

# COLD ANGER

**A Story of Faith and Power Politics**

by

**Mary Beth Rogers**

*Introduction by Bill Moyers*

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## Introduction

As Mary Beth Rogers reminds us, when the magazine *Texas Business* published a list of the most powerful Texans a couple of years ago, it included H. Ross Perot and T. Boone Pickens, U.S. Senator Lloyd Bentsen, and the then-Mayor of San Antonio, Henry Cisneros. It also listed Ernesto Cortes.

Ernesto Cortes?

Wait a minute. The man has no money and holds no public office. As Texans usually measure power, Ernie Cortes would be found wanting. He lives simply, talks softly, prays quietly, and is about as charismatic as a load of watermelons. Moreover, he spends altogether too much time in the company of poor people. As there are 32 million such folk in America, Ernie Cortes has little time for the television talk shows that swoon over celebrities, those bright, shining exemplars of contemporary American success. Richard Nixon gets more television exposure during his annual resurrections than 32 million poor people get in a decade. Ernie Cortes has not pitched his tent in the media spotlight.

So what is he doing on the list of most powerful Texans, this vagabond among the powerless? He is there because he empowers others. Ernie's secret weapon is his conviction that power is not something one gathers for personal aggrandizement; it is what you teach others to get for themselves.

Furthermore, he has known for a long time that if absolute power corrupts absolutely (actually, a little will do just as well these days), so does absolute powerlessness. It breeds those twin polluters of the soul, helplessness and hopelessness. And it transforms the processes of democracy from government “of, by, and for the people” into a power grab by lawyers, lobbyists, and legislators (aided and abetted by a media that manufacture frivolous distractions which overwhelm folk who might otherwise notice that their country is being plundered.)

Ernie Cortes abhors the powerlessness of the wounded. He has seen it turn proud people into submissive instruments of alien wills. Growing up, he began to notice how many of his neighbors spent their lives deferring to authority, never questioning, always taking what was done to them as if a rigged lottery were the order of things. “Latinos never developed an understanding of power,” he says. “They’ve been institutionally trained to be passive. Power is nothing more than the ability to act in your behalf. In Spanish, we call the word *poder*, to have capacity, to be able. Real power comes when people have permission to ask questions.”

Yes, but permission is rarely granted voluntarily. It has to be wrested from the powers-that-be. And that is what Ernie Cortes tries to help people understand how to do. Here is the second source of his standing: He organizes. More precisely, he trains organizers, and they in turn teach others. You may remember that group of housewives, priests, nuns, and workers at the local Air Force base in San Antonio. What a moment it was when, having been prepared by Ernie Cortes and like-minded allies, they took up their own cause against a callused power structure—and won. “Ordinary” people became experts on rezoning, development, and water and sewer systems. They got action on issues that affected them most immediately. “If we fret about the deficit, we feel paralyzed,” says Ernie Cortes. “But we can figure out and strategize and organize to change a neighborhood, get a street paved, improve a school.” He likes to quote one of his mentors, the late Saul Alinsky: “Never do for people what they can do for themselves.”

So it was that when Ernie first surveyed the Mexican-American community in San Antonio, he found that people were

alarmed about the flash floods that threatened their children's lives and their property, not to mention their potable water. This gave his people their mandate. Today, riding around these districts in San Antonio with one of the women who became a leader in the movement, you are regularly invited to behold and admire the water drainage ditches that were built because people organized. You will also be shown other functioning monuments to people power—paved streets and sidewalks, new housing, an access to the freeway.

This power is more than mere muscle. It resonates with a spirituality we last experienced at the height of the civil rights movement in the '60s. Once the San Antonio housewives began to study the law and the rules and began to confront local officials, they often discovered that they knew more than the authorities. This did wonders for their self-esteem and confidence, but it is only in part psychological. Its religious ground is the realization that if I am indeed one of God's children, I must lay claim to my inheritance. If God is my creator, the least I can do is live up to my heritage. Not surprisingly, churches provide Ernie Cortes with a network of kindred souls: pastors, priests, nuns, preachers, and laity who stand, as he tells them, in the tradition of the most effective organizers in history—Moses and Paul.

