Yale-United Nations Oral History

Bernard Aronson
Jean Krasno, Interviewer
October 9, 1997
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Interview with Bernard Aronson

Interviewer: Jean Krasno

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Jean Krasno: This is an interview with Bernard Aronson on Thursday, October 9, 1997, in his office in Washington, D.C. To begin with, for the record, Mr. Aronson, would you please explain the position that you held in the State Department and when you began your work on Central America?

Bernard Aronson: I went to the State Department in February 1989 as the designee for Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. I served as consultant to the Department until I was confirmed by the Senate in June of 1989. Then I remained as Assistant Secretary until July of 1993, the first four months of the Clinton Administration. I was working on Central America with the new administration even before I went to the State Department in February. I sent along memoranda at Secretary Baker's request to him about Central America.

JK: In what capacity were you acting prior to your role in the State Department?

BA: Do you mean what was I doing before I joined the Bush [Sr.] Administration? What I was saying to you was that even before I went to the State Department physically,

Secretary Baker had communicated that he wanted some thoughts about Central America. So, I sent him a long memo in the first week or two of the Bush [Sr.] Administration. But he had already asked me to be Assistant Secretary.

JK: Were you serving in the State Department during the Reagan Administration?

BA: No, I had a private consulting firm, but I was active in the debate about Central America. I traveled to the region. I testified before the Congress a number of times. I wrote a number of pieces in the Washington Post and the New Republic and elsewhere.

JK: What was the U.S. position on the conflicts in Central America in the earlier years and what kind of role did the U.S. play in the '70s and '80s in Central America?

BA: You are asking me about a period when I was not in office. Do you just want my historical view about that because I was not a participant?

JK: Yes, from your role and your knowledge.

BA: It depends on which conflict you are talking about. Guatemala is different than Nicaragua and El Salvador. We could spend a lot of time on that history. I don't know if that is the most fruitful use of time.

JK: Just from your point of view, what was the U.S. position in Nicaragua?

BA: During what period?

JK: In the earlier '70s and '80s. What I am trying to establish is when there was a shift in that position.

BA: Well, again you have to define what you are talking about, what period. I'm not sure that there was such a radical shift in the U.S. position. I think that the U.S. stated position was to promote democratization in those countries and to end guerrilla violence against the state, certainly in El Salvador and Guatemala. Now, you could argue how well or honestly the U.S. carried those stated purposes at various times, but maybe what you are referring to is the fact that when the Bush [Sr.] Administration took office, the Congress had already the previous year, and significantly before that, ended the military assistance to the Nicaraguan resistance. We took the position that we were not going to go back to the Congress immediately and try to restart that. Instead what we did was go to the Congress, both sides, both Houses, and both parties and seek to negotiate a new bipartisan policy toward Central America. The Centerpiece of that policy was to endorse and embrace and advocate the implementation of the Esquipulas treaties. The mechanism by which we did that was to convince the Congress to give us a year of non-lethal, humanitarian assistance to the Nicaraguan resistance to keep them in place under cease-fire conditions while we tried to promote, and make work, the elections in Nicaragua and leave open the possibility, or the issue, of what would happen if the

elections did fail. We wanted to jointly, in a bipartisan way, try to promote a free and fair, democratic election in Nicaragua.

JK: OK, that's very helpful. On El Salvador, during that particular time, the transition between the Reagan and the Bush [Sr.] Administrations, what was the position of the U.S. towards the conflict there?

BA: As I said, I think that the U.S. wanted to see an end to the conflict and wanted to see the preservation and strengthening of democratic government in El Salvador. Now, again, critics might argue that the U.S. didn't. It pursued that objective the way they would have liked the U.S. to have done so, and the U.S. did not explore negotiated options. Different people could agree or disagree. When we came into office, there was a new election for a new government about to take place. We did two things to sort of signal our policy: 1) in February of 1989, on a visit by the Vice President, we confronted the army with a massacre which had taken place in San Sebastian the previous year and demanded that the guilty parties be investigated and prosecuted; 2) we also made it clear that we wanted to see a negotiated settlement. In fact, in February 1989, the FMLN floated a new peace plan to delay the elections for six months in exchange for a cease-fire. And, on my advice, the Secretary of State did not dismiss that out of hand publicly and said it was worthy of consideration even though we did not endorse the idea of delaying the elections. But we wanted to send a signal that we were open to new proposals and new ideas to negotiate an end to the war.

JK: There is also the issue of Guatemala, but because we have limited time, maybe another time we could come back to Guatemala. We can focus mainly on Nicaragua and El Salvador.

BA: The peace process on Guatemala really hadn't started.

JK: It seems as though, from what you are saying that there was a difference in the approach, at least, to the situations when the Bush [Sr.] Administration came in.

BA: Well, the circumstances were different, too, but, as I said, we tried to end the political divisions in the United States and to create a base for a bipartisan policy. I think we were perhaps more enthusiastic about Esquipulas than the previous administration.

