

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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The University of COPS

San Antonio, 1986

The doors to the old elementary school on the grounds of the Immaculate Heart of Mary parish on the West Side of San Antonio are locked. Only the small red, white, and blue lapel button taped over a doorbell gives me any assurance that I am where I want to be: at the office of the neighborhood organization COPS. A hand-lettered sign lets me know I must ring the bell to gain entrance. The parish and the West Side neighborhood are so poor and devastated by urban renewal that they can no longer support the school. So the 70-year-old building is locked, boarded up, and used only for periodic sessions of an adult literacy class—and for the COPS headquarters, located on the second floor and accessible to the West Side leaders who run the organization. After my first visit, I understood the necessity of the locked doors. There are hazards in the old building and in the neighborhood. One day I lost my footing and fell on a chipped cement stairway that had no railings. Another time, a mentally retarded man exposed himself to me in the parking lot.

Today, it is only cold, and as I look through old clippings and files, I huddle close to the small space heater in one of the three rooms COPS uses for offices and meetings. The visible signs of COPS' power show not in the office, but in the expandable files

of newspaper clippings that grow larger with each passing year. The headlines mark the progress:

- 1976—"Rebuilding is Central Demand of COPS," San Antonio *Express*;
- 1977—"COPS Denies Disruption," San Antonio *Light*;
- 1981—"COPS Plans Meeting with Power Brokers," San Antonio *Light*;
- 1983—"Governor Makes Pledge to COPS," San Antonio *News*;
- 1985—"COPS Budget \$150,000," San Antonio *Express*; and it goes on.

I have been working in the files for about an hour when I am called to the telephone. It is Ernie Cortes calling from Austin. I am surprised because I had not mentioned to him that I would be in San Antonio, but he tracked me down anyway to ask, "Are you finding anything interesting?"

It was a question Cortes asked me frequently during my intermittent research and review of his organizations. And it was his way of keeping tabs on what I was hearing and thinking about them. The questions, daily telephone calls, and continuous dialogue—not only with me, but with dozens of other people—are his way of keeping up with what is happening within each organization. He talks with his paid organizers and key volunteer leaders almost everyday. He asks about everything they do—from their appointments, to the size of the banners for their rallies, to their impressions of a visit with a city council member, even to the current books they are reading. I should have guessed that Cortes would find my tracks wherever I went within the network. He seemed to be everywhere and into everything. One of his full-time organizers, Sister Maribeth Lar-kin, told me once, "We operate out of Ernie's vision."¹ Although Cortes discounts this and credits his organizers for helping develop a "shared" vision, he nevertheless keeps his hand in every activity in every organization.

I spent an hour at his Austin office one afternoon watching him work the telephone to get the help of Victoria's Catholic Bishop Charles Grahm² for a pet project and prepare—via a conference call—his leaders in San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley for a meeting on economic development with

then-San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros. A few minutes later he was delegating tasks to Austin organizer Ken Fujimoto for a meeting on affordable housing with Admiral Bobby Ray Inman, the former CIA operative and high-tech entrepreneur. In the middle of all of this, he took a call from Duke University's Larry Goodwyn, the historian of populism and author of *Democratic Promise*, and he advised Goodwyn to read Pope John Paul's papal encyclical on work, *Laborem Exercens*, in order to understand the Polish pope and the Catholic church as background for Goodwyn's forthcoming book on the Solidarity movement.

It was a dizzying experience to be with Cortes in his office. Often, his two young children Jacob and Alma would be there. Cortes regularly took over baby-sitting chores so that his wife Oralia could work on her degree in library science. Sometimes Ami, his teenaged daughter from his first marriage, would also be there answering the telephone for him or filing the news clips on key issues or Industrial Areas Foundation activities. His son Jacob, then 5 years old, would crawl up in his father's lap or beg for a sip of Cortes' ever-present diet soft drink, and Cortes would tell him, "Son, you know it's bad for you." Jacob would retort, "But *you* do it, dad." And Alma, three years older than her brother, would look up from her book and roll her eyes, as if to say, "Well, here we go again." Then Cortes would shift his attention to her, to her books: "Are you reading anything interesting, Alma? Tell me what you're reading." Later, he would recount with delight stories of Alma's passion for books, which, of course, mirrored his own.

I was never around Cortes when he was not simultaneously reading five or six books—mostly theology, history, economics, and biography. Books were everywhere around him—his office, car, home, garage. When Cortes' wife Oralia was packing to move into a new home, she complained to me that she had found more than 30 unpacked boxes of books from their last move. And that reminded Cortes to tell me about his recent readings from the half-dozen books he was carrying in a canvas bag, and to offer me two of them: a book on Catholic social teachings and another on the role of leadership in effective management.

As often happened with Cortes, one book led to an idea,

which resulted in a search for another book among those stacked to double depth on the shelves lining the walls of his small Austin office. Which also had newspapers stacked on the floor—the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Dallas Morning News*, and others—waiting to be clipped for his files. To keep up with Cortes, I found that my own reading expanded into areas in which I had never ventured before—particularly into economics, philosophy, and theology. He seemed eager for me to read, eager to show me the intellectual path to his own development so that I could better understand why and how he had come to build the organizations in the way he had.