Ernie Cortes is both conservative and radical. He knows his Bible and his *New York Review of Books*, *The Economist*, *Dissent*, and *World Press Review*. He carries on a running conversation with John Dewey, Albert North Whitehead, Dostoyevski, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. They have been tutors to a man who considers life a continuing course in adult education, and he borrows from them liberally. Ernie Cortes lives such ideas and tests them against reality; rhetoric is not enough.

I have rarely met a man to whom family and faith mean more, or who better understands the indispensable role of institutions in a fragile society. An obsession with individual rights, he will argue, can weaken the already tenuous ties that hold America's disparate peoples together. Each of us is uniquely an individual, but being alone and isolated is not our natural destiny. Society is dangerously atomized, he warns, and to heal the alienation we must involve individuals not in huge

mass organizations but in smaller ones that contribute to the public discourse. He is critical of government programs that foster dependencies while neglecting the innate political capacities of poorer communities. And his summons to citizenship is like a trumpet. What Hannah Arendt called “the joy of public happiness” is in Ernie Cortes contagious. The public square belongs to everyone, he says; fill it!

When I first heard of him many years ago, he was considered a “barrio revolutionary.” He helped to organize a boycott of farm products, so arousing the wrath of the wealthy growers that Governor John Connally sent in the Texas Rangers to break up the boycott. Some journalists who saw him then remember Ernie Cortes as a very angry and passionate young man. The anger is no longer visible, but the passion gloriously is. Ernie Cortes still believes that we are created equal—brown, black, and white; that people are citizens before they are consumers; that our future can be what we imagine. He once said of his organizers: “We’re a group of people who care about the future because the future is not something abstract. The future is our children, and what happens to them is important.” In a society whose political leaders have been willing to wreck the future for the profligacy of the moment, where only the present tense is heard and all that matters is getting it today, and where legitimacy is only conferred in prime time between commercials extolling gratification now, the future is a radical notion. Just as radical is the belief that the poor do not have to accept passively a future created for them by others. To Cortes and company, “power is such a good thing, everyone should have some.”

Once-upon-a-time this was a very American idea. Of late it has fallen on hard times, withered beneath an avalanche of manufactured images, public fictions, and the growing domination of stateless corporations. I am indebted—as no doubt you shall be upon reading this robust story of faith and power politics—to Mary Beth Rogers for a wonderful reminder that the American Revolution is not over. It lives on in the cold anger and warm heart of Ernesto Cortes.

More power to him!

—*Bill Moyers*

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## Prologue

*Cold Anger* is a story about a new kind of intervention in politics by working poor people who incorporate their religious values into a struggle for power and visibility. It is about women and men—like Ernesto Cortes, Jr.—who promote public and private hope, political and personal responsibility, community and individual transformation. Even joy. As such, it is a rare story in American politics these days.

Almost unnoticed, growing numbers of working poor people—Hispanics, blacks, whites, Protestants and Catholics, ministers, priests and nuns, shopkeepers, truck drivers, clerks and housewives—are entering politics at the community level in dozens of major cities in Texas and across the nation. They are unusual because they view politics as a *long-term* process to build relationships, new institutions, and humane communities. They are sparked by people like Ernesto Cortes, Jr., community organizer extraordinaire. Cortes is a man of both ideas and action who seeks long-term political change—not just a quick fix. He is engaged in the empowerment of people at a neighborhood and parish level that allows them to exert both personal and political control over their lives. Cortes and his groups have become successful enough to transform the politics of the ninth largest city in the nation and to determine the



fate of specific issues in a dozen others, as well as in the entire state of Texas. Because of these successes and the way these groups operate, Ernesto Cortes and the people who participate in the million-member Industrial Areas Foundation network of community organizations in Texas and elsewhere in the nation have the potential to shape a new American grass-roots politics for the 1990s—one that is nurturing to its participants and enriching for our political, religious, and social institutions. More importantly, the local Industrial Areas Foundation groups are virtually the *only* organizations in America that are enticing working poor people to participate in politics.