JK: At that time, was there a change in the attitude towards the United Nations' involvement?

BA: I can't answer questions like this because I can't speak to what the attitude of the previous administration was. I can really only tell you what our views were. You would have to make your own judgment about what the previous administration's views were. I was not there, so I don't think this line of questioning is very fruitful.

JK: OK, that's fine. We were just talking about some of the U.S. initiatives in the early part of 1989. Perhaps you would like to elaborate on what you were doing in terms of Nicaragua, first.

BA: The bipartisan accord formally and publicly committed the United States to the Esquipulas treaties and also to accept the results of a free and fair election in Nicaragua regardless of who won. I think it wasn't clear whether the United States would have accepted previously a Sandanista victory, if it was a free and fair election. So that sent a signal that maybe created a greater incentive to the Sandanistas to go forward with the elections since they were very confident they would win. I think the other thing we did, in addition to developing a new relationship with the U.S. Congress and the region's leaders like Oscar Arias, who publicly supported our new policy, was that we also, from the very earliest days of the administration, engaged the Soviet Union in our Central American policy. President Bush [Sr.] wrote Gorbachev a letter about Nicaragua in the very first weeks of his administration urging his cooperation in making the elections possible and asking him to halt the flow of weapons to Nicaragua as a gesture of good faith to support the elections. Secretary Baker made this a fundamental issue in his very first meeting with Minister Shevardnadze. My first official trip as Assistant Secretary of State after I was confirmed, within days of my confirmation, was to Moscow to negotiate with the Soviets. And they very much supported our policy. What we said to them was that this was going to be the first test of Gorbachev's new thinking in foreign policy and it would make a difference to this new administration if they cooperated in support of Esquipulas. We felt that was a position they could take without any loss of face in that it

was a treaty negotiated in the region. It was not a U.S. initiative. It was the Central American presidents' own initiative.

JK: As long as we are talking about Oscar Arias and Esquipulas II, what role did the U.S. play in the formation of the ideas that went into that plan?

BA: Again, you are talking about 1987. I think you need to ask somebody who was involved in that.

JK: OK. At any rate, the plan that came before the Central American presidents in 1989 to launch the elections.

BA: Well, there wasn't a plan. The bipartisan accord was a U.S. policy that they embraced because it very much supported their own regional aspirations. There was a lot of pressure on the Sandanistas to hold elections. At the inauguration of Carlos Andrés Pérez in February of 1989, the president of Venezuela, the Prime Minister of Spain, Felipe Gonzales, and others put a lot of pressure on Ortega to agree to speed up the election, which he agreed to do. He agreed to hold it a year earlier. So, the bipartisan accord came right after that. It was a perfect kind of complement and follow-through because the U.S. then made the elections the centerpiece of its policy in the region.

JK: Then the UN became more involved. What was the U.S. view of the UN role? First of all, we could just keep talking about Nicaragua.

BA: Well, we very much wanted maximum oversight and supervision of the elections. We were convinced that it the elections were really free and fair and fraud free, and that Nicaraguans had confidence in the process that they would vote the Sandanistas out. Therefore, we worked very strongly and closely with all the various monitoring groups, the OAS, the UN, the Carter Center, the National Endowment for Democracy, the European Union, to have maximum international supervision of elections. So, we strongly supported a UN role.

JK: What is your evaluation of the role that the UN did play? And they did play various different roles at that time, but we could talk first about the elections, for example.

BA: I think they had a large presence and it was credible and it was very important because the Sandanistas wanted international respectability. They wanted to be legitimized, so that the UN watching, the OAS watching, and others, there were some restraints on their ability to interfere with the process, to take unfair advantage of their domination of the state and the economy. Not that they didn't have enormous advantages and use state funds because they did. But it certainly was a spotlight on them that allowed for a free and fair vote to take place. And it gave opposition groups more bargaining power about the rules of the election and access to media and other issues.

JK: What about the role of the OAS?

BA: I think they were very similar in that period. I don't think the UN played a unique role in the electoral process. But because it was the United Nations had a special standing which was very helpful. But the UN and the OAS cooperated in the electoral observation. Again, our view was the more the better. We wanted as many observer groups there as possible.

JK: Also, there was the disarming of the combatants on both sides.

BA: There wasn't a disarming on both sides. There was only the disarming of the Contras. That was after the elections. That was a commitment we had made, that we would support that. And again, it was helpful to have the UN and the OAS there, to have an international presence. We, I think, had to use our own influence with the resistance to convince them to go forward with that because they were very distrustful of the new government once Ortega was allowed to stay. They didn't get any of their other demands in terms of constitutional changes and protections. So, for them to disarm when the army that they had fought for years was left intact was a very difficult decision for them, but we convinced them to do so.

JK: Were you also involved in decisions to include UNHCR and UNDP after the elections?

BA: I was not personally, but I'm sure that the embassy and the AID mission were in touch with them.

