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Yale-UN Oral History Project

Alejandro Bendaña
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
July 29, 1997
Managua, Nicaragua

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Interview with Alejandro B^endaña

Interviewer: James S. Sutterlin

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James Sutterlin: I would actually like to begin our discussion, our interview, on what one might call foreign relations, because the holding of the elections in Nicaragua was obviously a major element in the Central American peace process. Could you give your understanding of what led up to the decision on the part of the Ortega government to go ahead with the elections? To what extent was the Contadora process important?

Alejandro B^endaña: Technically speaking, the elections were constitutionally prescribed. There were elections held in 1984, so these were not the first elections under the Sandinista government. And under the terms of the Constitution, elections were to take place in 1990, in November of 1990. Two factors made the elections extraordinary. The first was that they were brought forward from November to February. And secondly, that there were very important modifications of the electoral law, including the whole regime of political groupings. This, in a sense, was part of a package of concessions, you might say, that took place within the framework of the Esquipulas peace process. Now, there were two stages to the peace process. One is the one known as Contadora, which begins in January 1983. They did an extraordinary amount of work, the members of the Contadora, in trying to avert the regionalization of the war. Everything has to do with the

war. The war, which as Contadora and most of the Latin American community viewed it, turned into an effort directed by the Central Intelligence Agency to be rid of the Nicaraguan revolution and to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. This would of course have been in violation of international law and in violation of what were the Boland amendments.

What this meant was that the Nicaraguan war was never quite a civil war, nor was it a full-fledged international war. The *contra* camps were in Honduras under Honduran protection, under Honduran army sustenance with a lot of funds going into them. The contras could penetrate, could come in, they would never and weren't ever able to take a major city or a major town.

The danger was (and this is where Contadora comes into being) that in defense of Nicaragua, the army was tempted to go over the border. And if you went over the border that meant a regional conflagration, and in fact the border was crossed a number of times. And at a certain point, the 82nd Airborne was called out, and when the Honduran President was told by the American Ambassador to request assistance because his country was being invaded, the Hondurans really didn't know about it.

Contadora suffers from the fact that there are four dimensions to the problem. One is the internal Nicaraguan dimension that is the Sandinista government and its armed opposition. The second one is the Honduran-Nicaraguan, and to a lesser extent, Nicaraguan-Salvadorean dispute, on account of Salvadorean and Honduran territory being used as a base of aggression against Nicaragua. You could add a third one, which was the Nicaraguan support for the rebels in El Salvador. And then there was, well, the fourth one: direct United States and Cuban involvement in the conflicts. So you could break it

down into four aspects. The Contadora process had difficulties juggling all four, because the tendency of the right and of the United States was to say that this is simply an internal Nicaraguan problem. If the Nicaraguans just concede to their [U.S.-backed] "opposition" everything will be fine. The thing is that before 1986, and this is claimed as the failure of the Contadora process, the United States simply refused to countenance an internal civic political settlement in Nicaragua. It believed that it could break the Sandinista regime. Hence, when you have the elections in 1984, American policy was that there should be no active civic opposition, something that was to vary dramatically in the 1990s. That is to say, the principal candidates were dissuaded from participating, and all this is documented, so as to not undermine the armed *contra* opposition. The main U.S.-salaried political leaders, like Calero, Cesar, and others would give the Contras a civic facade as members of the leadership of the Nicaraguan resistance. So, it was sort of an inconvenience to the United States to have a civic opposition which would have given Nicaragua the semblance of being a democracy, because in Oliver North's terms, we were simply a Soviet satellite. But a "Soviet satellite" that had opposition newspapers, that had 18 different parties, that had a whole series of things that simply don't fit in, especially a Constitution which looked more like the constitution of Costa Rica than that of Cuba. By this time, the Reagan administration was emotionally, morally, fully committed to its "freedom fighters." So Contadora ran up against this. The Nicaraguan government's position was, "Yes, we can talk to our neighbors; no, we won't talk to the *contras*, we want to talk to the people who are directing the *contras* and those are the people in Washington." And for a time, right before 1984, there was a previous lapse in the U.S.-Nicaraguan high-level dialogue, known as the Manzanillo talks, but as is shown in books

that have been written about it, this took place not with a Washington view toward settlement, but in order to appease what was a very strong Congressional opposition.

So, there are three sides in this matter. There were not only Nicaragua and the Central Americans, but also the whole Congressional and public-opinion dimension, which weighed very, very heavily. And, to the point, as you know, of leading the Reagan administration to countenance outright illegality, Iran-Contra, etc., in defiance of what was the public will and the public law. So, the 1984 elections did take place, but they were weakened because the principal opposition candidates had been heavily pressured by the U.S. to withdraw, not to participate. So, they were called "Soviet sham elections," even though by historical standards, or Central American standards, they weren't that bad. What happened, therefore, was that the 1984 elections, although won internally, were lost externally. That is to say, the United States campaigned, and charges of reckless accusations, of campaign harassment, pushed the line that this was not a free election, and so denying the very international legitimacy that Nicaragua needed. The battle in Western public opinion was absolutely crucial to one small nation that was trying to defend its sovereignty, because we weren't going to win a major military conflict with the U.S. and wanted to avert it. This real battle was in public opinion and in Congress, and with the Europeans. The 1984 elections did not achieve that external legitimacy that we would have wanted.

