Chit Chat Club
William Coblentz
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First, an apology. The tide of work has kept me away from this group - and others - far too long. I apologize. I regret, on a personal, selfish basis, my absence from stimulating, thoughtful friends with whom I share a sense of intellectual curiosity.

I always approach my task as an essayist with trepidation. For to me, the ultimate standard is the essays of Frank Sloss. With clarity, thoughtfulness, erudition he, in my opinion, has no peer - but here I am, so let us begin.

My essay begins in the Fall of 1985 with an invitation from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, an independent, non-profit organization, to join with 10 others to journey to Honduras, Salvador and Nicaragua. The group was composed equally of Democrats and Republicans, including Congressmen Vic Fazio, Democrat from Sacramento and William Lowery, Republican from San Diego. Among those from Northern California were Democratic Committeewoman, Nancy Pelosi; Pollster, Mervin Field; Newspaper Publisher, James McClatchy; Attorney, Vigo Nielsen; Scholar, Gloria Duffy; and Columbia Foundation Executive, Susan Silk - a knowledgeable vocal group with definite ideas.

The fact-finding trip consumed 8 full days with 38 meetings. These ranged from visiting a refugee camp and meeting the contras in Honduras to church leaders, U.S. ambassadors, human rights organizations, opposition parties, peasants or campesinos, repre-

sentatives of the U.S. and local press, businessmen and armed forces, prison inmates, war victims and, lastly, Presidents Duarte of Salvador and Ortega of Nicaragua.

If you come to Nicaragua or El Savador with preconceived conclusions, you could have them confirmed - if that's what you were looking for. If you come, as most of us did, without too much background and no conclusions - then take your choice - the revolution in Nicaragua has or has not succeeded and U.S. policy in both Salvador and Nicaragua is or is not the correct course.

Yet, in Nicaragua when the age of the president is 36 and the commandant of a militia force of over 6,000 soldiers 29, perhaps it is not too presumptuous to reach a conclusion.

Managua, the Nicaraguan capital, is littered with propaganda signs decrying U.S. aggression and exhorting patriotic efforts. The city was devastated in 1972 by an earthquake with the loss of 50,000 lives. The Somoza dictatorship took most U.S. aid for private gain and did little to repair the damage. Eight-story hulks of shattered buildings dot the landscape and it resembles Hiroshima after the bomb or our own Yerba Buena project in its present state.

The government bars the Catholic-run radio station from broadcasting mass, and the station must submit its script to the government censors for approval.

The government, which includes four priests whom the Vatican

bars from priestly functions, is promoting a popular church which is either a second Reformation or a transparent effort to diminish the influence of the church - take your choice!

There are even some political arrests in Nicaragua, although an international commission grudgingly says torture is less widespread than might be expected. That is cold comfort to a civil libertarian, but a fact of life so long as the Sandinista government is under seige. When we asked President Ortega about this, he launched into a diatribe about the U.S. and the bombing of M.O.V.E. protesters in Philadelphia and being polite guests of his country, we didn't press it further although Congressman Fazio told Ortega that while there were wrongs in our country, we did admit to them, our press at least printed them, and we even tried to correct them.

Our meeting with President Ortega was lengthy and full of criticism of the U.S. Six of us met with him while the others visited the "battle front." The President was accompanied by his Deputy Foreign Minister, Nora Astorga, an attractive woman elegantly attired in white tailored slacks and high heels who chain smoked from a gold cigarette holder. Chip Nielsen of our group who had backgrounded himself in persons and places informed me she had been designated to be the ambassador to the U.S. but Washington had turned her down. She is now the Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United Nations. It seems that during the Somoza

regime she enticed one of the generals to her apartment and he was exterminated by the Sandinistas. She did indeed seem well qualified for am ambassadorial post.

There is still a substantial middle class in Nicaragua and the feeling is they will not be wiped out; on the contrary, they will demand economic progress and Nicaragua will probably maintain a mixed economy, more like Yugoslavia than Cuba.

We found no one who believes Nicaraguans are even close to rising up against the Sandinistas. They might accept a change if the contras won but many would bitterly oppose the leaders that associated with the Somoza regime.

With the covert U.S. aid the counter-revolutionaries have reached formidable proportions and become more aggressive. Yet recent evidence is that the Sandinista army is more than their match - and more military pressure can only increase reliance on the Soviet Union.

If that is true, then this administration's hostility to the Sandinistas is a policy doomed to failure. The innocent lives that are lost at the hands of the contras will postpone the time when Americans - even democrats in Nicaragua - can play a more constructive role.

