

States of the Union

PAYMENTS TO THE PAST

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers that exists again in us, but all sorts of dead ideas and all kinds of dead beliefs. . . . Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines.

—HENRIK IBSEN

The college housing law is known here as a dead program.

—JULIAN B. MCKAY
Director of Housing Programs,
Department of Housing and
Urban Development (HUD)

I TOOK UP a newspaper recently and read that HUD was threatening to shut down a new school in Mt. Angel, Oregon, the Cesar Chavez College, organized last year by one Ernesto Lopez. It is a Chicano phoenix struggling to rise from the wreckage of a much older institution, Mt. Angel College of the Benedictine Sisters. Thereby hangs a tale.

The nuns founded their college in 1887, and for 70 years it flourished as a Catholic girls' school for future teachers. But in the early '60s,

enrollment took a nose dive, and the worried sisters, bowing to current fashion, decided to go coeducational. To handle the male invasion, they obtained an \$800,000, low-interest, 40-year mortgage from HUD for the construction of new dormitories.

When the boys arrived, many of them were wearing beards, sandals and Indian necklaces. Suddenly, or so it seemed to the nuns and the townspeople, Mt. Angel was swarming with hippies. According to an account in the weekly *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Male and female students were occasionally seen strolling together unclothed along the city's main street . . . and rumors of dope parties in dormitories were rampant in 1970." The undergraduates referred to their campus as "the Antioch of the West"—an ominous label considering that "the Antioch of the East" was skidding toward bankruptcy and had of late been engaged in a serious internal debate about the course of its progressive educational policies.

The sisters grew discouraged.

They allowed enrollment to decline once again, and when their accreditation with the Western Association of Colleges lapsed, they did not attempt to renew it. Worse, they stopped making payments on the HUD mortgage.

By last summer the Benedictines were ready to call it quits. It was then that Lopez, a vice president of the college, stepped in and persuaded the sisters to let him convert the school into a Chicano institution. Lopez, 35, had grown up in Denver and had spent the previous 11 years in Oregon working for various educational programs, most of them having to do with Chicano migrant farmworkers. "But there was no single institution that answered Chicano needs," he told me in a telephone interview. "There was no place for Chicanos to go that spoke their language." He meant it both figuratively and literally.

Lopez recruited for his fragile new college a small bilingual faculty and 105 students, 80 per cent of whom were Mexican-Americans. The curriculum focused on three areas: Chicano studies, early childhood development and bicultural teacher training. This was hardly a radical agenda, yet sufficiently "ethnic" to raise some eyebrows among the locals. In particular, those farm-owners who relied on Chicano labor to harvest their orchards felt they had jumped out of the hippie frying pan and into the Chicano fire.

In December, Lopez' new board of directors officially changed the school's name from Mt. Angel College to Collegio Cesar Chavez. They now regret the decision. Oregon growers have long worried that creeping Chavezism, spreading northward from California's San Joaquin Valley, would eventually engulf them, and Lopez believes the growers, fearful that the school was fronting for the United Farm Workers, sicced Federal officials on him. Within two weeks of the name change, he notes, HUD announced

the start of foreclosure proceedings against the Benedictine Sisters (technically still the mortgagees).

The evidence pointing toward collusion between HUD and the growers is thin and circumstantial, to say the least. Yet in this era of enemies lists and taped Presidential oaths of vengeance, who can be sure Lopez' suspicions are irrational? As a supporter of the new college said to me, "Chavez is an enemy of the Teamsters. The Teamsters are friends of the Nixon Administration. Therefore, the Nixon Administration is an enemy of the Cesar Chavez college." Q.E.D.?

HUD officials have been at pains to deny the charge, even as they have moved to close the school. "That's ridiculous," snapped Julian B. McKay when I suggested that the college's name had precipitated the foreclosure actions. "We haven't the least objection to the name. We want the college to continue. Let me ask you as a taxpayer: Do you think the Federal government really wants to own a convent?"

WHATEVER Washington's original motives, authorities currently appear to be looking for a face-saving compromise. The little fight is becoming a large embarrassment. The Chicanos have filed a civil suit against the Department alleging discrimination, and more than 50 senators and congressmen have fired off letters to HUD Secretary James T. Lynn demanding to know why he is picking on nuns and Mexican-Americans. Meanwhile, the Chicanos have collected \$14,000 in donations, and friends of the college have announced they will unleash Joan Baez, a rock group known as the Tower of Power and "practically every major Chicano band in the United States" in a series of fund-raising assaults.

So far McKay is underwhelmed. "It will take a lot more than that," he says, "just to get current. And then they'll have to show us they

have some way of regularly meeting future payments. Frankly speaking, I've done everything I could for them. I even flew out to Oregon and paid for their breakfast one morning, and I couldn't get reimbursed for it either. But in a situation of this kind there has to be a lot of give-and-take, and with these people it's been all take."

In rebuttal Lopez claims that HUD officials seldom answer his letters, and when they do, it is to offer vaguely worded rejections of specific Chicano proposals for a settlement. "We're a different color than what they have been used to dealing with," he says. "We're the untouchables. When they decided to foreclose, they didn't bother to write us. We had to read about it in the newspaper."

So the old ghosts continue to creep between the lines—the shades of indentures past, of injuries remembered. But the situation is more complicated. The College Housing Act was passed in 1950 and scrapped in the late '60s. In the interim it generated more than \$3 billion in dormitory loans to 3,249 colleges. Because a large portion of those loans is still owing, McKay and his tiny staff have become little more than collection agents, nagging and dunning colleges afflicted with large mortgages and small incomes. It is not an enviable job. "We're getting more and more requests for payment postponements," McKay says. "It's becoming very serious and I think it will get worse."

Ultimately, then, it may turn out that the Chicanos are merely in the vanguard of a long parade of colleges marching toward HUD foreclosures—victims regardless of race, curriculum or name. No one has yet suggested forgiveness, though it is probably the only solution and one that should appeal to the Benedictine Sisters. The government could forgive the sisters and the Chicanos their debts, and they could forgive the government its trespasses.

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