When I began to see what was happening, I wanted to know why and how, who and what, when and where. So I pursued the story. Then something unexpected happened. Without realizing it initially, I discovered that I had also embarked on a personal voyage that led to the discovery of new emotions and a new view of politics myself. I guess it was only natural, because coinciding with this pursuit were several currents in my own life, much like strong undertows, that pulled me deeper into the stories of these men and women who rejected special-interest and celebrity-based politics in favor of values they considered enduring and eternal.

When I began interviewing Ernesto Cortes, I had already started to reassess my lifetime in politics, which had been my passion since my father sneaked me and my younger sister past security guards into a Democratic party state convention in Dallas in the late 1950s so that we could watch the Democrats tear each other apart—both a participatory and spectator sport in those days of one-party Southern politics. But I loved what I saw at the convention: the fiery speeches, the furious arm-waving, the hot hall, the noise and intrigue, the confrontation between “good and evil.” It was a spectacle, a contest, and an adventure. I was intrigued. I wanted more. Politics began to draw me like a magnet, and I was caught in its force field from then on.

As a teenager I stuffed envelopes for candidates and collected “Dollars for Democrats” in dusty parking lots on the State Fair grounds. As a young wife and mother, I forfeited fresh vegetables, plucked eyebrows, and living potted plants to put up campaign signs, plan precinct meetings, or sell the

cheap tickets to political fundraisers. I pulled my children away from Saturday morning cartoons to sit in on “big talk” strategy meetings with aspiring candidates or officeholders. I kept card files and voter lists on my dining room table, hosted political receptions in my backyard, registered voters in meat-packing plants, and stayed awake all night every election night until the last votes were counted. I cared passionately about political ideas and issues and believed that what I was doing would have an impact on people’s lives. Politics for me was both a compulsion and a joy. It was a necessity!

But by the 1980s, there were disturbances in the magnetic field of politics. I was growing weary. And I was increasingly bothered by the shift I had been witnessing over the years from volunteer to professional politics—even though I personally had benefited from the shift. I had been married since I was barely 20 years old to John Rogers, a journalist who turned himself into a master technician and political strategist for progressive and labor causes. He was a campaign professional, a political expert. I, too, had been paid for my services in political campaigns and had moved in and out of local and state government at increasingly higher levels. Together, John and I had been on the inside of Texas politics for a number of years. *Texas Monthly* magazine once called us one of Texas’ most powerful political couples. I had even conducted workshops across the country under the auspices of the old National Women’s Education Fund to teach women how to run for office and win, using the latest in the new campaign technology.

Yet I was growing cynical about the transformation of electoral politics and the almost shamlike manufacture of voter consent that gives the appearance of democracy but delivers less and less of its substance. Both inside government and outside, in the process of capturing the machinery of government, we were moving to a system dominated by “experts.” Ordinary people increasingly were left out. But the essence of democracy is the concept of popular control and direct participation by people themselves in the decisions that affect them. We were moving away from bedrock democratic values built around the role of the “citizen” decision-maker. Also, I was seeing fewer young idealists caught by the politics magnet that had snared me 30 years earlier. That worried me, too. But what was really

beginning to weigh on me was that so many candidates and officeholders, some of whom I now knew well, seemed to look and sound alike, with images and words carefully crafted by campaign operatives who, I felt, relied on a too-simplistic reading of polling data from which they fabricated superficial themes—themes that appeared to speak to voter concerns but that rarely touched fundamental truths.

Political consultants multiplied faster than jack rabbits, increasing exponentially from one campaign season to the next. Activities previously handled by volunteers were taken over by experts in direct mail, telephone canvassing, cluster polling, message development, image managing, media buying, television production, speech coaching, and on and on. The times and technology demanded it—if you wanted to win.

