

ORANGE COUNTY

# Los Angeles Times

## O.C. Fund-Raiser Seen as Rising Influence in GOP

■ **Politics:** Ron Cedillos has gone from neophyte to someone who is being mentioned for the U.S. Cabinet.

By DAVE LESHER  
TIMES POLITICAL WRITER

In the last scene of the movie, actor Ron Cedillos is a Texas lawman-gone-bad, perched on a split-rail fence and gulping from a bottle of whiskey.

Across the horse corral, karate hero Chuck Norris finally appears, already bloodied from his fist-and-foot-flying destruction of a whole town, and now, ready to face Texas City's last bad guy.

"Drink, trucker?" asks Deputy Boles, Cedillos' character in the 1977 film "Breaker, Breaker."

In real life, Cedillos is a champion karate expert who sparred with Norris long before the face-kicking action movies became popular. But

this time, Deputy Boles gets a thorough beating—in slow motion, to violin music.

Today, Cedillos is the one taking bows, not punches.

At just 29, the Huntington Beach resident left Hollywood to buy an aerospace company in Long Beach, which he built into a successful, medium-size industry subcontractor. But now, at age 41, his most recent critical reviews are from Sacramento and Washington where major Republican leaders are showering this prolific fundraiser and political newcomer with flattery and power.

And last week, he was mentioned as possibly the next U.S. secretary of commerce.

Until 1988, Cedillos had never followed politics, let alone participated in it. But that year, with all the single-mindedness of an ex-athlete and entrepreneur, he went to work raising money for Pete Wilson's U.S. Senate campaign by tapping a lucrative network of professionals who, like himself, had previously paid little attention to politics.

Cedillos is working to use his new access to the seats of power to advocate a better regulatory climate for California business, particularly in his own troubled aerospace industry. At the same time, he is being recognized by top government leaders as a rising influence within the Republican Party.

Last summer, Gov. Wilson asked Cedillos to run for vice chairman of the state Republican Party, touching off a brief skirmish among the ranks that led to Cedillos' withdrawal. In August, Wilson appointed Cedillos to the California State University Board of Trustees.

Last week, Cedillos' name was floated by Washington columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak as a possible Cabinet appointment, replacing Commerce Secretary Robert A. Mosbacher. Mosbacher has not resigned yet, but he is expected to quit soon so that he can run Bush's 1992 reelection campaign.

Washington officials and sources could not confirm that Cedillos is under consideration by the White House, but the columnists said the self-taught businessman filled two important criteria sought by the president: he is Latino and he is from California.

The Washington rumor has started another round of questioning with which Cedillos is, by now, familiar. Essentially, the question is: Who is this guy?

Part of the reason Cedillos triggered a negative reaction with his application for party vice chairman was that some senior GOP leaders were offended by the gall of this relative neophyte who had hardly met an elected official before 1988.



Ron Cedillos

And in May, when Cedillos tried to organize a major meeting between the governor and top leaders of the aerospace industry, he was met with some incredulous looks by Fortune 100 executives who were asked to trust their companies to a virtual unknown. But as a result of the meeting, Cedillos formed a coalition of aerospace interests.

Continued

## Continued

But that has become Cedillos' trademark. Just like the celluloid Chuck Norris, Cedillos is the outsider who marches into a boardroom filled with some of the nation's toughest and most powerful pin stripes.

In the past year, "he's gone from somebody you've never heard of . . . to somebody who has, certainly to a degree, been embraced," said Skip Anderson, director of the B-2 program for Northrop.

"I think the time was right for a Ron Cedillos to step in," Anderson said. "We were all competing with one another and, I guess, felt that

we were such a part of the national fabric that things would go on forever. Obviously, things are changing."

In the president's office at Cedillos Testing Co., one wall is filled with pictures of the former karate champ posing with presidents, governors, senators and congressmen. Along the other wall are dozens of the jet plane models reflecting the wide variety of aircraft his company has worked on, including the space shuttle.

Cedillos' company in a warehouse on a cul-de-sac in North Long Beach is usually hired by aircraft builders to test the integrity of their structural components with machines which, among other things, perform X-rays and inject dyes into metal.

In his office, Cedillos sits on an overstuffed gray couch with all the restraint of a Corvette at a stop light. He is adamant that his audience understands his point and, for emphasis, he reaches out a monogrammed shirt-sleeve and taps his listener's knee.

It does not take long to understand why Cedillos' friends say he does not do anything lightly. This is not a man who would enjoy a passive sport such as watching tennis or baseball. Even on Super Bowl Sunday, Cedillos said he will not be found watching football.

"Being a voyeur doesn't do anything for me," he said. "If I can't participate, I don't want to do it."

Instead, Cedillos said, he has translated the emotional energy and the disciplined concentration from his karate training into his business, where he has found "a greater thrill of competition than fighting in the ring."

"The marketplace is unequivocal," he said. "If you do it wrong, it will take you out."

Politics was another challenge. But while he was interested in joining the process, he was not sure how to do it. It started when he contacted Wilson's Senate campaign and offered to help raise money. They accepted, but one Wilson insider said nobody knew what to expect.

"He just decided he wanted to be a player," the source said. "He appeared on the scene . . . [and] nobody knew who this guy was."

Within just a few months of his first political contact, Cedillos hosted Vice President Dan Quayle at his company headquarters in a midday fund-raiser for Wilson that drew more than 800 paying guests.

Cedillos said he could not estimate how much money he has raised for Wilson, but one source estimated he is responsible for several hundred thousand dollars.

"Most bright, achievement-oriented people would like to participate in the process," Cedillos said. "But most people don't know how to enter it at a level commensurate with their abilities."

One of the most curious aspects of Cedillos is his choice of beneficiaries. As the Republican Party has become increasingly split between its moderate and conservative wings, Cedillos' alliance has fallen on both sides.

Mainly, Cedillos says the reason is that he is not interested in social issues such as abortion and gay rights that have driven the sharpest wedge between Republican colleagues. His own litmus test for supporting a candidate, he said, is based on personality and support for the business community.

"I look for people who can get things done," he said. "My big political issue is economic stability and prosperity."

Cedillos personally has donated to only a handful of state and federal officials, including state Sens. John R. Lewis (R-Orange) and Edward R. Royce (R-Anaheim), two of Wilson's critics. Besides Wilson, the only other candidate for whom he has worked the telephones to raise money is conservative Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Long Beach). He also said he plans to help Bush's reelection campaign next year.

As a fund-raiser and an advocate for the aerospace business, Cedillos also was caught up in a scandal last year when Sen. Albert Gore Jr. (D-Tenn.) charged that Wilson tried to amend legislation that would benefit Cedillos' business.

Specifically, the amendment—which was suggested by Cedillos—would have required manufacturers of aircraft bolts to have their products tested by an outside laboratory, to stem the rising number of bogus and unsafe fasteners.

Cedillos says today that he was acting in response to a major problem in the business, and he emphatically denies that his company would have benefited from the legislation. He said his company does not test bolts and, in a letter to The Times, he insisted he would never do such tests in the future.