With this brief background, let me be presumptuous to make a conclusion: No matter how one views the Sandinistas, the policy of aiding the contras is nonsensical - bloody and futile.

There is no way the contras (whether you call them freedom fighters or cutthroat mercenaries) can defeat the rapidly modernizing armed forces of Nicaragua. In asserting otherwise, the CIA and/or Defense Department are indulging in the same kind of wishful thinking that perhaps led them to assure President John F. Kennedy that landing a 1,200 man force against a Cuban army of 200,000 would precipitate a popular insurrection against Fidel Castro. The result was the Bay of Pigs.

Our country is not very good at achieving its military objectives through surrogates. We failed in Cuba and again in Vietnam. Providing military aid to a feeble counter-revolutionary army such as the contras will only result in another failure. Surely one of the clearest lessons of recent decades is that the overthrow of established regimes requires direct military intervention by American forces. That's how we won Grenada and postponed defeat in Vietnam.

This is a truth of the most "tough-minded," "realistic" and "pragmatic" kind - terms that are used in Nicaragua, as elsewhere to disguise a wistfully impotent foreign policy.

What is American interest in Nicaragua? The answer is illusive for it must encompass the immediate "crisis" in that small country as well as our relationship to the future direction of the entire Hemisphere. First, and most immediate, our interest is to prevent the extension of Soviet power to Central America.

Second, and more profoundly significant is to stimulate and help reformist democratic forces throughout Latin America to create governments devoted to the popular well-being - the essential foundation of a Hemisphere whose ties to the United States would be maintained not by force but by consistency with the values and beliefs of our own country. Some say that policy perished in Dallas, on November 22, 1963.

In the long run, these two objectives are totally consistent. They may also be in harmony in the short run - and in Nicaragua certainly it demands a try.

One should not underestimate the potential harm of a Soviet dominated base in Central America. It would bring the cold war - in its hottest form - to the American mainland, aggravating the hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union, feeding the sense of danger that fuels the growing militarization of American society and diverts our attention and resources from our own problems.

There are at least two ways to prevent this unhappy outcome neither of which our government is willing to take.

First, is the traditional method - invasion and conquest. But military action undoubtedly would be prolonged, bloody and destructive of the very country we purport to rescue, and cause serious damage to our other relationships in Latin America. It is to be avoided; not at any cost, but at almost any cost.

The second route is negotiations - we tango together - the United States, the Contradora nations, Mexico, Venezuela, Columbia and Panama. But as the New York Times so aptly put it, "It takes two to Contradora." The premise of this position is to accept the fact that we are not injured by a government that calls itself Marxist or socialist. How the Nicaraguans choose to run their country is not our concern. The current leadership of that country does not want to be anyone's puppet. Marxists they may be. Nationalists they most certainly are. Moreover, the people of Nicaragua are Roman Catholic in faith and Western in culture. The United States, not far-off Soviet Union, is their natural partner.

The "facts" if that is what you call them, provide the realistic terms of negotiation. We should demand an end to the Soviet-Cuban military presence in Nicaragua and to any Sandinista activity that helps or stimulates revolution in other countries. In return, we would call off the contras and resume trade and assistance to build a truly independent Nicaragua.

An agreement such as this could not rest on blind trust. Violation would be difficult to conceal. It is in our self- interest. And it is in the interest of the Sandinistas whose only alternative is continued civil strife and perhaps American invasion.

The unfortunate aspects of all this is that the Administra-

tion in Washington is "divided" about how to achieve this peace in Nicaragua. The Pentagon and the CIA are at odds with Ambassador Habib and the State Department. Let us, for simplicity, state there are two factions within the Administration. The "war party" which seeks not only to stop the Sandinistas from threatening their neighbors and aligning with the Soviet bloc, but also to loosen their hold on Nicaragua itself. Though based in the Pentagon, the war party would make war only with a CIA-run army of Nicaraguan exiles, the contras, so that America will not be sucked into another Vietnam.

The other factor could be called "diplomatic detachment" looking to offer the Sandinistas a deal that would grudgingly let them pursue their leftist revolution if they send their Cuban advisors packing, reduce their army and forswear meddling in other Central American countries. They would use the contra army as a bargaining chip to be disbanded in negotiations.

Where does the President stand? For "no more Vietnams, no more Cubas." With a war he can't win and negotiations he can't abide. The contras will fight, the diplomats talk, to no discernible end.

The Contradora nations propose disbanding the contras, reducing Nicaragua's army and chasing all foreign military advisers, American and Soviet bloc, from the signatory countries - Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. It

would challenge them all to become more democratic but would concentrate international verifications on military provisions.