JK: To talk about El Salvador, the UN in the summer of 1989, became more involved in that process, in the beginning, strictly as an observer. Was the U.S. in favor of a greater role for the UN in the El Salvador process?

BA: Yes.

JK: What was your role in the process in El Salvador?

BA: As you know, the Secretary-General designated four countries to be formal friends of the process. One of our roles was to convince the government of El Salvador to cooperate with the process. They were initially somewhat suspicious of the UN and distrustful and were not entirely comfortable with the role of the four friends, though they very much grew to appreciate the role of the four friends. So, part of our role was to give them some confidence and encourage them to participate. In a hundred different ways behind the scenes, we helped to make the peace process work and worked with the parties and built confidence with the FMLN and sent signals to all sides, and in fact, behind the scenes helped broker the initial peace breakthroughs in Mexico City.

JK: I have been interviewing a few people on the Group of Friends of the Secretary-General and they had pointed out that the United States was not a member of

the group initially, of the four, and later joined as the "four plus one" after the agreements were signed.

BA: That was not a formal process, really; it was always "four plus one." We were not formally designated, but we were very much involved.

JK: Explain to me why was it that the U.S. was not really more formally considered a part of the Friends, but did operate in that way.

BA: Well, that was just Secretary-General and UN politics. They couldn't designate the U.S. We were seen as too one-sided, probably, too committed to the government and too big a player to invite in, in a formal way. But they certainly worked very closely with us in every other way and understood that the process could not succeed without the support and cooperation of the United States. I think it would have been impossible and unlikely that the U.S. would have been designated as a formal friend of the process. That doesn't signify anything but just good diplomacy. That was a triumph of form over substance.

JK: OK, then explain to me then how it actually worked because Mexico held a number of the negotiation sessions in Mexico.

BA: Mexico didn't hold them. They just happened to be held in Mexico. They were conducted under UN auspices, not Mexican auspices. They were just held in Mexico City.

JK: Right, under UN auspices, but Mexico covered a number of the costs, as I understand, or provided some of the support.

BA: I don't know about that. Everybody helped pay for the process.

JK: When those kinds of negotiations were going on, the Group of Friends often met with the parties, either there or sometimes in New York. What was the role of the U.S. at that time? Was there a U.S. presence during any of those meetings?

BA: Yes, I sent one of my staff to Mexico City to monitor the talks and, in fact, to begin, at the appropriate level, talking to the FMLN which he did.

JK: Who was that?

BA: Peter Romero, who was currently the number two person at the State Department in the Inter-American Bureau. He was our Charge in El Salvador, later on. We passed a number of non-papers back and forth with the FMLN to start a dialogue with them. We certainly talked to the government all the time. In the case of the April breakthrough, we met with Fidel Chavez Mena and others from the Christian Democratic Party. They

worked very hard to come up with compromise proposals which we encouraged. They went down and played a mediating role with the parties to secure the breakthrough on constitutional reform, which was in May.

JK: You are talking about April and May. Was that in 1989?

BA: No, I think that was 1990. The process really didn't get going in a serious way until after the final offensive. I think they were just working on the agenda and some of the meetings were in Geneva.

JK: When was the U.S. first contact then with the FMLN? Peter Romero, was he the first of the U.S.?

BA: He was probably the first. Yes, that was in Mexico City in May. But we had been sending non-papers, I think, prior to that. We had lots of contacts with their political representatives who were allied with them. Hector Silva came to see me during the final offensive in November 1989.

JK: He came to see you here in Washington.

BA: At the State Department, sure, and with Father Ellacuria during that period, prior to the final offensive, obviously, because he was killed there. So, we had ties to people who were very close to the FMLN.

JK: What was the nature of your talk with Hector Silva? Was that after the offensive in 1989?

BA: He came to see what the U.S. position was. We talked very much about purging the military and human rights violators. I told him we had been working on that well before the peace process and we were fully supportive of that. He was surprised and pleased to hear that. We wanted to see a negotiated settlement. He went to Mexico City after and reported on the conversation to the FMLN leadership.

JK: I wanted to talk to you about the November offensive in 1989. Was the U.S. aware that this was going to take place?

BA: No.

JK: No, so the U.S. was taken by surprise.

BA: Everyone was taken by surprise.

JK: Had the U.S. been aware of the heavy arms that the FMLN had, that they had land-to-air missiles?

BA: Surface-to-air missiles, no. That was also an unpleasant surprise.

JK: Were you surprised that they would launch an attack while negotiations had been starting, to a certain extent?

BA: Well, I don't think there was a sense that negotiations had started. That was not my sense at the time. What I think surprised everybody, particularly the El Salvadorean government and the military, was that they had the capacity to infiltrate San Salvador with that many people and weapons and strike so hard. There were some people who argued at that time that they were just going to wither away through attrition. And, in fact, their numbers had diminished significantly. But they sort of shattered that myth and that conventional wisdom that the problem would just be solved by time.

