

# States of the Union

## TROUBLE IN CRYSTAL CITY

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*So I say to you tonight, my fellow Texans, if you want your tax money used to establish a Little Cuba in Texas—to establish a communal farm in Texas—to promote Socialism in Texas—if you want Federal funds to finance efforts to destroy the free enterprise system that has built this state and this nation of ours, then you want a continuation of power of an administration that makes such grants to the Raza Unida Party.*

—GOVERNOR DOLPH BRISCOE (1976)

CRYSTAL CITY, TEX.

**S**OMEONE painted Popeye brown and set a sombrero on his head. The next morning citizens came from miles around to admire the Chicanos' painting of the six-foot high statue, which for years had reigned over the town square, a gift-reminder from the Del Monte people that Crystal City was "The Spinach Capital of the World." But before long Del Monte workers bearing cans of whitewash showed up and restored the pop icon's Anglo credentials. *I'm Popeye the sailor man: I am what I am what I am.*

Although the incident occurred two years ago, it remains a fair sample of the cruel dilemma confronting the residents of this brown, poverty-stricken

community groping for muscle in a white, affluent America. Last month, just when it seemed the Chicanos were getting somewhere, their efforts were again doused with whitewash, not by Del Monte this time but by a ring of politicians in Texas and Washington. Lame-duck Governor Dolph Briscoe led the pack, with President Jimmy Carter not far behind. Together they succeeded in killing off a promising, Federally-funded cooperative that the Chicanos had been painfully organizing since 1975.

To understand what happened, one must know something about south Texas politics and geography. Crystal City (population 8,000) is the seat of Zavala County, a lush agricultural territory lying to the south of San Antonio and to the north of the Mexican border. Known among Texans as the "Winter Garden Area," the land there has long been under the green thumb of wealthy white growers and corporations. For planting and harvesting energy they have relied on Mexican workers from across the Rio Grande, a cheap and plentiful source.

But in recent years the workers have been troublesome. As the growers see it, the problem is that too many Mexicans have settled north of the border

and become U.S. citizens. Over the generations they have dug in and multiplied, so that today Zavala County is 70 per cent Chicano; in Crystal City, Chicanos outnumber Anglos by a ratio of 10:1. Worse, the new majority has been acquiring an appreciation for democratic processes—both their promise and their practice—and consequently has been making life uncomfortable for the white landowners (the new minority).

The democratic current began to swell in 1970 when a typically Texas-style argument over the choosing of cheerleaders for the Crystal City High football team erupted into a full-scale revolt. As John Shockley, an Austin-based scholar, tells it in his contribution to a collection on *The Beginnings of Bronze Power* (Morrow), things heated up as soon as a special faculty committee chose just one Chicano cheerleader out of five named—a maneuver as difficult as it was insensitive, since 88 per cent of the entire student body was Chicano. Nevertheless, when a delegation of students complained to the principal, that worthy replied that their words were "a bunch of phooey."

There followed the obligatory school boycott, a near-total success, then the administration's repentance and the selection of more Chicano cheerleaders. But that small triumph proved only a start. In a subsequent election the Chicanos organized a new political party—La Raza Unida—and proceeded to win control of both the school board and City Council. Nowadays La Raza Unida is the most powerful political party in Zavala County, regularly electing its slate of Chicanos plus a handful of friendly Anglos.

The brain behind this remarkable political success is said to belong to a young Crystal City native named José Angel Gutiérrez, who with his wife happened to return to town during the height of the cheerleader dispute. Gutiérrez had just received a Master's in political science from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, and the title of his dissertation—"The Empirical Conditions for Revolution in Four South Texas Counties"—left little doubt as

to his ambitions. It was Gutiérrez, according to friends and foes alike, who led La Raza Unida to victory, and he is now chairman of the party as well as a county judge.

