

# THE CAMPAIGN PROMISE

BY  
JOSEPH GRANT

**M**anuel Ortiz blotted at the sweat that beaded on his forehead and over his upper lip. Although his upper lip was eclipsed by a thick, black moustache, Manuel Ortiz dabbed anyway, knowing appearances were everything up on the platform where he sat on a creaking metal chair.

It was a good crowd today, he thought to himself. Not like yesterday when Villasosa's people had infiltrated the common good nature of the townspeople and spread their vicious truths. Ortiz was used to the low-down mudslinging, dog-eat-dog world that was politics and he was used to an opponent using half-truths and lies to paint a negative picture, but never had he known his opponent to stoop so low and to be so malevolent as to tarnish his good political name with the truth.

Ortiz patted at his forehead again and looked out over the crowd. These were decent, hard-working people, most of who came out to see the man who paid for their day off from work from the factory and the fields in a celebration of la feria. Ortiz quickly counted the heads as the portly mayor, dressed in the same ill-fitting suit in which he was wed and the very same in which he would one day be buried, cajoled the crowd with his latest tale of political woe under the current Governor of the State of Mexico. Ortiz counted somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred and fifty people before the crowd parted to let a group of burly men through to the front. Ortiz took scant notice of the men and went back to his thoughts of what a deal he had made on this crowd. In this small pueblo, he calculated there were about eighty-five percent present for which he had paid. He was pleased with his return.

Most politicians up on the podium would be organizing their thoughts before speaking to a crowd. Ortiz had no reason to think about what he was going to say, not rehearse his speech or make any change to it. The speech was the same he had given in every desert pueblo only with the name of the town becoming the variable. Otherwise, his speech was as well worn as his battered Oxfords. These were his campaign dark horse, the ones everyone noticed, as he sat along the dais, one leg crossed lengthwise over the knee, affording all who would look; to see the holes in his shoes. People identified with it, Ortiz told his campaign workers. The fact that his shoes, expensive ones at that, had holes in them, showed everyone that he was a man of the people; a man with the common touch. Few people knew or suspected that these were a prop, along with his handkerchief, his glad-handing of the crowd afterwards and most importantly, much of the speech itself. Few knew that the speech was a work of fabrication, not unlike the pair of Manolo Blahniks that awaited him in the air-conditioned car.

Politicians like Ortiz created better fiction than most writers and most writers with their overblown egos and penchants for playing God, made better politicians.

He was not necessarily a great politician, by far, he was not. He possessed the all-important capacity for weaving an intricate and wonderful tapestry of deceptive truths. He promulgated visions of a world that seemed just out of reach to the common man but attainable if only he had their help.

His campaigns were wildly successful, confusing pundits and political foes alike. He always delivered the tangent to his constituents and influential supporters. To all others, he continued 'their crusade', allowing the masses who saw in him 'a beacon of hope in a hopeless

night' as he referred to himself on a number of occasions; to view him as someone reaching for the stars growing ever and ever closer as he grabbed at nothing.

Politics is a fool's game, played to the most gullible by a bigger fool than they. It is only the bigger fool that wins high office; promising the moon to poor peasants and farmers who got burned by the previous day's sun.

The people of this pueblo had not seen such a moon or a land of milk and honey that were routinely promised in such speeches. The workers and fruit pickers that worked this land never saw the moon in the light of day when they baked tasking menially and the only moisture to hit the hard baked land at their feet was the sweat that dripped from their brow. In Ortiz, they saw something that they had not seen in a long time; hope.

"Give us rain," an old farmer yelled in the middle of Ortiz's oratory, interrupting him. Ortiz becoming flustered, lost his place and began to recite the very same words he had spoken twenty minutes before. Some, who had been listening, openly laughed at his awkward sputtering moment.

"Give us rain!" the man repeated. Ortiz now stopped in mid-repetition and smiled.

"Sir, what is it that you want from me?" Ortiz offered his open hands to the crowd, beseeching the elderly man. "I am but a humble politician."

"Rain," the man said simply and rubbed his brown, stubbled chin. His day-old growth was snowy white. "Why don't you give us rain? You're promising everything else up there." He taunted the elegant tool of the right-wing. "We haven't had rain for two months and our crops are near death. It is only with regular trips to the Conchos River that we can have enough water to drink. Our crops are of no use to us if we cannot sustain enough to eat," the man said. "Give us rain and we'll give you your office."