JK: Did that have an impact on the U.S. assessment of the situation?

BA: It had an impact on the U.S. assessment and the Salvadorean government assessment and I think that plus the murder of the Jesuits certainly had an impact on the view of the Congress about military aid. All those combined had a significant impact on the negotiating process.

JK: There is an event that took place at that time that I have been very curious about and I don't know how much you know about it but I'd like to see if you have some interpretation of it. When the FMLN launched the offensive and they took the Sheraton Hotel they found two things that were unexpected. One was that Secretary-General

Baena Soares was there and the other was that they came across some thirteen or so U.S. military personnel.

BA: Trainers.

JK: Trainers, so what were the trainers doing there and were you involved at all on how their release was negotiated?

BA: Yes, I was involved in their release. The trainers were there because we had trainers in El Salvador training the Salvadorean military. There is nothing out of the ordinary about that. We had had a military relationship with them for a decade and training was part of it. It was just an accident that they were in the hotel when the FMLN took it. It created a real crisis and President Bush [Sr.] authorized some very serious measures to protect and if necessary rescue those people which I don't think I can actually go into because it is probably classified. The U.S. government took it extremely seriously. But fortunately, the FMLN did not want to get into a confrontation with the United States. They had one of their representatives in Washington actually talking to some of our people. At the time, Salvador Senabria who is still here. And they agreed to let them go after a period of time. So, the crisis was defused.

JK: In El Salvador, it was said to me that the military personnel were there planning the action that was going to be taken in Panama. Is that correct?

BA: Why would they be in El Salvador?

JK: I don't know.

BA: I doubt that it is correct. It doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Why plan an action in Panama that involved troops based in the U.S. in the Sheraton Hotel in El Salvador? If somebody has some grounds for that, I would be interested in hearing what they are. It doesn't strike me as making a lot of sense on the face of it.

JK: I was just wondering if you had any knowledge of that. You mentioned that the murder of the Jesuit priests had had an impact. In what way? You mentioned something about the Congress.

BA: Well, I think it was such a terrible atrocity, the killing of priests and the housekeeper and innocent people, coming after years and years of efforts to improve the human rights performance of the military. It also really sent a signal to some members of the Congress, made them re-evaluate their willingness to support the military. The Salvadorean military was shocked by the ferocity of the attack and the surprise of the attack even though at the end of the day the FMLN lost a lot of combatants and didn't succeed at all in convincing the urban population to rise up which is what some of them thought would happen. But it also ended any complacency in the Salvadorean military that they could somehow just roll along and the guerrillas would just go away. And for the first time, they had to contemplate the possibility that the U.S. would cut off military

aid. So, I think it gave them a much greater incentive to negotiate seriously than they had before.

JK: You had had a couple of the questions that we had sent you earlier that you had wanted to respond to. Did you want to do that now?

BA: Can I just go through by number?

JK: Sure.

BA: OK, "assessment of the impact of elections in Nicaragua on the developments in El Salvador." The FMLN have told me that since that time, that what happened in Nicaragua helped to convince them to negotiate. I think it helped both sides feel more confident about negotiating. On the Salvadorean government side, the military felt that the change in government and having a friendly government next door as opposed to a government that was allied with and aiding, helping to arm, the FMLN gave them more confidence that they could open up. And on the other hand, the fact that the left preserved a very central place in the politics of the country, according to FMLN leaders I have talked to, helped to give them a sense that they could have a role in a post-conflict El Salvador.

JK: On that same issue, did that also give the United States a sense of confidence that if elections went forward in El Salvador that there might be some kind of accommodation?

BA: Elections were not a new phenomenon in El Salvador. They were not the centerpiece of the peace process the way they were in Nicaragua. Although the elections did make a difference because in the next round of elections, not the 1989 elections but the subsequent congressional elections, for the first time the FMLN did not try to destroy the electoral process with violence. So that was an important event.

As far as number 4, "the degree of confidence or mistrust in the UN as the mediator." I think that the Salvadorean government initially had some distrust of the UN. I think that the Cristiani government never felt that Alvaro de Soto was even-handed or trusted him or felt they were dealt with fairly. But they did grow to understand the value of the process and the UN role.

JK: As long as you are mentioning Alvaro de Soto, I wanted to ask you also the U.S. assessment of de Soto. At the time during the negotiations, there were objections to Alvaro de Soto. What were the objections to him or to what he was doing?