Gutiérrez also put together a community action program that the Carter Administration has just torpedoed. He called it the Zavala County Economic Development Corporation (ZCEDC), a project closely linked with Raza Unida but wholly dependent for funds on the Federal establishment. (We are getting close to the point here, which means we are entering the Land of Abbreviations, so please pay attention.)

With the War on Poverty practically moribund by the time ZCEDC came on the scene, its Federal angel was the Community Services Administration (CSA), puny heir to Lyndon Johnson's once-robust Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). After Nixon dismantled the OEO, the courts compelled him to leave a saving remnant, the CSA, to continue funding and administering the few antipoverty programs still extant. Jimmy Carter, however, early on announced his intention to beef up CSA programs, especially those assisting minority Americans; and to prove it, he appointed Graciela Olivarez, a Chicano bureaucrat from Arizona, as the agency's new director.

On the surface, things couldn't have looked better for the ZCEDC; a moderately liberal, rural-minded Democrat occupied the White House, and a Chicano from the Southwest was in the antipoverty chair. Yet beneath the gloss things could not have been worse. Closely identified with the politics of Raza Unida, the Chicanos' economic development corporation had become an instant target of reigning Texas Democrats, especially of those whose power base was in or around Zavala County.

**I**N PARTICULAR, the ZCEDC was high on Governor Dolph Briscoe's "hit" list. Briscoe is from Uvalde County and owns 22,000 acres in neighboring Zavala. He has a big stake in undermining Chicano political interests there. His chance seemed to come



in 1975 when the ZCEDC announced plans for a 1,000-acre farm cooperative, to be controlled and managed by dues-paying county residents. The proposal, including an export-import operation and a savings and loan investment program, was sent to CSA with an initial price tag of \$885,000.

Briscoe promptly went on the warpath, labeling the co-op scheme "un-American" and "un-Texan." Gutiérrez, he warned, wanted "a little Cuba in Texas." Once the grant was awarded, Briscoe could hold it up for 60 days by insisting on his right of review; but he couldn't veto it, so most observers thought he had become embroiled in a losing battle. Then Jimmy Carter took over the White House.

Briscoe had helped Carter in the Presidential campaign. Now, calling in his IOU, he began pestering top White House aides to prevent release of the ZCEDC grant money. According to a report by Lisa Spann in the *Texas Observer*, Briscoe "even showed up in

person to plead his case and also used his clout to line up congressional support for his crusade to save south Texas from the Raza Unida-tied co-op."

The campaign paid off handsomely. Soon attorneys for the CSA were finding a lot of things wrong with the Zavala proposal, errors they had not been able to spot during six months that the proposal had lain on their desks. Even Graciela Olivarez, Carter's great brown hope, was heard to express reservations about the co-op plan.

In a clever argument, CSA officials noted that the Zavala co-op did not go far enough in helping poor people—that it would merely create a "new class of stoop laborers." Gutiérrez argued back that the corporation would pump thousands of dollars into the depressed local economy, paying over 200 workers an average of \$3.50 per hour—much more than the typical wage paid in the "Winter Garden Area."

Nonetheless, the result of all those new objections was the suspension of the grant by CSA. The ZCEDC immediately sued, alleging that the denial of funds was a political payoff by the Carter Administration to Dolph Briscoe. The Chicanos suffered a setback when Federal Judge Gerhard Gesell ruled that the White House was not obliged to release its file of Carter-Briscoe memos. There was "no evidence" of wrongdoing, Judge Gesell insisted, to justify his overriding the President's claim of Executive privilege. Furthermore, CSA director Olivarez had "exercised her unbiased judgment in the matter."

At that juncture, nature and capitalism took their course. Faced with the prospect of a long, costly trial, and already in hock for \$20,000 in legal fees, the ZCEDC reluctantly dropped its suit last July. In all but word, it was the end of the line.

Last month the word came. The Community Services Administration sent an official letter to Gutiérrez that revoked the grant and bullishly demanded repayment of certain previously paid-out funds.

"Ooooo, Popeye," squealed Olive Oyl. "You're so strong!"