A man grabbed Ortiz's ear on the platform and Ortiz shook his head and waved the man off. As Ortiz touched at the dog-eared speech he always carried in his coat pocket, he felt the familiar perforated edges of La Moda Comunicacion folded next to the speech. Luckily, the way the daily was creased, he espied the weather culled from the national weather service in Mexico City, a thousand miles away.

"I am a humble politician, not God Almighty," he prefaced his next offer of fiction. "But I can tell you that rain will come," Ortiz said as he wiped at the sweat that beaded on his forehead.

"When?" the old man bellowed.

"Tonight," Ortiz told them. His forecast was met with ripples of laughter throughout the crowd. Crowds reminded him of an untamed beast or that of an orphaned child that always needed placating.

"If you're right, Senator Ortiz, you will win the Governor's seat," the old man called out. "But if you're wrong, you'll be hung from the highest tree by morning," to which the sadistic crowd showed its appreciation. This alarmed Ortiz. It wasn't the threat of death that alarmed him but the immediate idea that he could lose his hold over the crowd so quickly, especially for which one he had paid so handsomely. The crowd was less orphaned than beastly, he thought and he wrapped his speech up quickly.

The thought was still with him as he sat in the cool, dark backroom of the bar across the street from his hotel. As he sat and joked with his campaign manager and one advance man out of the two he traveled with, the other having gone ahead to the next town, three silhouettes appeared in the doorway.

One figure bent over the bar and spoke to the bartender, Alejandro. Once he righted himself, the three figures continued on towards the backroom. Ortiz noticed this but went on joking.

His campaign manager noted the look of assignation on the senator's face. He turned and was greeted with the sight of three menacing figures dressed in black suits. One reached

inside his jacket. The campaign manager hit the floor. Ortiz saw this but kept his cool.

“Amigo.” One man spoke in a hoarse whisper.

“Si.” Ortiz nodded again, keeping his wits about him. “Hablo Ingles, por favor.” Ortiz said in case anyone was listening. The man nodded.

“You’ll forgive if my English is no good,” the man said, pulling out a piece of paper. Ortiz nodded and waved his hand. “I am representative of Mayor Villarosa. He asked me to meet you.”

“Go on,” Ortiz said pensively, holding his cards close to the vest.

“The Mayor has business offer for you,” the man said reading from the paper.

“This business proposition...” Ortiz asked slowly. “How much will it cost me?” He glared.

“Your rival, Rivera, is running strong here in this pueblo,” he read in a shaky voice. “The Mayor, he does not like Rivera. Rivera is a crook. He will only pay a small percentage for votes in pueblo. The Mayor wants you to win and can guarantee you the vote.”

“Thank you, Señor,” Ortiz said. “No thank you.”

“You have an eye for the ladies, no?”

The brow on Ortiz’s forehead furrowed and then relaxed. “Some say they have an eye for me.”

“The Mayor has left you a regalo in your hotel room to relax your mind, no?” The man smiled. “A man cannot think on a serious mind.”

Ortiz wondered what the present could be. Given what he knew of the man, it could be money, a girl or a pistol to his head. He looked at the two men behind the first man, similarly sullen and then back at him. “How much will it cost me?”

“One hundred thousand pesos.”

“Forget it, amigo.” Ortiz shook his head and sat back in his chair, determined. “Tell the Mayor that Senator Ortiz is an honest man.”

The man began to chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Ortiz demanded.

“Los siento, Señor.” He smiled. “Your words struck me funny, todo estan. After all, you are the man who promised rain,” he said and leaned in close. “Both you and I know the foolishness of such a promise.”

“Mijo...” Ortiz sat up in his chair and looked straight at the man. He took a sip of his beer and said: “I am a man of my word and if I say it will rain...it will rain.”

“Amigo.” The man returned the look as his face became animated behind his sunglasses. “Even you must admit that you cannot make it rain. Only the Almighty can do that and the last time I heard, the Almighty did not buy his clothes in Mexicali,” he said, disparaging the senator’s suit.

“Senator, permit me,” a second man said, stepping out from behind the first. Ortiz nodded as the man came forth. “You have promised the people of this pueblo rain. Even you must admit that you cannot make one drop of rain fall from the heavens, let alone enough for these farmers’ crops. When they awake tomorrow and see the sun baking the earth dry as it has done since the last harvest, the people, Señor, the voters, they will be very angry. The Mayor has told us three that if you would agree to his generous offer, he can assure you that you will not be hung from the highest limb of the highest tree.”