BA: He in many ways, obviously, contributed to the process. I have to give him credit for that. I think he was much more willing to understand the political problems of the FMLN in the negotiating process than he was the political problems of the Christiani government. At one point prior to the breakthrough on constitutional reform, the FMLN

had proposed amending the Salvadorean constitution to allow one national assembly to pass constitutional reforms as opposed to what was required which were two successive assemblies. And Alvaro insisted that this was the key to the peace process and was strongly backing it. And in fact, it created a crisis in El Salvador as it was seen as a direct assault on the constitution. Christiani was very much undermined by it and had his back to the wall. We refused to support it. Alvaro was sure that he had to do this because otherwise there would be no agreement on Constitutional reform. He didn't understand the use of deadlines. The current national assembly was going to go out of office on May 1, 1990. So, under the constitutional system, if they didn't pass constitutional reform, then you have to wait for two successive assemblies. So, he wanted, rather than use that as a deadline to force the parties to make progress, he wanted to change it so that only one could do it and have no deadline. In the end, they didn't change the process. That deadline was very important in getting the parties in Mexico to make the first big breakthroughs on constitutional reform. So, I think his tactical judgment was not always correct and he didn't convince both parties that he was even-handed as a mediator. That created some problems.

JK: What role did the U.S. play in the changes that took place in the constitution during that time because you had to get them in order and passed?

BA: As I told you, there was a sort of an impasse between the FMLN and the government. So, we worked very Fidel Chavez Mena and his Christian Democratic Party and they actually worked on the constitutional reforms and came up with some draft

compromise proposals. They went to Mexico City and those became the basis for the agreement.

JK: When you say we, who was working on that part of it? Were you working directly on it?

BA: In that case, I did because I knew Fidel Chavez. So, myself and my staff met with him and they came to my office and talked about it and worked on it. We didn't, I don't believe, draft any of the compromises. They drafted the compromises. We strongly encouraged them and supported their role as a mediator.

JK: What was the purpose of the changes that were being put into place?

BA: I don't remember what was in those provisions. I think it involved the composition of the Supreme Court, the electoral process, creating the Attorney General for Human Rights, some issues like that, expanding the electoral process, allowing smaller parties to have a greater role, human rights regime, et cetera.

JK: So, the U.S. did help that process along. Was the importance of that help to give some confidence to the government side?

BA: No, the importance was just to get some agreement. You had the parties at an impasse and there was a deadline. If they hadn't reached agreement by May 1st, then

there is no way they would have had constitutional reform for three years. To the extent that constitutional reforms were a critical part of the peace process, this would have delayed the whole process for years.

JK: So, the U.S. had to come up with ideas.

BA: Well, I don't think we came up with ideas so much as help the process, encourage players in the process to find formulas that would reach consensus.

JK: Did you work on the FMLN side with that?

BA: In that instance, we did not. We didn't really work with either side. We encouraged the government, to a certain extent. Our role was more finding a group that could broker these differences.

JK: Did the UN play a helpful role at that point, when it was seen that it was going to have to pass the two national legislatures?

BA: Again, I think that they didn't appreciate the intervention of this group. They would have to speak for themselves, but at the end of the day, they realized that it was necessary for a solution.

JK: Just one more question about Alvaro de Soto's role because it was controversial. In hindsight, how would you evaluate his role?

BA: Just what I said, in some ways I give great credit for forcing reforms, pressing for reforms, and frankly, I was surprised that made it into the final agreement. On the other hand, I think the process could have moved much more quickly. I think his failure to gain the confidence of the government made it harder to reach agreements when it could have been easier. And on this one instance of creating a deadline and some pressure, I think his judgment was incorrect. But he put enormous personal energy into this and he certainly deserves great credit for being a bulldog in the process.

JK: The final agreements were completed, or more or less completed, in the last hours of Pérez de Cuéllar's tenure and then signed in January 1992. But about a year and a half before that, the parties had come to an initial part of the agreement, which really was based on human rights. What was the U.S. attitude, or role, in this?

BA: Well, we were very supportive of that and the UN monitoring presence. There was an enormous gulf between the parties. It was very important to build confidence, and human rights was a fundamental issue in the conflict. So, we thought of that as an extremely important first step, that the parties could reach agreement on a very important thing, that there would be a presence that would reduce the threat of political violence because it hovered over the process and could have crippled the process. We saw that as a very important breakthrough.

JK: Do you think having the human rights agreement early in the process did actually facilitate the final agreement?

BA: That is what I just said, very much so.

JK: What about the Truth Commission? What was the U.S. attitude about that?

BA: We thought that the Truth Commission was a necessary part of the agreement and a good part of the agreement, and certainly was warranted, given the nature of the conflict. I'm not sure it succeeded as well as it might have in all areas, but it did a good job.

JK: In what do you think it may not have succeeded or that it could have been done differently?

BA: I think some FMLN groups escaped some responsibility for some of the things they did.

JK: It didn't show up in the report?

BA: Some groups got targeted more than other groups unfairly because of FMLN politics, one group sort of fingering another. So, I think that was unfortunate. Maybe in

retrospect more names should have been named. It was a very touchy issue and could have blown up the process, too.

JK: What about the specific naming of people? Before the report came out, I understand that the government was not happy when they heard that names were going to be used.

BA: I think that's true. And I don't know how that finally turned out, but there was less naming of names than there could have been. It was a judgment call that some people felt that it would blow up the process. Whether it would have or not, nobody could say at this point.

