

June 7, 2005

Dear Bill:

Thanks for your letter of May 5. Sorry that I've been delayed in finishing the writing, editing, computerizing this report of Anne and my participation in the 1990 Nicaraguan elections observations.

If you detect any aspects that do not jibe with your perceptions of the process, let me know, for I want accuracy for the full compendium of items I'm writing.

Yours truly

OBSERVING NICARAGUAN ELECTIONS IN LOS CHINAMOS

by Don Irish

Our big, blue IRA truck rumbled down the dusty hill and stopped on the bridge (Puente Mirimbás) over the dirty little creek (Rio Sucio) that wanders through the town of Santo Domingo. "Main Street" looks like a 19th century Colorado mountain mining town. Elevated boardwalks ramble unevenly up and down in front of the frame one-and-two-story buildings that line both sides of the meandering street. Wooden posts hold up balconies or second-floor extensions. Many horses and mules are tied and stand mutely before the small stores. They contain a modest array of merchandise in their musty and dim interiors; but few can afford to buy the items. Swinging doors provide entrances to the cantinas. An old, flickering U.S. Western film will be shown weekly in the ramshackle upper floor of a teetering edifice. A line of houses, with their latrines directly over the creek, formerly constituted "prostitution row", but are now occupied by families. The ore-crushing mill is closed down for repairs. The ambience is subdued. UNO and FSLN banners and graffiti abound in the town. This is February in the dry season in the Amerisque mountains of Chontales, Nicaragua. We thus contended with dust rather than "world class" mud, which will arrive with the rains in a month or two.

We were among the 121 members of Witness for Peace who had been officially invited by the Supreme Electoral Council to observe the election on February 25 (1990). Altogether there were about 3,000 such individuals who came for that endeavor from many countries. [As a result of the agreements of the five Central American presidents, made at Esquipulas II (August, 1987), Costa del Sol (February, 1989), and Tela (August, 1989), the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and President Carter's group of Freely-elected Heads of State were invited by the Nicaraguan government to monitor its elections.] The United Nations very astutely named Republican former US Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, to head its team. The UN and the OAS each had personnel in the country since the summer of 1989; and at their peak each had about 400 individuals throughout the country. The Carter group numbered about 35. (Many other organizations were also among the official observers; the US Veterans for Peace, Latin American Studies Association, the European Parliament, Sister City programs, International Lawyers, and other representatives we met.) Minnesota was also represented by Project Minnesota-Leon, the Center for Global Education of Augsburg College, and Pastors for Peace.

Our team, after two days of preparatory training in Miami, had finished two additional days of orientation in Managua before leaving for the camp. Since 1983, Witness for Peace Long Term Team volunteers, of which I was one in 1988, have been assigned mainly to the areas of conflict in the mountainous interior, from the northwest 4,500 foot ridges on the Honduran border to the jungles bordering the Rio San Juan, along the frontier with Costa Rica. One of our principal tasks in these seven years was to investigate and document military attacks against civilians and civilian facilities, programs, and personnel. Our regular reports of these violations were provided the US media, human rights organizations, Congress, and the Executive branch of our government. On this trip, one of our team members investigated a

recent assassination. But this time our tasks were to be different.

Our team in Region V consisted of sixteen persons, eight men, eight women, of diverse faiths, and a variety of occupations. (Some were stationed in Boaco; others were around La Libertad, birthplace of both President Daniel Ortega and Cardinal Ovando y Bravo.) One pair rode several hours on horseback, plunging through streams and mud, to an isolated farm house which served as a voting site, one visited by no other observers. Dr. David Harris, Red Wing surgeon, was one of those. Two others worked around El Ayote, passing Contras along the way. (A fire-fight had occurred that morning, with one soldier killed, another wounded.) With us, as an "Assistant Driver", was a former Contra who had accepted amnesty. Being from the area, he was helpful in alerting us to the cross-country routes customarily followed by Contra bands. As an amnestied Contra, his life was at risk on this trip north that Saturday afternoon, as also was the young veterinarian official who rode back with us on Monday morning.

We arrived at 5:00 pm in Los Chinamos, where Anne Barstow (a Professor of History, State University of New York/author) and I were posted. Claire Weber, a current Long Term Team member (UCLA – Latin American Studies) was uneasy about proceeding further north into "Contra country", with the reminder to our small team, that they could not possibly arrive there until after dark. They hesitated to risk traveling that road at night. However, they decided to go on, since otherwise they would have missed the early morning opening of the polls. (They arrived safely.)