Of course, you had to have money to operate in this arena, which meant that unless you had personal wealth, you had to raise money constantly. To be successful at the money game, you tailored your views and votes to those who had the money, or you kept your mouth shut on issues and ideas of controversy. As a result, most politicians said essentially the same thing, with a few chosen code words beeped out to signal an affinity with certain special-interest groups. But for most voters, the differences between politicians were arrayed in shadings of gray, rarely coming close to any substantive hue on the political color spectrum. With one politician virtually indistinguishable from another, voters simply stopped voting. What good did it do? No one seemed to care anymore. And I was not sure I did either. Besides, there were other disturbances in my life beginning to break up the magnetic field of politics and lessen its pull.

One was John Rogers' cancer diagnosis in mid-1983 when he was in his professional prime. John's illness forced us to examine our lives in a way we had not since we married more than 20 years earlier. We particularly focused on family and our children, and what we wanted to make of the time we had left—together and separately. With this kind of reflection came a renewed desire by both of us to recapture some of our early political idealism, now frayed by the years of experience. It hit us during one of the most difficult times of his treatment when John told a physician at M.D. Anderson Cancer Treatment

Center in Houston that seeing the poor treated as royally as the rich in that great publicly funded hospital reminded him of why he had gotten into politics in the first place. "I was a liberal who believed in people," he said. "But then I got caught up in the fun of it all, and I became a technician instead."

Our new idealism embarrassed us. For the most part, we kept it to ourselves.

All of this was weighing on my mind when Texas Treasurer Ann Richards and I were in Washington on a snowy evening in February 1984. Ann had been my longtime friend and colleague in a number of causes—a few raucous campaigns to elect both good women and men to public office. Most recently, we had collaborated on a major museum exhibition about the history of women in Texas. When she was elected treasurer, Ann asked me to become her chief deputy, and we had the distinction in 1983 of becoming the first women in modern Texas government to occupy the top two positions in a state agency. Now we were in Washington calling on officials of the Federal Reserve Board, and through the efforts of our friend Carlton Carl, we had the good fortune to have dinner one night with some of our favorite members of the Texas congressional delegation—U.S. Representatives John Bryant of Dallas and Ron Coleman and his wife Debbie from El Paso. Fiery Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower was also in town, and he joined us too.

Going out on a snowy night is always a memorable event for Texans, but the muffling of Washington sounds and sights by that white blanket also made me reflective—and surprisingly more talkative than usual. The weather gave us the restaurant to ourselves and I was seated next to Congressman Bryant, apple-cheeked, serious, and apparently as reflective as I. Before coming to Congress, Bryant was the major strategist for a reform clique of legislators who served in the Texas House in the 1970s. He was a straight arrow—ethical, smart, and conscientious about public service—and the only politician I knew who blushed when he got a compliment. His congressional district in east Dallas was a mix of blue-collar workers, blacks, middle-class business owners, and professionals, and Bryant had worked with my husband on a number of issues over the

years. Although we knew each other, I did not know much about Bryant's background. We began talking about the things that drew us to politics.

"For me," I began cautiously, "it was both the excitement of the game and the teachings of the Methodist church." Pause. Did I really say that? Should I continue? In my political circles, you always handled a discussion of religion and politics cautiously because in the Bible Belt, anyone who mixed religion and politics was either a scoundrel, a soft touch, or a fool. If you were from the progressive wing of the state party, as were most of the people at our table that evening, you wouldn't hobnob with any of them. But I caught a glint in Bryant's eye.

"You too?" he asked, smiling.

Encouraged, I continued. "I believed all that stuff about 'loving your neighbor,' 'blessed are the poor,' taking care of the 'least of these,'" I said.