The economic situation continued to deteriorate; it deteriorated very, very fast. The military situation was more or less in hand. But the economic situation was running out of control. The embargo was in place; there were sabotages. With Perestroika the oil-flow problem began to get more serious. And this began to open up a new space for a

new possibility. Whereas Contadora had been there, sort of a guarantor so that the five Central American nations could talk amongst each other, because there were also bases in Costa Rica, and within the Central American context, we had a four-against-one situation. Contadora served as a counter-weight, and especially as a counter-weight toward the United States. The one time that the Contadora countries did try to involve the United States to allow the peace process to work, that is to say by ending support, or suspending support for the *contras*, George Shultz privately told them to mind their own business and that this was his backyard.

By 1987, conditions were beginning to change. There was a coming change in administration in Washington, the Nicaraguan economy was deteriorating rapidly at that point, so that new conditions, new opportunities began to open up. There was the initiation of the new dialogue with Gorbachev, with the illusion that all regional conflicts could be solved by way of a Washington-Moscow dialogue. Bush has a rather different outlook, and Baker, as you know, made it a first priority to get the Central American issue off his back because it hampered a whole series of initiatives. This was the opportunity that someone like Oscar Arias was able to see. Now Arias is not the genius he is made out to be, but he simply picked up where Contadora left off, and he picked up also on something that Vinicio Cerezo, the President of Guatemala, had begun, in an Esquipulas conference, in 1986. For the first time for some quirky reason, the five Central American presidents had actually met on their own, although it was for some ceremonial "Central American Parliament," or something of that nature. Contadora says, "This is fine, this what we have been working for so that the Central Americans will talk among themselves." Arias began to put forward a plan, and I think his principal claim to fame is

the fact that when the United States got wind of the plan, calling for the disarmament and demobilization of armed contingents, along with amnesties, Elliot Abrams hit the ceiling and tried to get a change. Much to Arias' credit, and much to the political intelligence of the Nobel Prize committee, they gave Arias support, giving him the prize and boost to allow the possibility of pushing forth a plan which *might* be acceptable to the Nicaraguans, and might be acceptable to the Hondurans, because they weren't happy with it either. So, there's a whole series of stories of how, during the negotiations, the U.S. Ambassador and the others had Reagan on the line, trying to get the whole thing sabotaged, and at a certain point the five Central American presidents just had to shut themselves off in a room with no advisers there, nobody taking phone calls, especially from Washington, until they hammered out a document called the Esquipulas II, or the Arias plan.

The essence of the Arias plan was there was something for everyone in it. This was for all the five nations and, even though the Costa Ricans didn't have much of a problem with the Hondurans, it was valid for Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. You can trace the initiation of the internal dialogues to this effort even though each one went on their own dynamic, culminating in different forms. Even if it was a "package settlement" of agreements for each of the nations to take, it was really addressed at Nicaragua. It wasn't a peace plan for Nicaragua, it was a peace plan for the region.

In a nutshell, what the Arias peace plan calls for is for countries to broaden political liberties, offer amnesties, offer guarantees, reform legislation, freedom of the press, on the one hand. And on the other hand, an ending of support for external insurgencies, which was sort of aimed at Cuba, but more than Cuba at the United States.

So that the insurgencies would, in the light of the new political space, not really have the room for fighting, and therefore there would be a reconciliation process in each country, National Reconciliation Commissions to be set up in the each country, and the beginnings of an internal dialog. Well, all this was difficult because it was a stumbling block, not only for Nicaragua but also for El Salvador, to accept the belligerency of the *contras* of FMLN as such. Whereas before we had been saying we don't talk to the monkeys but to the zookeepers, now we were going to have to talk to the monkeys. In that sense, there was the question of whether to ask for an amnesty first and then talk about a cease-fire, or a cease-fire first and then political guarantees. That went back and forth.

But at the subsequent summits, two things were linked in, by this time more directly and more specifically in terms of Nicaragua. One was to bring toward the electoral timetable, and to link this with demobilization and disarmament of the *contras*. Supposedly these were going to be parallel tracks, so that elections would be held with the country at peace, with the *contras* demobilized. The election would be their guarantee that whatever they had been fighting for, civil liberties would have materialized. New open electoral rules also negotiated prior to the August 1989 summit in Tela, Honduras. There was a pre-Tela summit in Managua with all the parties – a new electoral framework was devised which was unprecedented, by most standards, even more liberal than that of the United States, of allowing foreign financing for the parties, giving a series of facilities and just opening the door wide open for external support. It may have tilted the field not only against the Sandinistas, but we didn't suspect that then. The hope was that the consensus reached between the Sandinista government and the entire spectrum of internal, legal political parties would then go to Tela to demand *contra* demobilization.

The CIAV President signed on to that and said, “Yes there must be a plan to demobilize the *contras*, to disarm the *contras*, and give them the guarantees.” That’s when we began to think of where the United Nations involvement would take place, what form it could take...