We came to Los Chinamos prepared with a full set of the election laws, regulations for observers, and information about all the political parties – their history, candidates, and role in the present political scene. (In Managua, Juigalpa, and Santo Domingo we had met with representatives of the UNO coalition – national, regional, and local - attorney Delvis Montiel et al; the FSLN – National, regional and local – Alejandro Bendaña, , Fernando Caldera, et al; Via Cívica (financed by the US-National Endowment for Democracy funds) – Dr. Carlos Quiñonez Torres; the Conservative Democratic party (PCD) – Lucas Urbina; the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT) – Bonifacio Miranda, their presidential candidate; Edgar Chamorro, former Contra PR man; the Supreme Electoral Council; Regional Electoral Council – Mirna Rosales, and Santo Domingo Electoral Council; the UN team headquarters in Juigalpa – José Octavio Martínez of Mexico; and others.) (I myself had met with representatives of seven of the political parties cumulative through this and other trips.)

I had been in Los Chinamos in 1988, accompanying a medical team of doctors and nurses from the clinic at Santo Domingo. However, the sleepy, small, and virtually one-street hamlet now was buzzing with activity. Dozens of horses and mules were tied to the fences and building posts on both sides of the dusty road. Hundreds of campesinos and their families were in the street socializing, preparing for the coming night within the two churches and any other available space. After dark, clusters of men gathered around candles atop large, empty oil drums, rolling dice and gambling. Two drunks got into a fight, but were separated by their respective friends (Liquor could not be sold on election day.) A resident estimated that 1,000 prospective voters were already present after having ridden or walked for hours in from the surrounding countryside to perform their civic duty. There were constantly shifting waves of campesino sombreros as the men moved about the area. Many women had small children or infant-in-arms.

[This was my ninth trip to Nicaragua. The first was in 1968 during the Somoza era, when I was faculty advisor to the University of Minnesota SPAN program in Central America.] Generally we lived amongst the poor people, the campesinos in isolated rural areas or in the urban barrios, We could not drink the water (except in Managua) or eat uncooked or unpeeled foods. Often there was no running water, electricity, or even latrines. Chickens, pigs, and dogs, frequented the houses, roaming the rooms or making their respective noises under the floors. Sleeping in hammocks or in rooms with several other adults and children was standard fare. One eats rice and beans and there was always variety rice and beans for breakfast, beans and rice for lunch, and gallopinto (mixture of rice and beans) for supper!]

The young veterinarian took us to a one-story, rather rambling residence, which had an FSLN sign on the front porch but which proved to be the house an ardent UNO family. Since there was no hostel facility in the community, we had to stay with a family the first night. (We stayed in the precinct-site, a school building, the second night.) Any choice would have found us with partisans of one or another party in that very polarized society. We were able to deposit our knapsacks in a rear room, filled with three beds. Then the family provided us with our evening meal of beans and rice and a bit of meat. They wanted us to be their guests. However, we insisted on paying them, for as independent observers we wanted to avoid obligation to any partisans. Likewise, in the morning, when we asked the charge for the night's lodging, they again demurred and refused to state an amount. So we left an appropriate sum on the table and left.

In the back yard we were soon engaged in a lengthy conversational challenge from a family relative, Erminio Pérez García, a middle-aged, well-to-do, rancher who had more than 100 head of cattle. Other sombreros soon gathered in a circle around us. "Why are you here?" he inquired. "Because of the unusual circumstances suggested by the Accords signed by the five Central American Presidents," I replied. I granted that we, as foreigners, were involved in an intrusion on their Nicaraguan sovereignty and that we were not fully at ease with that role. But we had been invited to come to their country to observe the elections, with many other internationalists. "Who invited you?" he continued, suspicious and a bit testy. "Of course," I said, "we could not visit a country without permission of its government. However, our sponsor is the Supreme Electoral Council, which has provided the auspices for about 3,000 of us from many countries to be here." (Although the SEC of five persons includes two from FSLN, two from opposition parties, and one neutral "notable", the UNO people contend that it is pro-Sandinista. It is an independent, fourth branch of government, common in Latin America.) I knew he was trying to link us with the FSLN. We had heard the venom and vituperation from UNO people against the FSLN earlier in our visits to UNO personnel at three levels. One of the women of the house then brought out a large, attractive UNO poster featuring Violeta Chamorro, the UNO candidate. (We had seen it before in Managua and had one in our collection of election items there.) They offered it to us, but we explained that we could not accept it. As with the meals and lodging, we said we would be pleased to be their guests and receive their favor on occasion under different circumstances. But our role then as observers in the community did not permit us to accept gifts from the followers of any party. Gradually, it seemed that greater rapport and trust were being established, that we had "passed the test".