The war party says the Sandinistas are sure to cheat. The diplomatic faction wants a treaty promise that the Sandinistas will let the contras back into Nicaragua politics. Ambassador Habib wants to pursue the Contradora military de-escalation. Contradora remains the wisest way out and the best of a bad deal, if anyone still cares for the suffering people of Nicaragua.

Salvador is a country under seige. This is apparent with the large number of soldiers at the airport and the bullet-proofed vans with armed guards supplied us by the U.S. Embassy. In fact, the mark of affluence is not a Mercedes or Rolls Royce, but an armed Cherokee.

President Duarte, a graduate of Notre Dame, is a superb politician. He is articulate with a sense of humor who can also be most candid, especially when he admits the military is still in charge in Salvador. Duarte walks a tightrope between the left and the right and he needs and merits our full support. U.S. backed build-up of military forces, human rights reform and the electoral triumphs of Duarte have at least calmed the turmoil that beset this country as recently as 18 months ago. As a sign of the state of the country, there is in large lettering outside the presidential palace a notice to all to check their guns before entering.

Salvador's economy is in shambles with at least 50% unemployment and a justice system that is a sham with both judges and witnesses thoroughly terrorized. Who would want to be a member of the judiciary when you are offered no protection and receive a monthly salary of $400? No wonder some of the judges have either "retired" or gone to Mexico.

One experienced participant noted, "Justice in El Salvador is a rabid dog that only bites those who have no shoes."

For example, at dawn on February 23, 1983, three large trucks filled with 200 uniformed soldiers sped into Las Hojas, a farming cooperative 45 miles west of the Capital run by the National Association of Indigenous Salvadorans (AMS) and dragged away seven people. Later they were found sprawled alongside the banks of a nearby river with their thumbs tied behind their back. Eleven peasants from neighboring villages were lying with them. All had been shot repeatedly in the head.

On a rainy day we met at the cooperative with their president, Adrian Esquino Lisco, who told us that 74 villagers were killed at various sites outside the village that day in February, but that only 18 deaths were recorded by the judge. "We ask for justice for those who died," Esquino said. "Justice, nothing more." The Las Hojas massacre is one of the best documented instances of army involvement in human rights violations in Salvador. The main points of Mr. Esquino's account have been sup-

ported by investigators from the U.S. Embassy and the official Human Rights Commission. President Duarte has made this massacre one of six human rights cases to be investigated by a special human rights commission he set up to show such indiscriminate killings would no longer be tolerated in El Salvador, but movement in all this has been slow. It was not until May of 1985 when Mr. Duarte's Christian Democratic Party won control of the National Assembly that he could oust the rightest Attorney General who had obstructed legislation to change the judicial system. The former right-wing majority had also held up changes in the legal system. Not a single military officer has ever been convicted of a human rights violation and much of Mr. Duarte's future not only in El Salvador but in Congress depends upon what progress has been made.

The most dramatic symbols of power and purpose continue to be the embattled, fortress-like U.S. Embassy and the tomb of assassinated Archbishop Romero in the National Cathedral. Most commentators see Salvadoran politics being dictated for the most part by the U.S. Embassy with multiple splits within the power structure. Duarte's standing has slipped considerably since the negotiations for the return of his kidnapped daughter. Military hardliners like Generals Bustello and Ochoa saw Duarte's willingness to negotiate with the rebels as tantamount to treason. They represent a potent internal force opposing any further steps

toward dialogue.

The press is alleged to be uncensored but most newspapers of the left and even the center have already been bombed out of existence. The survivors are for the most part to the right of Duarte. They publish very few copies of each edition, reproduce government press releases, and print a smattering of international news, marriages and obituaries and a large number of paid political advertisements - the only way in which critical view points, mostly from the right, are expressed.

In the countryside, community development workers and church people report pervasive fear among the peasantry. The ordinary process by which leadership emerges in community development is stunted. No one will volunteer. The military views even harmless community improvement projects with suspicion. One project - a plan to organize a committee to repair a water pump - was abandoned when the local commanders insisted on a list of all the persons taking part in the project. Cooperatives, no matter what their activity, are considered subversive.

The future is not encouraging. While the war within the country is described as a stalemate - it is more a dynamic game in which each side has ever greater power to do damage without sufficient force to win. The bottom line of the U.S. policy first established during the last years of the Carter Administration is to do anything that is necessary to head off victory by

the left. There is hostility toward any genuine dialogue that might result in the incorporation into the government of some or all elements of the FLMN, an idea that is clearly anathema in spite of the lip service paid to it. The most logical scenario seems to be an interminable war of attrition paid for with American dollars and Salvadoran deaths.