JS: One point that you are getting very close to: the advantage for the Sandinista government, as they saw it at this point, was this also the possibility of getting rid of the *contras*?

AB: Incorporating the *contras* as a political force, for them to become a political movement, for them to cease to be an armed force...

JS: ...and to being about an end to the U.S. support of the *contras*...

AB: Right. One was linked to the other. If all the Nicaraguan political parties, if all the CIAV presidents called on the *contras* to disarm, then this was a call on the Administration or Congress too. By this time, we felt our flexibility would be welcomed in the U.S. Congress. Remember that Jim Wright was very much involved in all of this, and he knows what’s going on step by step, briefed by Arias and ourselves. So, it was a sort of triangular diplomacy going on there. So that the moment that these things are announced, they are communicated to Congress, which then tells the Administration, “Everything we have been asking for has been given, and so what excuse can there be for continuing to provide ‘humanitarian aid,’ or trying to overthrow the Sandinistas.” With

no aid for the *contra* soldiers to be able to return under a United Nations plan, this is where the first thought comes up of the CIAV. They would be the ones to collect arms, to offer guarantees along with UNHCR, support integration, etc, that they needed to rebuild and rehabilitate themselves, including facilities to become a political party and participate in the elections.

So that in the end, what happened was that the elections were held and the *contras* never demobilized. One of the most difficult decisions that had to be made in those months by the Sandinista government was whether to go ahead with the elections in the light of the renegeing on the commitment to demobilize. That is to say, demobilization did not precede elections. The United States was dishonest, hedging its bets on the question of a possible Sandinista electoral victory: keep the armed pressure on. We will never know the answer, but there were a lot of people betting that if the Sandinista won, the State Department, to begin to repeat the 1984 episode, would denounce the whole February 25, 1990, election as a fraud. Evidently a lot of people expected the Sandinistas to win. The big shock to many, including ourselves, was that they lost.

JS: Let me ask you in this connection, did the incorporation of the United Nations in the plan in the form of CIAV and ONUCA, have any importance for you at this point, because in effect the United States had agreed to these ... which meant the resistance couldn't come across the board. So my question is, did the United Nations seek to give you some kind of a guarantee that in the end the commission would support?

AB: Yes, but let's go a step or two backward. I think the crucial battle was the battle held—I'm not certain anymore about the date—in this conflict with the United States. We had to make a legal, diplomatic battle to take the matter to the Security Council. And you are aware that there is a discrepancy in the Charter where the regional disputes are handled by the region versus Article 33 or whatever it is that says that any security situation... The United States did its utmost to say, as it had historically with regard to its interventions in Latin American, "No, sorry boys, this is off to the OAS, the Security Council has nothing to do about it." One of the breakthroughs was that we were able to put this bilateral dispute, after a series of the bombing of our (?), the mining of our ports, the over-flights, some of these drastic violations and the big violations that came out on the front page of the Newsweek, how the U.S. was just preparing troops, for God's sake, in Miami to attack Nicaragua, and this was all over the papers. And the decision was that we couldn't go to the OAS, that the OAS was historically dominated, by [the U.S.] and we weren't going to get very far, whereas in the Security Council we might get a hearing. With the Soviet presence there, there might be an equitable chance of getting there. So then the UN is seen as the instance that, "We want to get involved in Central America." That's the first point.

The second point was to do something that was absolutely unprecedented, which again has had Pérez de Cuéllar pulling his hair out. And that was to get the UN to observe an election for the first time in an independent country. It had been done in Namibia before, but in this case it gave all the jurists a big headache. Now we're looking for more elections to do. But Nicaragua was the first one. And this had to do with the earlier consideration I made. The 1984 election may have lost externally but won

internally. The crucial thing about the 1990 election was that we had to win internally and externally, and maybe this time we neglected the internal front. Anticipating U.S. maneuvers, there was not to be a shadow of a doubt that this was a clean election. Therefore we organized a massive, unprecedented international observation. So we got all the Carters involved, and the International Socialists, but above all we asked the UN Secretary-General to set up a commission, which was headed by Iqbal Riza and Elliot Richardson. After a long debate, a serious debate, the Secretary-General accepted it, the United States went along, I think somewhat hesitantly...

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UNITED NATIONS

AB: We had to win these elections internationally, in terms of public opinion. The only thing that was going to stop the United States from funding the *contras*, because Bush was no pro-Sandinista and he did want to get rid of the regime, was to strengthen the hand of the international community. We needed high level witnesses, the Carter group and the UN. Pérez de Cuéllar's very smart move was to put Elliot Richardson in charge. Because you had to have a gringo there, because if you had somebody from Africa no American is going to give it much credibility. We were a bit suspicious about that, but it turned out to be an intelligent move; he turned out to be a very equitable fellow. Carter was by and large helpful. But all of this international supervision meant that since everyone regarded the playing field as tilted against the poor opposition by the mean Sandinistas, more electoral concessions, more facilities, more turning a blind eye

over illegalities. The Sandinistas sort of tilted over backwards to make sure the election was free *and* appeared to be free, with periodic reports from the OAS and the UN over the course of the entire electoral campaign (not just voting day). On Election Day you probably had more observers at some booths than voters, and this was part of the idea. On the presumption that we did have a majority, and that majority was going to vote for the *Frente* when the time came. Had that taken place, we would have had, supposedly, unquestionable international legitimacy and in light of that legitimacy, there had already been secured a promise via Carter and via Gorbachev that the United States would respect the new government. Whether they would have delivered, we'll never know.