JK: There was a U.S. person who participated in the Commission.

BA: I don't think so, a U.S. person?

JK: There were three Commissioners.

BA: Oh, you mean a U.S. citizen, yes, not U.S. government, yes, Tom Buergenthal.

JK: After the report came out though, amnesty was granted.

BA: That was part of the peace process. Amnesty was a provision of the peace accord. That was always a part of the peace process and the peace agreements. It was amnesty and the Truth Commission.

JK: My understanding from interviewing some of the FMLN that the legislature then passed amnesty.

BA: That was to implement what the peace agreement had said. It was not an independent decision of the legislature. It was a negotiated part of the settlement just as it was in South Africa and lots of other conflicts.

JK: Did the U.S. feel that the amnesty part of it was an important ingredient?

BA: We weren't sitting at the table, so we didn't have view on every issue. The parties really negotiated all of this. But I think that some kind of amnesty coupled with the Truth Commission and the Ad Hoc Commission, which was frankly more important than any of the others, the purging of the army. The elimination of the security forces, that whole package was necessary. You can' t single out one issue. If you just had amnesty and you hadn't dissolved the security forces or purged the officer corps, it would have been a bad thing. But you had all those things together.

JK: The other question that I wanted to get at was, how much leverage did the U.S. use specifically either in terms of incentives or other kinds of leverage, either during the negotiation process or the implementation process?

BA: We used all the leverage and influence we had in every way possible to move the process forward. We withheld military aid voluntarily for a short period of time. We pressed very hard for the purging of the worst abuses from the officer corps well before the negotiations got serious. We worked very hard and clearly and strongly with all the parties in the government and the army to make it clear that we wanted to see the negotiations go forward. We monitored the right wing and tried to keep any threat of violence against the guerrillas or the left from taking place. We consulted and worked very closely with the four friends. As I talked about, we were involved in various stages of the negotiating process. Our ambassador in El Salvador went up to a guerrilla village and spent the night and met with the FMLN very early in the process. We started our own process of talking to the FMLN. We provided an enormous amount of the funding for the peace process.

JK: What kind of funding did you provide for the negotiation part?

BA: We put some funding into that and certainly all the missions, ONUSAL, the Human Rights Mission. We were part of the groups that funded those. AID provided funding for all the reconstruction and rehabilitation programs for the guerrillas and for the army. We provided the principal training for the new police force.

JK: They had put into the agreement a land distribution plan.

BA: Yes, and we provided a lot of the funds for that, too.

JK: The U.S. provided the funding that could be available for the loans.

BA: I believe so, or maybe for technical assistance. I'm not sure exactly, but everything that was there, we were the principal supporter. We also arranged to forgive a significant amount of the official debt of El Salvador to free up funds for them.

JK: I just wanted to come back to the Group of Friends for a minute. In the beginning we talked about that diplomatically it really wasn't wise to have the U.S. working openly among the Group of Friends.

BA: It wasn't working "openly" so much as designated as a formal participant in the talks.

JK: That is a better way to put it. But after the agreements were signed, then you did actively become a "friend."

BA: We were always active. It was just that somebody made up this term, the "four plus one." But it was always "four plus one." But later it got talked about more openly, that's all. It wasn't some formal change.

JK: So, there wasn't a real change in terms of any direct contact with the negotiating parties?

BA: No, we were always in touch with the parties.

JK: Well, that clears up a misunderstanding on my part because my understanding was the U.S. had been sort of more in the background and then after the agreements were signed in Chapultepec, that the U.S. was more directly involved.

BA: That is totally untrue.

JK: Not true, that is an important clarification.

The other thing I wanted to talk to you about was the establishment of COPAZ. Do you think that COPAZ was a useful mechanism?

BA: Yes, I do because part of the process had to be to convince the FMLN and the left that if they gave up their weapons, they would still have influence. They would still be a part of the process. COPAZ was a formal recognition of their role and their influence. And there were other committees, too. There was an electoral commission established

early on, a multiparty electoral commission to reform the electoral rules. I met with them in the State Department early in the process. The Communist Party participated for the first time. There was a business-labor commission established that also dealt with issues. So, all of these mechanisms were very important.

JK: Did it actually function well? I mean, symbolically it was a good idea.

BA: I think that the value was in the practice that everybody was sitting at the same table. It created oil on the gears. It wasn't necessarily the forum where everything got solved. It was form over substance, but form was very important.

JK: You talked about the reform of the security system, separating the police from the military. Has that been done successfully?

BA: It wasn't just separating. All the traditional security forces were abolished, the Treasury Police, the National Police, the Havendy Police, I believe. An entirely new police force was established from scratch. The guerrillas were a part of it. It was trained by "ISITAP," which is a Justice Department program. The security forces had traditionally been the worst human rights abusers. So, it was a very important step.