Ortiz shuddered at the thought. “All right, tell the Mayor I will think about it. Let me sleep on it, amigo.” It was the best decision Ortiz could offer.

The man smiled and held out his hand. “You are very wise to consider Señor Villarosa’s generous offer,” he said and took back his hand when Ortiz didn’t shake it.

“Generous offer.” Ortiz shook his head and waved them off as they began to walk through the alcove to the bar.

The third man stopped and turned and walked back to the table, while the others waited at the bar. "There's one more thing, Señor."

"What is that?"

"Mayor Villarosa is a generous man. We take care of our people. There will be an incentive to accept the mayor's offer. You will see."

Ortiz nodded as the man again walked through the alcove. "What are your thoughts, Miguel, Juan?"

"The deal is lousy. I'd stay away from it," Manuel, his advance man advised.

"I don't know. This will cost us many pesos, but it might be a good investment in the end. We could get that kind of money up with only a few minor problems, but I think we can do it."

"I've heard Villarosa has ties to La 'M,'" his advance man said, speaking of the Mexican mafia, his voice lowering near the end of the statement. "It might be good to avoid it altogether."

Ortiz sat with his head in his hand, his index finger touching the bristles of his moustache. "What you've said is true, but we have forgotten that if it does not rain tomorrow, I will lose this town and therefore, the vote, nomination and election, I'm afraid."

"I say we wait," Miguel spoke up. "The deal is lousy." He shook his head and ran his hand across the table and pounded it with his fist. "I say we wait. Another day won't kill us." He shrugged.

Ortiz glared at him. "If it is true that he is connected, it just may kill us. But I agree, I will do what I told them. I will sleep on it and take my chances in the morning."

"I will see how much money we can get by then," Juan said, still contemplating the raw deal. The two men looked at him. "Just in case it does not rain."

"There's one thing that puzzles me, Manuel."

"What is that, my good friend, Miguel?" Ortiz asked.

"Why did you divert from the speech?" he asked, almost pained. "You've always had the same speech for as long as I've worked for you."

"The words were there, so in essence, it was the same speech."

"I agree. It was eloquent and the part involving the rain was moving. But you changed it," Miguel interrupted. "You always said that speech brought you luck."

"It has brought me luck," Ortiz said confidently.

"Then why change it?" Miguel said. "It may have been bad luck to change it."

"Nonsense." Ortiz waved his hand over the conversation. "Such talk is pointless," he said and stood. "Now, let us return to the room. I'm tired."

"What will you do about the Mayor's shakedown?" Miguel asked pointedly as the three men exited the bar and stepped down onto the cobblestone street.

Ortiz shrugged and walked over to a man who had set up a small taco stand beside the bodega of their hotel across the street. Ortiz peered down at the flesh-colored stones and their octagonal design. These masonry stones were common throughout the region and he saw them in every pueblo they visited.

He studied the man and watched him flip the carne asada and carnitas on a makeshift grill. Errant flies buzzed in and around the bowls of cut-up green cilantro and lettuce, along with the white onions and salsa. He noticed the man looking at him.

"Can you make it rain, Señor?" the man in the blue guayabera shirt asked intently.

Ortiz looked hard at the man. He was a Mayan. He studied the man's hard crag of a sun-baked face and the sweat that beaded as if to cool the man's fiery face. The man was pleasant and despite a few missing teeth, the man seemed happy in his work.

Ortiz had not been exposed to this level of poverty until he traveled beyond his father's house during his first campaign. Until then, poverty was what read about in the papers.

"If I, Senator Manuel Ortiz, said it was going to rain..." he said, puffing his chest out and raising his index finger. "Then it will rain."

"God bless you, Señor Ortiz." The man smiled and handed him a couple of freshly made tacos.

"No, Señor." Ortiz begged off, knowing the man needed the money.

"Please, I implore you." He offered.

Ortiz thanked the man and walked across the street to see what gift the mayor had left in his room. Ortiz looked back as he walked and noticed his aide rush back to give the old man some pesos so as not to show impropriety.

Sure enough, back in the room there was an incentive for Ortiz to take the Mayor's offer. It came in the form of a luscious, young woman waiting on one of the beds. Ortiz nodded at his two aides and the two men left the room immediately in search of their own incentives in the hotel bar. Ortiz thought to himself about how generous of a man the Mayor was, but he still could not bring himself to buy his way into this or any future election. He prided himself on how he hadn't bought an election in years. He would at least give the Mayor the respect he had earned and accept this token of their new friendship. He wouldn't, however, become a pawn of the Mayor or he said, to himself, as he removed his shirt.