But the electoral turn-over did take place; the election results showed a number of things. What was the test of faith for the United States simply was not met, because the *contras* did not demobilize and the State Department reports were very critical of the electoral campaign. That is to say, they were beginning to undermine eventual results. Plus you had a series of para-governmental or right-wing agencies that became active in Nicaragua. We let them all come in, with loads of money and dirty tricks that were played up and down throughout the election. It was also a fact that the United States was the principal force in getting the entire right and even parts of the left to unite in a coalition and get Mrs. Chamorro to be its head. That is to say, had that coalition split, then the Sandinistas with the same number of votes would have won the election. But anyhow, the U.S. embassy was quite active in directing and bringing UN observers of their own who were a lot less than neutral. And the *contras* were always there. In certain areas of the country, voting did not take place because the *contras* were actually making electoral propaganda on behalf of Mrs. Chamorro. The point is that the *contras* did not

demobilize, not even after the election, in fact not even after Mrs. Chamorro takes office, but until some months later when they had extracted further concessions from the new government in regards to security guarantees, and the reduction of the army, etc. etc.

JS: Now this was the responsibility of the new government to certain extent, plus CIAV.

AB: But you can understand why, because of the unexpected electoral results, the CIAV scheme shifts. CIAV was expecting that the poor *contras* would have to be protected against the mean Sandinista army *and* government, when they came back, because the Sandinistas were going to win. So, this is one of the distortions in the CIAV mandate, and again the CIAV was very much a U.S.-directed operation, congressionally funded. The UN got out of it and it became only OAS, acting as sort of a counter-military and denunciatory body that was very much influenced by the Republican right wing and the Jesse Helms agenda. To this very day, just one month ago, seven years after the war, it has ended its presence in Nicaragua, but with a very deep ties and loyalty to the *contras*. But again, following the results, the *contras* did feel insecure because it was the same Sandinista army that was still there. Because the Sandinistas lost the election but didn't lose a war, and there's a big difference between those. And in the constitutional turn-over these institutions pretty much remained the same. Later came a drastic reduction of the army, but the army remained as it was in terms of its leadership, although it was reformed. And so the little *contra* out there in the north, he continued to see the army out there, and felt he had no protection. On the other hand Sandinistas saw a new

government that now seemed to be bent on reversing the agrarian reform and taking away benefits. So, CIAV would have its hands full, and within one or two years it would have to broaden its mandate so it could take care of reintegration and support of the soldiers from both sides, instead of being a force on only one side, which actually for some time perpetuated the division in the country-side.

JS: Let me ask you then, from the UN perspective what happened was an agreement between Pérez de Cuéllar and Baena Soares that CIAV would function in Nicaragua through the OAS. But outside of Nicaragua it would be the United Nations which had responsibility, in other words in Honduras, such functions as were being carried out by CIAV. Did you sense that here?



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AB: No, we were not so much aware of that.

Dag Hammarskjöld

JS: For you CIAV was an organization dominated by the OAS?

AB: Well, it was UN-OAS in the beginning, and they had their bureaucratic language. On the other side of the border, it was UNHCR, which had always been there and had a very difficult time because they were dealing with refugee camps, which were also military camps, and when amnesty was offered the military leaders in the camps blocked the UNHCR from allowing the people to return. They didn't want an exodus. It is typical of regional conflicts. So CIAV did its dealing mostly within Nicaragua itself, setting up a base of operations locally, and the real role it came to play was to police the

Sandinista army on behalf of the Reagan-ites. In certain zones, CIAV was almost a state. That led to a whole number of distortions. And then CIAV became more and more partial, dependent as it was, it had a direct line to the right-wing Congressional offices so it could get the funding it wanted and serve intelligence purposes.

JS: This was the OAS part of it?

AB: One of the things that did happen in this entire process was the change of the Secretary-General of the OAS and the coming of Baena Soares. Our perception of the OAS, or at least of the Secretary-General, changed. Baena Soares was a fair man, and indeed he was one of the principal guarantors of the Sapoá cease-fire agreements. There really was never a "peace agreement." What you had was a sort of temporary cease-fire that kept renewing itself. The real peace agreement was the election. And even then, the new government had to go and negotiate three, four, six times. Between 1990 and 1996 there were at least 44 demobilization agreements, done with different bands, which kept cropping up, many of them very angry at the United States because they had been left hanging. Once the political arrangements had been made, whatever the *campesino* had been fighting for was sort of forgotten; it was never taken into account. And this explains a lot of the resentment; this explains a lot of the rearming. But the facts are that if you count the number of people that disarmed after 1990, that following the disarmament of some 21,000 *contras* in 1990, the number is greater than the total number of *contras* that fought in the war. Many of them might have been recycled. They got angry, the

government provided false promises, they would go back, pick up a weapon, and then turn it in, go back, six months later...

JS: Well, was CIAV helpful at all in counseling the *contra* people in giving them the tools so they could start a new life?

