

# CONVERSATIONS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

by Paul E. Sigmund

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## THE UNITED STATES AND CENTRAL AMERICA

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*José "Pepe" Figueres led the 1948 revolution in Costa Rica and as president of the interim junta presided over the writing of a new constitution that included advanced social welfare provisions and dissolved the Costa Rican Army. As leader of the National Liberation party, he was elected president in 1953 and again in 1970.*

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In El Salvador I think that President Duarte is trying hard. Fidel Chavez Mena, his foreign minister, and José Antonio Morales Ehrlich, the other Christian Democratic member of the junta, are both good men. Manuel Ungo [of the FDR] is not bad and not good. I looked at the agrarian reform and inspected a farm and it seemed to be well run, but they can't make a cent because of the world price of coffee. The price of coffee is Salvador's number one problem. Cayetano Carpio, the top Communist in El Salvador, is a very stubborn man—very hard to deal with. You can deal with some Communists. Fidel Castro is a real bastard, but you can deal with him.

The people in Washington think they know what they are doing, but they don't. I have had hundreds of experiences with the U.S. Government. It is so large and heterogeneous that it manages to include both very intelligent and very unintelligent people. It is hopeless to influence it. The U.S. is not made to lead small countries. Its world responsibilities have been thrust on it against its will. I would make use of the Costa Rican Communist leaders as intermediaries in El Salvador. I would try to convince Manuel Mora, the Costa Rican Communist who surrendered to me in 1948 and the top Communist in Central America, to help.

The French-Mexican initiative on El Salvador makes absolutely no sense. This earth is a crazy place. What do they know about El Salvador? I spoke to President Lopez Portillo for hours. He thinks Castro is enlightened, that he has a monopoly on the future and is the only one with a long-range view. Perhaps I

am biased about Cuba. Costa Rica has done as much or more in the same time in literacy, medical care, and raising the standard of living without suppressing freedom or eliminating the protection of the judicial system. People love what they don't understand. They don't understand Cuba. They start from two premises: (1) that the world will go collectivist by the end of the century, and (2) that the United States is decadent. The U.S. is too young to be decadent. The Nazis thought that the U.S. was soft, that a democracy could not be mobilized to fight. The Communists in Central America think in the same way as Castro—that you can't have a just society without suppressing democratic freedoms. This may lead to some short-run improvements, but in the long run the flexibility of democracy enables it to correct its errors.

I may be a bit egotistic when I say this—because Costa Rican foreign policy is mainly my foreign policy—but anti-American feeling has disappeared in this country over the last thirty years. The Communist party of Costa Rica has only three congressmen and gets 3 per cent of the vote in presidential elections in this country. Because they are legalized we know how little support they have.

In Salvador free elections are also a possible solution, and if anybody can do it, Duarte can. However, Ungo and Ruben Zamora [of the FDR] cannot return to El Salvador without visible guarantees. Right now they would not return, since the armed forces are under the control of a group of barbarians.

The Guatemalan situation is even worse. It is still living in the seventeenth century. Central America divided itself into five nations when it split off from Spain, which itself was not a nation. Until recently Managua was harder to reach from San José than New York. The Nicaraguans are Andalusians [from southern Spain], while we in Costa Rica are Galicians [from northeast Spain]. Personally, I am a Catalan.

The U.S. assistant secretary of state for Latin America has enormous responsibility and no authority. Jeane Kirkpatrick [U.S. ambassador to the U.N.], when she talks about us has not the faintest idea of what she is talking about. I remember talking to President Eisenhower at a meeting where he wanted to send us atomic reactors for the development of nuclear energy. I told him we needed primary school readers more than atomic reactors. Everybody

in the United States has an aunt in Poland, but no one is interested in this part of the world. The U.S. only reacts when there are brush fires to put out. Your nation tries to be reasonable in its policy, but it is so large that it is impossible to get the ocean to move.

I would be surprised if you are surprised that U.S. relations are bad with Nicaragua. If I had been fighting for ten years, in jail and tortured for five years, I would react as they do. I went to the ceremonies for the second anniversary of the revolution last July. I thought U.S. Ambassador Lawrence Pezzullo was very understanding in not taking offense at all the rhetoric against Yankee imperialism. I heard him insulted in my presence. He took a philosophical outlook and understood that in Nicaragua the U.S. has been on the wrong side ever since 1856. The Somozas were so sick with greed that the Sandinistas didn't have to appropriate anything. Just by taking over the Somoza properties Nicaragua has become one of the most socialized countries in the world. I am friendly to the Sandinistas. I put myself in hell for Nicaragua. I am president of the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan Association. They are all Communists but me...