We laughed. Then Bryant revealed that his earliest political impulses stemmed from the same Methodist teachings. Both of us were somewhat embarrassed. He was a member of Congress. I was a back-room operative. Some people might even think we were political sophisticates! Yet we had just admitted to each other that we had been drawn to politics, at least in part, because we believed what we had learned in the Methodist Youth Fellowship! Both of us had obviously imbibed the same tenets of the old Social Gospel, which had penetrated Methodist and other Protestant churches after the turn of the century. Its premise was that, if you believed in the Gospel, you had a responsibility to correct social and economic wrongs and to work for a just society. The beliefs underlying the Social Gospel were those that had propelled so many Protestant ministers into the civil rights movement, the antiwar efforts, and the urban poverty wars. Although I had long since left the Methodist church, its Social Gospel seeds had been planted in me at the little Greenland Hills Methodist neighborhood church in Dallas. And those same seeds had been sown in Congressman Bryant's neighborhood church, as well. Politics became for each of us the logical field in which to harvest them.

That conversation stayed with me. A few months later, I was at Scholz's Beer Garden in Austin with friends when I met Bill Shearer, a compelling and literate conversationalist who owned

a small regional publishing firm and who had struggled to outgrow the fundamentalist beliefs of his Nazarene preacher father. Our talk that evening turned to the mix of religion and politics, often a poisonous stew that endangers democracy. But when I told Shearer about my conversation with Congressman Bryant, he thought it would be interesting to develop a book about successful “moderate” political players in the 1980s whose initial motivations to enter politics derived from basic religious values. The point of the book would be to see if genuine religious sentiment could be injected into the political arena without launching the narrow, extremist theocracy that fundamentalists such as Jerry Falwell seemed to propose. Shearer encouraged me to pursue the idea, and we came up with a list of people I would interview. Along with Bryant, Ernesto Cortes, Jr. was on the list.

I had known Cortes more than 20 years earlier in San Antonio when he was a young activist involved with the United Farm Workers and I was a housewife with two babies helping conduct voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives on San Antonio’s Hispanic West Side. Since the early 1960s, San Antonio had changed enormously, and many people considered Ernesto Cortes largely responsible. He organized one of the grandest and most long-lasting political coups in the nation by turning San Antonio’s once-closed, Anglo-dominated city government into an open community that elected Henry Cisneros its first Hispanic mayor in 1981. The vehicle for this shift in power was a Mexican-American-based and Catholic church-based organization called Communities Organized for Public Service, or COPS. Although Cortes consistently maintained a low profile, politicians were becoming increasingly aware of him because COPS-like organizations were springing up in cities throughout Texas, New York, California, and other states.

I was very interested in the Catholic church connection to this successful political organizing, and Cortes was kind enough to give me unlimited access to him and his organizations for the book I planned to write. But after following Cortes around for several months, I realized I was seeing something different in politics. I was seeing more than the story of the religious or political motivations of one man, or even San Antonio’s transformation through a new brand of church-based social

activism. I was, instead, witness to a new kind of faith and power politics—gritty, realistic, and successful. Unfolding in front of me was the story of more than 400,000 men and women who made up the network of Industrial Areas Foundation organizations in Texas, and how they were developing themselves to assume power and to act responsibly once they got it.

Since I had been in politics, I had never seen anything that seemed to reach people so deeply and wrench from them such a commitment to make “unimportant” people important in the public life of their communities. Cortes seemed to be building new political institutions and developing a new kind of political participant. And his organizations and people were connected not only with the Catholic church, but with mainline Protestant denominations as well. The political intervention of these church people seemed to be creating intelligent political discussion on behalf of poor families and neighborhoods, providing a stark contrast to fundamentalist involvement in single-issue, all-or-nothing conservative politics. What Cortes was doing was also more interesting to me because it seemed to transform individual lives and give ordinary people a sense of personal power that allowed them to operate as equals with the “experts” in corporate board rooms, city halls, and in the state capital. As a result, I decided to focus on Ernesto Cortes’ new kind of religious-based politics in Texas, and this book began to take shape.