AB: Well, CIAV was never very clear about its mandate. They were involved in health campaigns one year, then they'd get involved in housing campaigns the other, then they would get involved in the human rights monitoring and then they started building peace commissions with the church. It was sort of a haphazard, evolving operation. That is, in retrospect they were trying to sell themselves off as the people who had this wonderful strategic vision of how to rebuild a country. Some of them were quite idealistic.

JS: That's what some of the NGOs say about them.

AB: Right. So CIAV became a protector of the *contras*. And it made one run-in after the other with the army, because what we had in the north was sort of a form of soldier-bandits. Soldiers became delinquents in order to survive; others were fighting for the grievances or for promises that hadn't been kept. But the CIAV sometimes didn't make a distinction between them so whenever there was a fire-fight, they would go in there and protect and sort of smuggle out wounded *contras* in ambulances and give them refuge and serve as go-betweens, and this irritated tremendously the army and at certain times the

government too. But this was sometimes in cahoots with the right-wing, which continued to see the presence of armed bands, right-wing armed bands, as a source of political pressure on the Chamorro government for it to take a harder and harder anti-Sandinista line.

JS: The Chamorro government?

AB: The Chamorro government, right through the Aleman government, because then the bands starting saying, "Well, we demand an 80% reduction in the size of the army; we demand that the whole army high command be removed; that the police and army withdraw from such zones." That coincided objectively with what the right-wing was saying here, and with what Jesse Helms was saying in Washington, too. So it was of a political character and it gave a political push. And CIAV very much acted as intermediary, along with the Catholic Church, saying, "Don't go after these people," even though many of them became outright delinquents and had quite a battery of criminal accusations against them. They were very much involved in that type of politics, and they did very little to disguise their anti-Sandinista bias.

JS: What about ONUCA?

AB: Refresh me about ONUCA? I'm not sure they had very much... The ONUCA was in charge of receiving the weapons, right?

JS: That's right. Much was done by a Venezuelan battalion. Part was done in Guatemala and part in Nicaragua.

AB: There wasn't much controversy about that... everybody turned in their old rusty weapons and kept the good ones--typical guerrilla insurance policy. They were gone pretty soon. I can't remember too much more that was controversial about...

JS: Now, in the case of UNAVEM after the elections. You had a quick count ... both the government, President Ortega, and the president-elect requested that UNAVEM stay, that the Secretary-General allow them to stay, for a while to assist in the transition to facilitate communication, I guess, between Daniel Ortega and Violetta Chamorro. How did this function?

AB: This was indispensable. Carter, and to a smaller extent Baena Soares was part of this set-up. In this country, everybody gets involved in internal politics, from Carlos Andres Perez to Willy Brandt... It is part of the historical curse of Nicaraguan politics. But there was a tremendous amount of lost confidence. The Sandinista party was traumatized; the Sandinista population was traumatized. Again, remember, there had never been in this country a peaceful turnover of regime--and so in the mind of the popular population this spelled war. I, and a lot of others, had to be out there telling the Sandinistas, "Don't pick up your weapon. If you go back to the weapons, then we go back to 1975 and the armed struggle. This has been an election. We have not been defeated in military terms; we are not disintegrated. We now become an opposition, and

we are not doing too bad because we've got such-and-such a presence in such-and-such an organization, and such-and-such quotas of political space." But it was a tremendously tense period. And the new government, which was totally unprepared to govern, which was totally divided against itself, Mrs. Chamorro depended heavily on her son-in-law, only slowly began to come to grips with what was the reality: that they were going to be the next government.

So, between March and April there began a series of extremely delicate negotiations on what was going to be the turn-over process. And that is to say, the definition of issues that were very sensitive to the Sandinistas that were legally part of the revolution, and that simply could not be reversed because there was no mandate for counter-revolution. This was not Pinochet coming into office. And there was a constitution and this government would have to be loyal to a constitution, and to a constitution that was popular and Sandinista-oriented. But on the other hand, there were a series of campaign promises that had to be kept. So, on delicate issues, such as questions of property and especially the question of the army, the army command, the Ministry of the Interior, what was going to happen to that? And other things such as they were going to go about changing the names of plazas and streets that had been named for revolutionary heroes. Now these were very delicate problems. So, a series of negotiations began, some of them were initiated by Carter. I don't remember if Riza was there involved, but I was in some of them. Some discussions were private, and some of them were open. I think both sides sort of needed assurance because in many senses the real power was in Sandinista hands. And there was a need to feel that there weren't going to be massive prosecutions, that state employees—the civil service—was going to be

respected, and that above all that the property distribution was going to be respected too, even though there were cases of outright confiscations that had been unjust or illegal that might have to be reversed. All of that required discussion for a smooth transition to take place. Assistant Secretary Bernie Aronson and others pushing to get rid of General Humberto Ortega made it more difficult. One of the principal issues was whether Humberto Ortega would remain head of the army and how fast the Sandinista army was going to be brought down in size. What happened was the fastest reduction of an army ever known in history, within two years from 85,000 to about 20,000, creating massive problems for the country.