Seldom have we found so many negative factors in combination as those now affecting Costa Rica. We have developed a welfare state that provides a bed for every sick person and a place in school for every child. My party reduced the number of people without shoes from 80 per cent of the population to none and increased the number of secondary schools from five to 250. Our wages and consumption have been constantly increasing. We import \$750 worth of goods per person every year and try to pay for it by exporting coffee, cacao, and bananas. But except when there is a frost on the coffee plantations of Brazil, their prices keep going down. The price of oil has risen fifteen times, and with a little over 2 million people we have as many cars as Rumania with a population of 22 million. Interest rates have gone up 800 per cent here, and inflation has taken off. How can we convince our people that the party is over? And we have had the bad luck to have all this happen when the U.S. is overdrawn and not inclined to give foreign aid when it is reducing social services at home.

We have bauxite, possibly oil, and great hydroelectric potential, but how can we develop them with world interest rates at 20 per cent? We could invest \$2 billion here in development. If oil is discovered, then our credit will improve, as Mexico's has. Until then, however, we need your help in encouraging investment and economic assistance.

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## GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION IN NICARAGUA

*Tomás Borge was one of the most prominent leaders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, which led the movement that overthrew Anastasio Somoza in July, 1979. Now minister of interior of the Government of National Reconstruction, Borge is principally responsible for dealing with the media and party opposition in Nicaragua. The interview took place in Borge's office.*

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You see this glass ashtray? If I dropped it and it shattered in pieces, it would be the way Nicaragua was after the revolution. We were outsiders, with no experience in running an army, an economy, a police force. We have had to learn over the last two years. In the last few months of Somoza's rule, fifty thousand of our people were killed. Somoza tortured them, dropped them from planes, had wild dogs tear at their genitals. Yet we decided there would be no revenge. People were shot by private individuals, but there were no public executions. There are bad conditions in our prisons, but our political prisoners are not mistreated. The only aid we have received from the U.S. to improve our prisons is thousands of Bibles. One hundred thirty out of every thousand children born in Nicaragua die before the first year. Help us with them. The rest is demagoguery.

Our political system is built on direct contact with the people—with the poor. Go with me to the barrios. I sleep and eat with the people. As to the closings of the *La Prensa* newspaper, we will do it as often as necessary. When the Miskito Indians on the coast fled to Honduras and we were trying to persuade them to return, *La Prensa* said we were assassinating them. We do not believe in yellow journalism and lies. *La Prensa* is the organ of COSEP [the Private Enterprise Council]. The opposition parties are obsolete, with no reason to exist but the good will of the revolution. We have "Direct Line" [*Linea Directa*, a call-in radio program] and "Face the People" [*Cara al Pueblo*], where people can voice their complaints. If we had had elections three months after the triumph of the revolution, we would have had a hundred per cent of the seats in Congress. We need to prepare elections with a registration system and identification cards to avoid fraud. In 1985 we will have general elections for political authorities at all levels. I can tell you beforehand the Sandinista Front will win. If the Conservatives win, I will commit suicide. I cannot believe that the people would choose to return to the past. It is historically absurd. If we held elections now, the opposition parties would disappear. Look at the small turnouts at their rallies. On May 1 we had a million people at our rallies, while only about seven hundred people showed up for the right-wing parties. Democracy is institutionalized in the U.S. and some other countries, but how democratic are Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico in reality? In Mexico, for instance, the press does not dare to print any statements critical of the president.

The Permanent Commission on Human Rights is a political instrument of the enemy political parties. All it does is keep bringing up the abuses in the first few months after the revolution. The opposition criticizes the government for permitting demonstrations by mobs. In March thousands of people mobilized on one night and destroyed two opposition radio stations. I personally prevented the destruction of *La Prensa* that night. We can't prevent people from expressing themselves, and we refuse to use tear gas against them.

All kinds of rumors are circulated by the opposition: that Somoza cut off my testicles; that I meet with

Fidel Castro in the Managua airport at 5:00 in the morning; that when the water level goes down in the lagoon, it is because it is being shipped to Cuba.