Most of my research and more than half of my manuscript was completed by late 1987, when John Rogers suddenly died—having survived his cancer and its debilitating treatment only to succumb to his old childhood nemesis, asthma. It was 1989 before I got back into the book, and new emotions and new insights led me to throw away everything I had written before and to start all over from scratch. Somehow, my basic political cynicism no longer provided an adequate framework with which to view either politics or religion, or to deal adequately with what Cortes was doing. And that led me to understand one additional current in my life, one that grew stronger as I emerged from the undertow of grief: the renewal of my own political hope.

Ernesto Cortes and the Industrial Areas Foundation were bringing people back into politics. They were attracting men

and women whose values were based on the belief in the fundamental worth of the individual and the understanding that only within the framework of a caring human “community” could the individual grow, develop, and rise to his or her potential. What’s more, these were people who had an appreciation for the value of give-and-take and genuine public discourse. They believed in the joy of politics and in its inherent worth as a way to participate in the world. They believed in the excitement and vitality of practicing “citizenship,” giving it an expanded meaning beyond what is usually encapsulated in civics textbooks. To Cortes and the people he was bringing to the political process, a “citizen” is someone who matters, someone who becomes visible—and thus worthy—by taking action to benefit the common good. A citizen is someone who can operate effectively, personally and politically, because he or she understands the uses and misuses of power—and its sources. In many ways, the people Cortes was bringing into politics were more sophisticated than the “experts” who were running politics and managing the politicians. And they came closer to grasping the inherent wisdom that underlies our democracy: that government should not be a distinction between us and them—the experts and the ignorant, the governing and the governed. It should be “we, the people”—not them, the government.

For me, then, the significance of this story is how Ernesto Cortes, Jr. and other leaders of the Industrial Areas Foundation organizations are helping ordinary men and women awaken to their power to become “we, the people.” It is a story that makes me feel hopeful once again about American politics. And it is a story that revealed to me the depth of underlying anger felt by men and women for whom the idea of becoming “we, the people” is so distant.

Anger? Yes, anger. Which, for the working poor, arises most often from being ignored, invisible, left out, overlooked, dismissed, and burdened by the small frustrations and daily humiliations of a constant struggle to get by. But the anger I saw among the working-class and poor families Cortes represents is not one based on sour resentments or a false sense of entitlement. Rather, it is an anger that seethes at the injustices of life and transforms itself into a compassion for those hurt by life. It



is an anger rooted in direct experience and held in collective memory. It is the kind of anger that can energize a democracy—because it can lead to the first step in changing politics.

Ernesto Cortes, Jr. and the people of the Industrial Areas Foundation organizations have chosen to be energized personally and politically by their anger. In turn, they are changing the political process wherever they participate. That is because anger for Cortes and the people he organizes is an emotion of hope—not of despair. Ernesto Cortes is helping new political participants take the hot impulse of their anger and cool it down so that it can become a useful tool to improve individual lives and the quality of the common community. For them, “cold anger” reflects the hope of change.

Our history reveals that Americans have been trying to expand the concept of “we, the people” for more than 200 years. Sometimes we have succeeded, sometimes we have failed. But the process has always challenged our most thoughtful citizens. Ernesto Cortes teaches that it is the process of becoming “we, the people” that is important in itself. And, by focusing on the “becoming,” Cortes and the new political leaders of the Industrial Areas Foundation are revitalizing not only themselves, but our continuing American experiment in democracy as well. I believe they offer hope for the survival and reality of “we, the people.”

Several individuals provided valuable advice that helped me develop this story. They are Anne Blocker, Dr. Betty Sue Flowers, Geoff Rips, Ellen Temple, and Fran Vick. I am grateful to them and to my children, Billy Rogers and Eleanor Rogers Lee, who encouraged me to continue the story when I put it aside. I am particularly indebted to Ernesto and Oralia Cortes and to the men and women of the Industrial Areas Foundation who gave their time and shared their lives with me.