JK: In the agreement, a formula was reached to have some former members of the National Police and some former members of FMLN participate in the first class that would go into the academy.

BA: I think that there was a small percentage amount of each side.

JK: Did the U.S. have an opinion on that, whether they should be involved or whether it should be a completely new force?

BA: I can't remember at the time what the issue was. I think there was a trade-off, but it built some confidence for both sides to have some presence. But about 80% or more were to be new recruits, or something like that.

JK: Just to do an evaluation of the peace process, we could take a look at first Nicaragua and then El Salvador. How would you evaluate, and what is your opinion on how these two processes worked? How well did the UN operate in their role? And what was the relationship between the United Nations and the United States?

BA: The processes were very different and the role of the UN was very different. Nicaragua really was not a peace process. It was an electoral process and once the elections were held, the guerrillas were forced to give up their weapons. But there was nothing else but a change in government by election. There was no reduction in the army the way there was in El Salvador. There was no change in the police forces the way there was in El Salvador. There were no new human rights guarantees the way there were in El Salvador. There were some programs to try to rehabilitate and retrain people, but in Nicaragua the guerrillas were forced to disarm for an election. In El Salvador, every

aspect of the society and the governmental structure was changed in fundamental ways. And that is one reason why El Salvador was a much more successful process.

The UN was much less involved in Nicaragua, frankly. They played a role as one of a number of groups that oversaw the elections and they were there with the OAS to receive the weapons and all that, but they didn't have the kind of presence in the field that they had in El Salvador to protect the former guerrillas. There was no peacekeeping force in the country like that brought into El Salvador. The only groups that really looked out for the former combatants was CIAV which was a very small civilian group led by the OAS. And I think, unfortunately, the results show the difference. El Salvador is in a lot better shape. Democracy is a lot healthier and the economy is a lot healthier. The divisions are a lot less bitter than they are in Nicaragua.

On the other hand, I think that El Salvador was one, maybe the most, successful peace process in the Post-Cold War history of a civil conflict. And it was successful because all sides gained something. There were no losers. The FMLN gained enormous changes that had taken place in no other country in Latin America. Probably no other country in the world would have submitted to an independent group nominated by the Secretary-General that went through the entire officer corps and at its own discretion purged several hundred of the officers who had fought a war but had not been defeated on human rights grounds. I think that national reconciliation really worked in El Salvador. The success of the FMLN in the recent elections is a sign that the political process changed. So, I think El Salvador is one of the great success stories for the UN and for the international community.

JK: How important was the role of President Cristiani?

BA: It was indispensable.

JK: In what way?

BA: Because he came out of the most powerful economic and political families and groups in the country. He was one of the earliest founders of the Arena Party. He had enormous credibility on the right and among the powerful economic interests. I think that only somebody like him could have made peace with the left. And secondly, he was very pragmatic, not an ideologue. Like Arzu in Guatemala, he was willing to embrace changes that nobody would have imagined possible from an Arena president. Yet he retained the confidence of the army. He was a very skillful political leader. He had great credibility and he had great respect among the guerrillas, too. Before he was killed, Ellacuria had said some very positive things about Cristiani, publicly.

JK: The negotiating team, did that seem to work well on both sides?

BA: Well, I found the negotiating team on the government side somewhat surprising, I never understood it, frankly. It was a surprising group to me. You had a poet, David Galindo. I don't know how and why that team was put together, frankly, but at the end of the day it worked. There were a lot of frustrations from time to time with the pace of the process. I don't know if that was deliberate or not. At the end of the day it worked. It

wasn't a natural group of people that one would imagine you would put at the table to negotiate a peace treaty.

JK: Yes, it was an interesting combination. The negotiations were finalized at the end of Pérez de Cuéllar's tenure. How important was it that his tenure was ending on December 31st?

BA: I'll tell you a story that most people don't know. At about 2:00 on the final day of Pérez de Cuéllar's tenure, Tom Pickering got a call from Jorge Montaño who said that he had just been with the Secretary-General and the Secretary-General had told him that he was leaving at 4:00 that afternoon. He had a plane waiting for him. And we had not reached an agreement. If he had left, the whole peace process would have been delayed for months, and who knows what would have happened because Boutros-Ghali would have come in and had no familiarity with it. We asked Tom Pickering to call Jorge Montaño back and ask for an emergency meeting with Pérez de Cuéllar for the four friends and us. We went over to see him.

JK: Did Tom Pickering go with that group?

BA: I went and Tom Pickering. We sat across the table from Pérez de Cuéllar, Alvaro de Soto, and Mig Goulding. Pérez de Cuéllar said, "Look, I've given this all I can. I have to go. I have this plane waiting. It's scheduled. It's a private plane. Alvaro can carry on. I've done all I can do." Jorge Montaño and I told him, implored him not to leave and said,

"You can't leave. If you leave, this thing is going to be delayed for months. If you stay, we think we can end this war. Look at all the blood that has been shed. Please don't go. You can't go after all you've done. Don't leave." He agreed to stay till six o'clock, but at the end of the day he wound up staying till midnight. And we settled it at midnight. In fact, he turned to Mig Goulding and Alvaro and asked their view. Alvaro said he didn't think he should stay because he had done all he could and he had earned his right to leave. But there was no way we could end it. There was too much left to be done. There was no way we could end it in the remaining hours. And Mig Goulding said that he thought there was a chance. And we all said, "You have to stay." He decided to stay.