Anne then retired to her mat in the family room with a number of sleeping companions, and I dozed off and on, slung in a hammock in a passage-way. Roosters answered each other's crowing most of the night, and dawn came early. Going into the street and toward the voting sites – two school buildings within the same compound – we viewed hundreds of campesinos formed in serpentine lines, winding back and forth and finally extending into the road. They stood erect and close together, body to body. Like dominoes, a push of one seemingly might topple the entire line! More than a thousand individuals had registered during the four October Sundays at each of the two precincts (juntas). According to regulation, no more than 400 persons should be voting at each place.

We entered the JRV 803 (voting site) and introduced ourselves to the President, first and second member (three persons constitute each local electoral council), and the fiscales (poll watchers for the parties). We showed them our photo-IDs and official papers. They assured us that we were free to observe any and all aspects of the process and could take photographs also (except within the voting booths). There was a spirit of friendship and serious cooperation among the 10-12 officials, though they differed in their politics. They arranged for themselves to vote first; and the polls then opened to others about 8:00 am. Electoral police, unarmed at our site, wore white shirts and dark trousers and stood at the entrance and exit doors. (Their instructions that only one person at a time enter – “uno, por favor” – might have had a suggestive value to vote for the opposition coalition, UNO, but it seemed accidental.)

Voting proceeded very slowly at first. I timed the process, noting that only one voter per minute was going through the rather complicated procedure. At that rate, if most of the 1000 voted, it would take 16 hours – until midnight – with all the paper work to be completed thereafter! The people in the long line were becoming irritated at the lack of movement. The staff put in a third booth (a black, plastic shield, triangle in another corner, covering a school desk.) That brought the voting to about 100 an hour, an improvement. Later, the staff dispensed with the initialing of each of the three ballots by each officer. Though that technically violated regulation, it seemed appropriate and necessary to speed the voting. Later in the day, the fiscales often helped insert each of the three ballots into their respective cardboard boxes while the voter stood by, for often the ballots had been folded improperly and would not go in the slots, slowing the pace. Again, the change in procedure was outside the regulations; but I never saw a fiscal open a ballot and observe its marking. That variation also seemed justifiable. Pregnant women, elderly persons, and any who were ill were repeatedly invited to come to the head of the line. Soldiers were given no preference in the sequence.

Two large books – one at each end of the long table. – contained the roster of registrants, divided by serial numbers. Each prospective voter showed their registration/ID card, and their name was checked off. Beside each name was their thumb print in blue ink. A second check against fraud was the stamping of a secret number on the back of each ballot. (This composite number stemmed from digits chosen at random by the officials at the site, the sequence being unique to the precinct.) Therefore ballots from other sites could not be introduced without detection. After voting in secret and depositing the ballots, the voter's right thumb was first cleaned and then dipped into a well of indelible ink, another precaution against multiple or improper voting. The voter then exited, holding their thumb as it dried

away from their clothing. Sometimes young women who entered carrying an infant or child left and momentarily forgot to reclaim them from a fiscal who had offered to hold him/her while the mother voted. Several returned, a bit flustered, self-consciously laughing.

Many of the international observers characterized the voting throughout the country as an almost sacred national ritual, approached with reverence, and conducted with great seriousness and conscientiousness. I was impressed again by the dignity that each person seemed to manifest, no matter how humble, carrying themselves erect with personal pride. The universal judgment of the many observers was that the elections were "free and fair" in the technical, mechanical sense.

During the day, blue OAS and white UN vehicles appeared with their personnel as did three ABC-TV staff from Mexico and El Salvador. Three of President Carter's group also visited our quite-isolated community, including former President Corazo of Costa Rica and Senator John Danforth of Missouri. (My wife and I had been Danforth Associates in the 1950's). On March 1, as we flew home on the same plane with Elliot Richardson, we were able to converse also with him and thank him for his contribution as head of the UN team.

Voting ended about 7:00 pm and the paperwork began. Each pile of ballots was checked for corresponding secret numbers, then counted until each of the three had the same total. Tallies of each of the three ballots then followed, by party designations. Parties, not candidates, were voted for, and the position on the list determined which of a party's candidates, if any, were elected. Proportional representation provided advantages for minority groups. Even with the system of proportional representation, the polarized society at this time virtually "wiped out" the centrist parties nationally.

I was intrigued that ballots were judged invalid if the X touched or crossed the lines of the circle in which placed, or if there were a smudge or line anywhere else on the ballot. Those decisions seemed unduly rigid to me – but we were only observers. As a result, at least 130 ballots were nulo there. Perhaps when the ballots were recounted in the regional center, many of those might be considered valid. Of the 1,083 registered at our site, 853 voted – 81% – about the national average. Of the 769 valid votes for President, 704 (91.5%) went to UNO and only 42 (5.5%) for the FSLN. (The Central American Unity Party [PUCA] received nine votes on the municipal ballot; and the Social Conservatives got five.) Having lived in the city of Chicago, in North Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana, I entertained the idea of inviting Nicaraguans to monitor our 1994 elections!