After many hours of sweaty lovemaking, Ortiz stirred from his dreams. He looked at the girl. She was sleeping soundly, he noted. Why wouldn't she be, he asked himself, he had shown her an intense night. His eyes ran across the shadows on the wall.

As he lay there in the darkness, a strange sound filled his ears. It sounded as if a giant hissing snake slithered slowly past the window. He jumped from where he lay and darted to the window. He opened the wooden shutters. It was raining. But more than that, it was pouring! Ortiz let out a victorious laugh, waking the girl who gave him a dirty look and pulled the covers over her head.

Ortiz celebrated by telling the girl to gather her clothing and get the hell out. The election was now certainly his, even the Mayor could not control the weather or the outcome of the election, he sang to himself. Plus, if they were going to hang him for no rain, they may vote the Mayor out of office and himself in, he joked to himself.

He breathed in the cool, wet air that cascaded as a mist into the room. One hundred thousand pesos, he roared. One thousand pesos my ass! He laughed.

The Mayor, it turned out, was the one who had the last laugh. It was true that Ortiz won the election, but the amount of rain nearly ruined the crops that were left. He won the election because the people feared him and thought he could control the weather. The story somehow leaked out of the Mayor's office of Ortiz's dalliance with the girl and the ensuing scandal of the underage girl who declared that Ortiz was the father of the baby she now carried in her womb nearly cost him that victory. In hindsight, Ortiz may well have been wise to accept the Mayor's initial offer. The price to fix the election had indeed been a con, one that the Mayor freely admitted in a closed door meeting with Ortiz. Villarosa informed Ortiz he had planned to take him for one hundred and fifty thousand pesos, but charge his opponent two hundred thousand pesos. The trouble was that his opponent couldn't come up with the cash. Enter the young girl who was the niece of the man who ran the taco stand outside the bar. There was only the concept of the man being handsomely paid for by signaling Villarosa's people on whether or not Ortiz had taken the bait. The initial plan was to have Ortiz get caught red-faced and red-handed with an underage girl who would be untouched and he would therefore have to pay for what was only an implication.

The trouble was that when Ortiz's advance men, Miguel and Juan went to the hotel bar, they discovered it was closed and the bar across the street and remembered the friendly taco vendor and invited him for a few drinks.

It was only an added extra that the girl had gotten pregnant by Ortiz and once the girl

began to show and make noise in the local papers did the offer from the Mayor triple in price. He could take care of the problem, he assured Ortiz. As Ortiz sweated in his office, both men knew that he was looking at the twilight of his once sunny political career. Ortiz could only hope the Mayor had enough pull to keep him out of jail. He knew that the Mayor finally had him where he wanted him. It would be tough to keep Ortiz from getting vilified in the national press, but the Mayor had enough pull with the local papers and had many political allies who would kill the story. The Mayor had as many enemies, but fortunately, like Ortiz, these were enemies he also controlled.

The Mayor had plans for Ortiz and with Ortiz leading in the polls; it was only a matter of time, luck and money to be spent. The Mayor would do well with an ally in the Governor's seat, he smiled to himself and besides, he had Ortiz in his pocket.

In that small, cramped office, Ortiz could only wonder to himself why he had suffered such a lapse in judgment as to sleep with the girl. He wasn't drunk and he wasn't stupid. He was full of hubris. The papers were too, he thought to himself. It was a mystery to him where they got the information. Each day they were bursting with even more wilder stories than the day before, telling of how the senator had been drunk and violated the poor, defenseless girl when no such thing happened. In sating the public's thirst for the up-to-the-minute pabulum, this deepening scandal would reveal in tomorrow morning's papers that the girl was also a prostitute.

As Ortiz sat a disconsolate pawn in the Mayor's office, the Mayor paraded smugly about and lectured him. Unbeknownst to Ortiz, the Mayor himself fed the latest story to the reporters he had on the payroll, twenty minutes before Ortiz arrived. As the Mayor railed on, Ortiz wondered how he had gone to bed with a nubile, young woman and awoke with the oldest trick in the book, orchestrated by a man more corrupt than himself. Politics, he said sighing to himself, did indeed make strange bedfellows.

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