JK: And so he stayed.

BA: Right.

JK: So, what were the loose ends that Alvaro said you couldn't reach an agreement over?

BA: Well, he didn't get into the details. There were a lot of loose ends. There were a lot of issues around the land program. I remember Joaquin Villalobos. I was in the Salvadoran government's suite of offices and Joaquin Villalobos came in at 11:30. Armando Calderon Sol was up there negotiating.

JK: 11:30 at night? On the 31st?

BA: At night, and they were working on language on that land issue and then they got that settled and that was it. They had the treaty. That was 11:40.

JK: It was Joaquin Villalobos and Calderon Sol who is now the president.

BA: Right, but Calderon Sol was not a formal member of the Salvadoran negotiating team.

JK: No, he wasn't.

BA: But he was Cristiani's agent.

JK: So, Cristiani had him come to New York during that particular time. He felt that he was an important player.

BA: He was mayor of San Salvador and he was a very important player in the Party.

JK: The transition, then after the agreement was reached, the transition to Boutros-Ghali, in terms of the implementation, were there any problems?

BA: There were lots of crises and rocky moments and deadlines were missed in terms of implementation of the process. The guerrillas did not give us their weapons. The

weapons caches were found that they had secretly hidden. That created crises. The land issue resurfaced. There were renegotiations. There were lots of continued crises. But once there was a UN monitoring the army in place and the guerrillas were there, the war was over. Certainly, the momentum of it changed in fundamental ways. But there were lots of tough moments. It was not so easy for the FMLN commandantes to sell the agreement to their members either, particularly within the ERP. Pete Romero, in fact, at one point met with sixty of the chief senior cadre of the ERP and explained the agreement and what was in it. There was a lot o unhappiness.

JK: So, the U.S. did play a role in the implementation period in terms of negotiating different stages?

BA: Sure.

JK: Were there any other points that you wanted to raise?

BA: I will just make a general point about making a peace process work and what the role of the UN was. I don't think either of the parties entered into the peace process with any idea that it would end the way it did. And if they had known the way it would end, they may never have entered into the process. And I am not sure that either side was so fully committed to the process when they entered in. But the process took on its own momentum. The fact that it was sponsored by the United Nations, which had international standing, the four "friends" were involved, the United States and the Soviet

Union were involved, created a momentum that carried the parties along. Now, they were both responding to realities in El Salvador, which was that everybody was sick and weary of the war and wanted it over. If that hadn't been the case, the momentum alone would not necessarily have carried the day. But I think that there is a great value in bringing combatants together at the international table of peace and telling them they are peacemakers, even when they don't necessarily intend to be, and giving them the stature, and status, and attention, and resources, and support that goes into a process like that because that really buttresses the process. At times when somebody is going to fall away or there is a crisis, that really keeps them at the table. Nobody then wants to be standing in front of the world and the finger pointing at them that they walked away and they killed the chance for peace.

I have talked to the U.S. government recently about the peace process, or the lack of a peace process in Colombia, and one of the points I made was that you need to bring in the international community and you need to bring in the UN because these parties will not end the war by themselves. They can't anymore than the parties in El Salvador could have ended the war by themselves or made the concessions they made, by themselves. They needed that international framework and pressure and support and apparatus to make it work.

JK: I think that is an important point and the process taking on a kind of momentum of its own. In interviewing the two sides of the negotiating teams in El Salvador recently, there was a tremendous pride for having been a part of that.

BA: Absolutely, and deservedly because if you look at the four regional conflicts that were underway in the Cold War era, Central America, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia, all of them were local conflicts but in each there was an East/West dimension. The only one that has been ended successfully and permanently and on positive terms was Central America. And of that, El Salvador is clearly the most successful. I think it is the most successful model of peacemaking in a civil conflict in modern history, without question. And I don't think it will ever be replicated, frankly. Everybody won.

JK: I forgot to ask you about the role of Thomas Pickering because he had been ambassador to El Salvador.

BA: Tom was very, very helpful and one reason why the four "friends" was the "four friends plus one" so smoothly was that Tom knew the region, knew the players, was fluent in Spanish, had very good relations with the other ambassadors and was in constant contact with them and had great credibility. So that made a big difference. And Alec Watson, his deputy, also played an important role. He also came out of Latin America and was very involved, as well. You should talk to Alec.

JK: I'm going to actually. Thank you so much. I really appreciate this.

Yale-UN Oral History Project
Bernard Aronson
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