*Question: Is there not a need in every system for an independent press and bodies separate from the government to receive complaints?*

We don't have liberty of the press in Nicaragua; we have license. We have courts and a judicial system. When some policemen killed a black marketeer, they were arrested and tried. We have the National Forum—a system of regular meetings with representatives of the opposition parties. I receive four hundred letters a day, and they are all answered. We are sensitive to the needs of the peasants for housing, education, medicine. These are our fundamental concerns.

[Motioning to the large collection of crucifixes on the walls and tables of the office] I am a great admirer of Jesus Christ.

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### THREE NICARAGUAN NEWSPAPERS

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*The uprising against Anastasio Somoza began after the assassination in January, 1978, of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, editor of the opposition newspaper, La Prensa. Following Somoza's overthrow, La Prensa, now edited by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, Jr., took an increasingly critical position toward the Marxist orientation of the Sandinista government. In turn, Barricada, the government newspaper, edited by Pedro Joaquín's younger brother, Carlos Chamorro, attacked La Prensa and strongly supported the government. After a split among La Prensa's writers, Javier Chamorro, an uncle of the two editors, formed El Nuevo Diario, which also adopted a pro-government position. The widow of Pedro Joaquín, Sr., Violeta Chamorro, was a member of the Junta of National Reconstruction until early 1980, when she resigned "for personal reasons." The following discussion among the three editors took place at a private home in Managua in early September.*

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*Question: Is there press censorship in Nicaragua?*

LA PRENSA: Three editors of *La Prensa* review copy for each edition, and then it goes to a special person who is charged with ensuring that it does not violate the government's decrees concerning sensitive information. We get regular notices from the government as to what we cannot discuss. Thus we could not mention the closing of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights. When Edén Pastora [*Comandante Zero*] left the country, we were told two days later that we could not discuss his whereabouts.

BARRICADA: Formerly the press was dominated by one social group. Now all sectors have access to it. The workers and peasants supported by the majority of the people now are able to express themselves in the media.

EL NUEVO DIARIO: We are different from the American press, where you have newspapers that are controlled by the Republicans or Democrats. Ours are

open to all the people. There is more freedom of the press here than in the other countries of Central America.

*Question: What is your circulation, and how are you financed?*

*La Prensa* prints 70,000 copies; *El Nuevo Diario* 30-40,000; and *Barricada* 40,000. *La Prensa* makes 30 per cent of its income from advertising and *El Nuevo Diario* about a third from the same sources. *La Prensa* shares 15 per cent of its profits with its employees. When it is closed down, as it was three times by the government in the last two months, it loses \$16,000 each time. *Barricada* breaks even because of income from printing other government publications. *La Prensa* now fears a government orchestrated campaign to intimidate the newsboys, who sell most of its copies, especially in the small towns in the countryside.

*Question: What are the most serious problems currently facing Nicaragua?*

BARRICADA: The most serious problems are economic. We now have five times as many students in primary school as before the revolution. Tuition at the university is \$5 a semester, and in 1980 we raised medical coverage to 3 million medical visits a year. The cost of oil has increased, leaving us with balance of payments problems so that we cannot import basic goods. If the U.S. would give us half the aid it gave Somoza, our problems would be alleviated.

LA PRENSA: Another reason for the balance of payments problem is the decline in production. How can you have a healthy economy when efficient factories like Prego Soap are expropriated because their profit-sharing plan is accused of "decapitalizing" the country? How can you have freedom of opinion when the government promotes the slogan, "National Directorate, at Your Command" [*Dirección Nacional, Ordene!*]? How can you have press freedom when the final examination in journalism at the State University and at the Catholic University included the question, "Explain how *La Prensa* manipulates public opinion"? Or when we get phone calls like one I received the other day: "We are going to kill you because you are a reactionary"? How can we have free elections when Daniel Ortega, the coordinator of the Junta of National Reconstruction, says that the only purpose of elections is to strengthen the revolution? How can we discuss government policy when it refuses even to publish its budget?

EL NUEVO DIARIO: The press should publish what the people believe is true and not circulate rumors and foment discontent. Our problem is that \$800 million has been taken out of this small country; we have 14 per cent unemployment; and the U.S., which owes us an historical debt because of many years of exploitation, does not help us. We are constructing a mixed economy and we need the help of the private sector. The small businesses that comprise 30 per cent of the economy have a different attitude from that of the Private Enterprise Council and *La Prensa*. [wv]