Nobody really trusted anyone. Until you've got a working relationship that had been actually growing between the Sandinista leadership and the Chamorro leadership, and particularly when the extreme hard-line, right-wing people decide to become the opposition to Chamorro, until then both sides felt that the international presence was necessary, so that there could be no brutal reprisals, nor would there be any outright disobedience, particularly on the part of the armed forces, to who was going to be the new Commander in Chief under the terms of the Constitution.

JS: Let me ask--you mentioned Baena Soares as having your respect. What about Pérez de Cuéllar--was he a figure in this, or was he too distant?

AB: Pérez de Cuéllar was an extremely cautious diplomat. In comparison, Baena Soares was much more forceful, and stood up to the United States on more than one occasion, which is one reason that he wasn't reelected. Pérez de Cuéllar did keep a strong

interest in that, and was quite responsive, but I wouldn't see the UN as a *source* of diplomatic initiatives. There was once or twice an attempt for the UN to ask the Secretary-General to see if he could arrange talks between Ortega and Reagan or at the level of the Secretary of State, but that never came to very much. Now Alvaro de Soto and Francesc Vendrell, top UN officials, were quite adroit. But nonetheless, appeals to the office of the Secretary-General, without going through the Security Council... I don't know if all of them had to go through the Security Council or not, or whether it was an initiative of the Secretary-General. Anyhow, he was much more active in the Salvadoran negotiations and Guatemalan negotiations, but here it was at an earlier stage.

JS: That was my next question, actually. How much influence do you think developments in Nicaragua had on the El Salvador question? What you had to say about CIAV is very interesting because the United Nations followed a different course in El Salvador, where it was a purely UN command.

AB: Yes, I think it was. But remember Nicaragua was the first testing ground that what in the world has come to be known as post-conflict peace-building. I think the Agenda for Peace had much to do with what happened here, and all the disasters that were made, in terms of conceiving of reconstruction and coming in here as though there had been an earthquake and not a war. There was a learning process, supposedly, and AID and others did some studies of Nicaragua that could be applied to El Salvador. Where the tension always was, was in this human rights and arbitration mission of the UN. This is where ONUSAL had the problem. That is: if you are going to be a human

rights observation, you denounce; but if you are going to be a mediation link, you can't denounce because you've got to work with both sides. And Riza was there and they were going to have internal problems. So they never really did either job very well. So in that sense I think they have to learn to keep the two, political negotiation and the overview body...

Now, the other major difference is that the Salvadorans were an insurgency, and the insurgencies or oppositions, by nature, the same as in Guatemala, need more of the international body than does the government, which feels it has the upper hand. The international body, the UN, acts as a sort of a counter-weight for a weak opposition. It was not the same in Nicaragua. It was the Sandinista government that required a backup vis-à-vis the U.S. This meant inviting the UN at the technical expense of your own sovereignty, because they were getting involved in areas which, in sovereign terms, belong to the state, and no international body has to come in to supervise your judiciary, your electorate, your internal procedures, whatever. But anyhow, it happened then, and it happens more now. We had to give up some sovereignty in order to keep any sovereignty, in asking the agencies to come in and fulfill extraordinary roles and to begin to set up a precedent which I'm not sure where it's going to take the UN in terms of Cambodia, Mozambique, aid to Somalia, etc.. It just opened up a new age, which coincides with the post-Cold War setting.

In El Salvador, also, the insurgents...

[end of tape 1]

[beginning of tape 2]

JS: Let me ask one further question about El Salvador and Nicaragua. Theoretically, under its rules, ONUCA was to prevent the movement of arms from one country to another. So in theory, arms supplying, which had been coming from Nicaragua to El Salvador, was to cease. Now, I know no one has ever found that it did cease. But my question really to you is: did this have any effect at all? In other words, was there a cessation of shipments from Nicaragua to El Salvador in this period following the elections, since the army was still in charge?

AB: No. It was much too delicate. In the first place, the Salvadorans were in charge of their own arms procurement. Secondly, they knew that the American satellites were all over the place. And thirdly, they had various inflow routes. It was easier to bring them in through the Middle East and Guatemala than to go through Nicaragua, given the vigilance. There was no 'official policy' of sending weapons--just a policy of not persecuting people who might have been involved in trans-shipping weapons. We were too busy fighting the *contras*, and why do the U.S. a favor anyhow? But then there was the question of logistics. When things got too blatant, too open, it was also a matter of concern to our government. And there were difficulties also because when something like Esquipulas, when something like Tela were signed, where Daniel Ortega signs something calling on *all* armed insurgents to disarm and to demobilize, the Salvadorans, FMLN and Guatemala UNRG was not impressed.

JS: Some in the FMLN felt that Nicaragua had betrayed them.

AB: Some did, others did not.

JS: Another, what we call, 'external actor' in this story was Cuba. What role did Cuba have, if any you know of, in the peace process in Nicaragua?

AB: The Cubans were probably among the most moderate in terms of trying to push and induce the Sandinistas to accept, to make the compromises that were necessary, particularly with the advent of Perestroika when things were going to be ... quite different. There was solidarity, but within the context of solidarity there was always this push for caution, and the idea that one of the confidence-building measures was that the Cuban military should leave, for example. The Soviets were even pushier in this regard.

