics. Every four years we have an electronic plebiscite, which does not have anything at all to do with politics."

The audience is rapt. Cortes continues, his tone more serious, his voice dropping in range. "Aristotle sees politics as discussion and decision-making about family, about property, and about education. Aristotle talks about politics as public discourse which enables and ennobles a spirit because it allows you to cross the boundary between public and private and move beyond self-centeredness into relationship with other people and engage them and bargain with them, fight and ultimately compromise with them. That's politics. What we have every four years are these plebiscites which are about media, ad men, marketing techniques, pollsters. So we've totally trivialized our politics, made them superficial and somewhat distorted and deformed. As a result, people are in revolt against politics. They think all politicians are phonies. They think of all politicians as lacking in substance. They see politicians as being self-centered and egotistical. And unfortunately, in eight out of 10 cases they're right."

"Well, I'd like to suggest that the real opportunity that comes out of this crisis is for us to begin now to develop an appreciation for what real politics offers. Real politics offers an opportunity to engage people at the core of their values, their vision, their imagination. It begins to offer them some possibilities for change, for transformation of self and of community by be-

ginning to deal with some fundamental issues which affect families."

"Real politics requires understanding of some other values like pluralism, compromise, discourse, quid pro quo, and most importantly, relationships—how you begin to build relationships."

"Organizing is a fancy word for relationship building. No organizer ever organizes a community. What an organizer does is identify, test out, and develop leadership. And the leadership builds the relationships and the networks and following that does the organizing."

"If I want to organize you, I don't sell you an idea. What I do, if I'm smart, is try to find out what's your interest. What are your dreams? I try to kindle your imagination, stir the possibilities, and then propose some ways in which you can act on those dreams and act on those values and act on your own visions. You've got to be the owner. Otherwise it's my cause, my organization. You've got nothing!"