Why did the UNO gain a 17:1 advantage over the FSLN at our site? Region V has been perhaps the most backward, least developed sector in Nicaragua. Many of its people were very isolated in the interior and had been unable to receive the educational, medical, and other benefits of the revolution. Contra attacks targeted doctors, nurses, teachers, agricultural specialists, other governmental personnel, schools and clinics. Further, it was "Contra country", and many of the Contra came in from the hills, donned civilian clothes to register and later to vote on February 25. In addition, it was cattle-raising country, and about 15 of the bigger land owners (patróns) had worked to bring in the campesinos dependent upon them, to participate in the voting. This had been a major conflict area; and the people had wearied of the war, became increasingly resistant to the draft, and had been caught between the contending forces.

The paper work continued by lantern until 5:00 am. (The lights went out for an hour. My companion, Anne Barstow, sat on the ballot sacks until some residents brought several kerosene lamps.) A truck then came to carry some of the election officials and the ballots (in large, red plastic bags) to the regional capital of Juigalpa. There they would be counted again and the computerized data would be sent to the electoral headquarters in Managua. (I was up virtually all night, more comfortable than trying to sleep on a bare table top.) The final reports were prepared with meticulous care. We then hopped an empty cattle truck for the trip back to Juigalpa, carrying additional ballots with us. (Standing up all the way – does one sit on the floor of a cattle truck? – one's shoulders and arms are jerked constantly from holding to the wooden rail above and on the sides of the truck on the rough road.)

The FSLN, with more than 40% of the vote nationally, remained much the largest and best organized political party. That was a remarkable achievement, given the ten years of Contra war, five years of U.S. economic embargo (both violations of international law), high inflation, unemployment, and other severe problems faced by the populace. That result showed endurance, and commitment by a strong party core, even under the dire conditions. Perhaps, in collaboration with Assembly representatives from centrist parties – or defections from the fractious, unstable UNO– FSLN would be able to block an abrogation of the new Constitution and any legislation that would reverse the gains provided the majority of the people by the revolution. The FSLN was prepared to turn over power on April 25, according to Constitutional provision; though the Contras were to have been long-since demobilized by the agreements of the five Central American Presidents. If, however, the US administration lacked the wisdom and decency to respect the right of the Nicaraguans to make their own decisions thereafter, greater tragedy could have ensued.

If the US and the Chamorro coalition had endeavored to dismantle the constitutional structure, to repeal laws that had aided women, unions, peasants, ethnic minorities, and the poor, or to place Somocistas back in positions of power, then serious confrontations would have occurred. Death squads might have risen to eliminate the Sandinistas,. In the “worst case scenario” a genuine civil war might have then followed. (The Contra war is not to be seen as a civil war, having been engineered by the US from outside the country.)

President Jimmy Carter, Joao Baena Soares of the OAS, and Elliot Richardson of the UN all were witnesses to the discussion between Violeta Chamorro and Daniel Ortega after the elections. With a respect for the sovereignty of Nicaragua not previously manifested by the US, the attitudes and actions of our government would have been determinative of a peaceful transition and avoided further bloodshed. The FSLN was responsible for two free and fair elections (1984 and 1990); and it should be credited with advancing democracy in their country. They had from the beginning adhered to policies of a plural polity, mixed economy, and non-alignment; but the Contra war, economic embargo and the other stratagems of the US administration badly bent their revolutionary program. The war-weary people, in order to gain respite from a continuance of the conditions, “yelled Uncle”, as Ronald Reagan desired. The strategy of Low Intensity Conflict worked in this instance; and Elliot Abrams and company won this round. Violeta Chamorro and UNO gained the presidency.

We who respect international law, who oppose unilateral interventions by the US in the domestic affairs of other sovereign countries, will continue to alert the American citizenry to

the consequences for our own democracy of present policies (covert operation, secrecy, censorship, unaccountability of public officials). And we'll also stress the implications of low intensity conflict for the suppression of Third World peoples. These policies, as those related to Vietnam, are sapping the moral fibre of American government and society.

The elections on February 25th were technically excellent, to the great credit of the Nicaraguans. However, the conditions under which they occurred were the result of a decade of manipulation by the United States, against the Sandinistas, and its substantial financing of the UNO major opposition. [Reports indicate that the US invested 12 million dollars in the UNO campaign of Violeta Chamorro. It is illegal in US law for other nations to provide such financial aid in our elections.] Thus, the elections were mechanically honest but unfairly influenced by the US. The US continues its dominance of that small, poor country.