JS: You don't doubt that they were in favor of the Esquipulas process?

AB: Cubans were ambiguous about Esquipulas II. Their support for Nicaragua and for El Salvador was a matter of principle. They had to follow our cue, as in the Contadora process.

JS: And how highly did you assess the importance of the Soviet Union at this point? Schevernadze came to the region just after the elections, I think.

AB: I think that was before. He came soon after the meetings with Baker in Colorado or Montana or somewhere. The trouble with that was that what we felt had been a unilateral concession in terms of suspending weapons shipments to El Salvador in return for a very vague and un-kept promise to respect the outcome of the Nicaraguan election. Respect would have meant, to us, that we agree--and it is not an imposition--we agree that the arms shipments would be suspended, but why then would the United States have not agreed to get the *contras* to demobilize? And that didn't happen. So, it didn't seem like a very equitable bargain--but that's the most ... and that was a lot to get out of the United States, that is to say, to not disqualify the electoral process... A vague understanding that Washington would live with whatever government came out of the election.

JS: Pérez de Cuéllar thought that it was very important to get the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the United States all directly involved in the peace process here. But that was more in regards to El Salvador than in regards to Nicaragua, because ... negotiations didn't really involve external forces here.

AB: No--in El Salvador the key actor was the United States. We were talking about weapons, and Cuba was not the only source of weapons and neither was the Soviet Union. I can understand why Pérez de Cuéllar is saying that, because the United States was dead-set against admitting its role and was trying to continue to pretend that it was an innocent bystander there, whereas it was a direct party to the problem. The Salvadorean army command did not take one step without consulting it. And the proof of that is that when the United States and Aronson get directly involved and say, "We are going to

bring this thing to an end,” the famous New Year’s Eve agreement, that’s when it ended. When the United States starts twisting arms, things happen, and if it doesn’t they don’t. And that’s pretty much what happened in New York, with regard to El Salvador when they negotiated.

JS: I’d like to turn to a subject which you just barely raised, and that is the whole post-conflict peace-building process. For your information, I wrote part of the *Agenda for Peace*, so in fact I was not thinking about Nicaragua. But anyhow, my question is, how successful, how effective, if at all, was the United Nations in all of these areas, helpful in what we now call post-conflict peace-building, in Nicaragua, in reforming the police, for example?

AB: They didn’t get involved in police. They sort of shied away from police. It’s a problem, which I think goes to the root of the constitutional authority thing. By its very nature, post-conflict peace-building, or just peace-building, presupposes a United Nations involvement which is capable of acting as a legitimate and recognized interlocutor, not only with the government but with an opposition party. But as you know better than I, the United Nations is an agency of governments, and hence this type of... unless you’ve got some kind of special United Nations mandate and a very weak government, type of Haiti set-up. Unless you have some sort of Aldo Ajello Mozambique who’s acting as king-maker, which is very humiliating to any country, then the United Nations cannot play that role. I think it is sort of a no-win situation: if it respects its governmentally-oriented mandate and responsibility, then who does it work with in a country such as Nicaragua--it

works with the UNDP. If the UNDP, assuming it knows what it wants to do, assuming that they knew something about peace-building--which they don't, although they are trying--if they want to get into an involved, very delicate, and new task, of the social re-minting of a nation, and the promotion of new forms of social interdependence, as opposed to just repairing bridges, and this and the other, this type of task requires a very deep involvement of civil societies, of NGOs, if it is going to become sustainable. It has to be thought of more as a process than as a project. And the UN is very project-oriented, and the UNDP is more project-oriented--they say, "OK, we have two years, in two years we will have this, we will have an impact here, and an impact there, and impact on this... and out we go and my career is going to go up." Whereas, we have to think of the process element.

Secondly, if indeed, and this is what happened here, the very good people at UNDP tried to think about these issues but the moment they thought, "Let's develop here a specialty in dealing with veterans and combatants," we went and said, "Look, you can't deal with them as you deal with refugees." So in that sense, the UN finds itself, if it follows standard procedure, becoming more active than it is. Specifically you don't have a very dynamic-grade person here, but still they are here at the consent of the government. Then you have missions, and this is where Alvaro [de Soto] was always in, to give more power to the UN. I'm not sure that's a solution. Many of our problems come from intervention, and the solution to the problems of intervention is not more intervention. In the UN scheme, you have sort of a direct reporting to the Secretary-General. That sort of gives the agency a direct channel which gives it a little bit more leverage, more autonomy *vis-à-vis* the government, but I don't think most self-respecting governments are going to

put up with that for a very long time, nor will UN agencies do because they see it as too costly, too risky, they don't want to get involved, etc. But the requirements of peace-building are very long term.

What I'm getting at is that we need to be able to find forms where the UN agencies and the UNDP in particular, can work more forcefully, with civil society, without having to go get the approval of Minister X and Minister Y and Minister Z, particularly in post-conflict countries where the chief characteristic is that things are polarized.