Cortes clearly loved to teach. Once he was finally able to recruit and train enough organizers in Texas to share the tedium of daily organizing duties, he began to put together seminars and training classes that stretched his leaders intellectually and created what one of his organizers called a "community of scholars." In fact, Cortes began to look at his organizations as a mini-university. "It is a place where people learn . . . where people are really thinking about politics in an interesting way, about economics and other disciplines. Where they are trying to apply what they learn," Cortes explains. "What we want are organizers and leaders who really understand reflection and see themselves as scholars who synthesize reading, reflection, and action. Our role is not merely to help. It is easy to encourage dependency. Our role is to teach. It's hard to do, to keep up the energy for it, but I think it is essential."³

Community leader and former COPS president Helen Ayala said that when she completed her term of office, she felt as if she had graduated from the "University of COPS." Bill Eassum, pastor of the Colonial Hills Methodist Church in San Antonio, believed the training he received was more "profound" than anything he had learned in three years at the Perkins School of Theology.

Former *Texas Observer* editor Geoffrey Rips says the realization that Cortes was teaching as well as organizing sent him reeling: "The sphere of politics was suddenly much larger. It was not only a place to act but also a place to think. The importance of politicians and the electoral apparatus shrank in comparison to the development of people Cortes called 'lead-

ers,' all those who are engaged simultaneously in the restructuring of power relationships and in the development of their own understanding and that of others."⁴

Philosophers Hannah Arendt and José Ortega y Gasset turned up on Cortes' reading lists, along with political scientist Bernard Crick, economist Lester Thurow, and theologians Walter Brueggemann, Hans Kung, Gregory Baum, and Leonardo Boff. Cortes urged IAF leaders to read biographies to learn how power and leadership developed through individual lives. Disraeli, Churchill, Huey Long, Robert Moses, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lyndon B. Johnson—even J. Edgar Hoover—became points of reference in his lectures. So did church documents.

For six weeks in 1985, Valley Interfaith met every Sunday for four hours to study Pope John Paul's encyclical on work and the American Catholic Bishops' Letter on the Economy. More than 1,500 people went through the courses, and the collective decision of the organization to lobby in Austin for indigent health-care legislation came out of these meetings.

Other seminar topics included ideas about the concept of the public good, trade and monetary policy, and the United States' relationship with Mexico. And power. Always back to power.

Power as seen by Lord Acton? "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."⁵

Power as seen by Catholic theologian Hans Kung? "The exercise of power . . . can be justified in virtue of service and must be judged by its character as service."⁶

Power as seen by the patron saint of community organizers, Saul Alinsky? "Power is the very essence, the dynamo of life. It is the power of the heart pumping blood and sustaining life in the body. It is the power of active citizen participation, pulsing upward, providing a unified strength for a common purpose."⁷

The full range of power is a hard concept to grasp if you have never exercised it, and Cortes returns to it repeatedly to train people to use it for broad social purposes. Ed Chambers, the IAF's national director, said that in the early days of COPS, Cortes had to go in several times to admonish its leaders and tell them, "Hey, this is not about some Mexicans getting some power. This concept is bigger than that."⁸

So Cortes talks frequently with his leaders about the ambiguities of power—about the kind of power that tends to corrupt and the kind of power that comes from knowledge. He believes that knowledge can be the path to power for people within its organizations.

"Power ultimately depends on consent," he says. "And we're teaching how you go about getting consent. The problem in government is how you delegate the work to the experts, the professionals and bureaucrats, without delegating the power. We want people to become expert enough to challenge the experts and maintain the power all the while."

Cortes says he also returns to power again and again in his workshops because many of the church members who make up his organizations are uncomfortable with the idea of power. He tries to get them to separate power from brute force and violence and to look at it in terms of cooperation rather than coercion. Cortes gets his leaders to read Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's book *Love, Power and Justice* because Tillich believes that love and power have to be joined to produce justice. "Tillich talks about how love without power leads to sentimentality, while power without love leads to cynicism. You have to operate with both and it creates a tension that's not always comfortable," Cortes says.

"We had people analyze their own experience with power one time, and it was usually bad because they were on the short end of it," he says. "They simply never had the joy of exercising it! We just want them to have a little joy."

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Anger Gives You Energy

Los Angeles, 1986

"Pastor Sinnott, please leave the room and wait in the hall!" Edward T. Chambers, teacher, issues the command, and the Reverend Thomas Sinnott, student, follows it.

Chambers, director of the Industrial Areas Foundation, is teaching a seminar on power at Mount St. Mary's College in the hills overlooking Los Angeles. Tom Sinnott is a Lutheran minister from New Jersey, and he is one of about 100 people from across the nation who are attending the IAF's training program for church leaders and community activists.¹

During the next 10 minutes, Chambers orders other people to leave the room as well—a youth gang social worker from East Los Angeles, a school teacher from El Paso, a lawyer from East Brooklyn, a Methodist minister from St. Louis. All obey the order. After all, Chambers is the head guy, the leader, the man in charge of the program. But the program is about power, and about how most middle-class and poor people give consent to have it taken away from them.

"We teach not only how to get power, but how to use it," Chambers begins.

All eyes are on Ed Chambers, who dominates the room physically as well as emotionally. In his 50s, tall and barrel-chested, Chambers has the stiff-necked posture of intense pride. When