The final thing is that once they begin to understand that phenomenon, it's time to go, for the official to leave, because his one-year or his two-year contract is up. And then the whole thing begins all over again. And this happens with the Swedes and the European Union—the European Union has been a little bit more imaginative in this. But I don't think we've been able to solve the tension between the peace-building and the operative invasion of peace-building. We've got sort of the notions, the theories, the concepts, of where we want the long-term, but how do we operationalize it, and how do we arrive at specific bench-marks and indicators that we are making progress. This is crucial. The only people I see beginning to think about that are the people at the World Bank involved in the war-to-peace study. But again, the more economists you've got involved, the further away you will get from getting at some of these things. We need to have more staying power and more flexible sources of resources, because a lot of this peace-building from the bottom-up, a lot of working with veterans and reconciliation, is going to take a steady sort of accompaniment which can only come from nationals themselves, from within the country. Sometimes there is an exasperation to go in, "Let's

do the job ourselves... Somalia style.” But it’s not going to work. You’ve got to be able to identify the Somalis, the Nicaraguans, and the Salvadorans, who are in this and aren’t going anywhere and aren’t escalating bureaucratic careers, who are going to be there one, two, three years from now. Identify them, and support them, whatever. And that takes a little bit of political guts sometimes, because you might be on the other side of the political fence sometimes.

JS: Let ask you in that connection about the World Bank and the IMF. There policies were somewhat in conflict with UNDP policies and UN policies in El Salvador. Was that also true here?



AB: Well, there was this two-three year period in which there was an extraordinary amount of aid and flexibility on the part of the U.S. With the structural adjustment coming in, it very much became a problem. The key to economic reactivation, in the countryside, in the conflict zones, for its veterans, for war-torn populations, is low cost agrarian credit. If there are no agrarian credits, there’s no production, and people are unemployed, and people will pick up the weapons. Even under Somoza, there was access to agrarian credit, and on so-so terms. With the structural adjustment, with the privatization of the banks, the terms [of loans] become less those of developmental credit and more those of commercial credit for foreign exchange earnings. You give it to the big people who are going to be the exporters and the little guys get less. And that’s part of structural adjustment. Many of those loans, sometimes they are not paid back, they can’t be paid back—especially if they’ve got thirty percent interest rates behind them.

But yet the small producer, the guy who picked up the weapons and will do so again, is now the backbone of any army, and there the backbone of the economy too—rice and beans and maize, that sells in what is a very rich land. This country could feed the rest of Central America. But unless we've got an appropriate type of credit that will be countenanced by structural adjustment, then we're not getting very far. The safety nets just won't substitute. The NGOs can put a little aspirin into that, but there's got to be much more leniency in this regard, and we've got to be able to open up lines of thinking and financing for peace-building activities that contemplate this type of credit for cooperatives. We've seen some of these work: *ex-contras* with ex-army people working together on a cooperative. Here the European Union has been better because they give outright donations; but even then the government has put up a counterpart in local currency. Sometimes, the money is out there in dollars or ECUs, but there is not enough currency here because the IMF has said, "You stop your printing presses or else." So, there you have it!

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JS: Final question: one of the things that was supposed to happen in this region, and be encouraged by the United Nations, was the establishment of a Central American security system. As far as I know nothing has happened, other than a few meetings. What are the prospects here, and what if anything can the UN do to encourage it?

AB: Well, that had more to do with the fact that there was a Sandinista government in existence, and hence on account of the ideological disparity, Contadora began what was a 'security commission' which was to try to put ceilings on weapons and on types of

weapons. The idea went pretty well; although there was a reticence to exchange information, there were regular meetings of the armies. The real security breakthrough was a political one, when the Sandinistas were booted out of office. Although some suspicions remain with regard to the Sandinista army, the fact that we now have governments that are ideologically homogeneous and neo-liberal and that the Nicaraguan army has been bending back forward to try and rebuild its relationship with the United States, I think has put the security commission question into the background. All of the countries were supposed to reduce inventories and numbers. In fact, as has happened with the Esquipulas process, the only country that ever complied with most things is Nicaragua. So, Nicaragua went to most of the meetings and said, "What about you guys?" and Guatemalans have been fidgeting. But other than some minor border things, I think it has fallen back from the priority. UNESCO has done things like promoting treaties of governmental security. In terms of thinking about security, the Central Americans are pretty advanced; more advanced than the people of South America because they incorporated democracy into notions of security and economic development, while those people are still dealing with army posts and clearances and things of this nature. The army-to-army relationships are good.

The other general preoccupation I would have, not only here but everywhere, is that armies are now trying to behave like big NGOs, so they're getting involved in health campaigns, educational campaigns, forestry, border controls, traffic, things that they are never supposed to do. They are looking for new jobs. I don't think this is helpful for civil society; but it is being pushed by the Pentagon. Now everybody wants to get involved in some multi-national peacekeeping thing. I don't think that's a healthy

development over the long range. No one who is serious is really arguing that the army should disappear. The main problem here is not the army but whether we are able to enhance the police effectiveness. Until we are able to do that the army is going to continue to play what is an unconstitutional role in being involved in internal security matters. Look, it's happening along the Texas border in the United States, too! So, that remains a matter of concern.

JS: Thank you very much.



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Yale-UN Oral History Project
Alejandro Bendaña
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
July 29, 1997
Managua, Nicaragua

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