Views of Latino Leaders

A Roundtable Discussion on U.S. Policy in Nicaragua and the Central America Peace Plan

Participants - Toney Anaya, Eddie Cavazos, Mario Obledo, Avelardo Valdez, Willie Velásquez and Linda Yañez

Editors - Antonio González and Richard Nuccio
The Southwest Voter Research Institute is a tax exempt, non-profit, non-partisan organization chartered to conduct research which may be used to improve the level of political participation in Hispanic communities.

Neither SVRI, its publications, nor its research is intended in any way to reflect an endorsement for or opposition to, any candidate or political party.

The objectives of SVRI are:
- to provide current political and demographic baseline data by precinct for voter registration campaigns;
- to inform the Hispanic leadership and public about the political opinions and behavior of Hispanics;
- to provide support to law suits challenging discriminatory election practices and systems;
- to provide ongoing evaluation of voter mobilization strategies; and
- to inform the Hispanic leadership and public about the impact of public policies on Hispanics.

For information on SVRI publications and activities, contact: Southwest Voter Research Institute 403 E Commerce, Suite 260 San Antonio, TX 78205 (512) 222-8014

SVRI Latin America Project Reports are the product of studies on United States Policy in Latin America. The goal of the Latin America Project is to develop through a program of training sessions, delegations, seminars, polls and publications, a large group of Hispanic leaders articulate in the key issues of U.S.-Latin American relations. In this way it is expected that the political equation regarding these issues may be altered to include Hispanic leaders as natural participants in the public policy debate.

Other SVRI publications include:

Southwest Voter Research Notes, a monthly newsletter;

The Latino Electorates Series, profiles of Latino Voters in the Southwest states and at the national level, included in this series is The Political Empowerment of Texas Mexicans 1974-1988, Hispanic Political Participation, and The Latino Electorates, a national profile of Latino Voters in the U.S.;

Public Policy Reports, studies on timely public policy issues which affect Hispanics generally and Mexican Americans in the Southwest in particular. Included in this series is Falling Through the Safety Net: Latinos and the Declining Effectiveness of Anti-Poverty Programs in the 1980s.

Election Reports, a series of reports on selected elections in the Southwest.
Views of Latino Leaders:

A Roundtable Discussion on
U.S. Policy in Nicaragua
and the Central America Peace Plan

Participants:
Toney Anaya
Eddie Cavazos
Mario Obledo
Avelardo Valdez
Willie Velásquez
Linda Vañez

February 2, 1988, Roosevelt Center, Washington, D.C.

and

Willie Velásquez Sets His Sights On Latin American Issues
by Javier Rodríguez

Edited by:
Antonio González
Southwest Voter Research Institute
Richard A. Nuccio
Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Southwest Voter Research Institute extends thanks to National Community Funds of New York which funded the delegation, the Careth Foundation of Boston which funded this publication, the Center for Global Education and Current Events Contact which coordinated logistics for the delegation in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and consultants Luz Guerra, Alicia Torres, José Treviño, John Booth, John Donahue, Charles Clements and Larry Hufford who provided background information, timely logistical support and good counsel for the delegation.

SVRI is indebted to the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies of Washington, D.C., for providing the forum and the technical assistance for the roundtable discussion on Latin America. Richard Nuccio, Director of International Programs, served as moderator of the discussion and editor of the initial draft. Brooks Clapp helped moderate the roundtable discussion and was involved in the transcription and preparation of the report.

In addition, SVRI wishes to thank Javier Rodríguez and the editors of The Current, who graciously allowed us to reprint the last major interview given by Willie Velásquez before his death. Finally, thanks to R. Michael Stevens, publications editor at SVRI, who prepared the typescripts for publication.

Robert Brischetto
Executive Director
Southwest Voter Research Institute

The study was funded in part by a grant from the Careth Foundation. Any views presented herein are those of the roundtable participants and not necessarily those of the Institute, nor of the funding source. Neither Southwest Voter Research Institute nor the work contained herein is intended in any way to reflect an endorsement for or opposition to any candidate or political party.

Copyright © 1989
by
Southwest Voter Research Institute, Inc.
All rights reserved.
Printed in the United States of America.
CONTENTS

Preface v
Introduction vii
Views of Latino Leaders-A Roundtable Discussion 1
Appendix A: Statement of Delegation Head Toney Anaya 13
Appendix B: Willie Velásquez Sets His Sights on Latin American Issues 15
PREFACE

In the aftermath of Vietnam and the collapse of a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy, the United States was faced with several complex challenges in its relations with the Third World. How should we balance the use of force with diplomacy in pursuit of U.S. interests? Are there ways to foster political and economic systems in developing countries that are sustainable over the long term? Can political leaders develop a rationale for significant U.S. involvement that passes the test of domestic public opinion?

In the 1980s Central America was the place where the United States tried, once again, to deal effectively with the Third World. The judgement of history on U.S. success in meeting these challenges in its Central American policy will be harsh. Whether the failures are blamed on a zealous President or a recalcitrant Congress, the United States will exit the eighties far short of its principal goals in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

In effect, the United States has conducted two radical experiments in its policies toward Central America over the last decade. During the first part of the Carter Administration a dramatic shift away from the East-West optic imbedded in the containment policy was attempted. U.S. policy was made more sensitive to internal factors and a principle of non-intervention applied to crisis situations such as the decay of the Somoza dictatorship. The result was a collapse of public, congressional and even bureaucratic support for the policy, a reversion to containment policies by the Carter Administration itself, and the election of Ronald Reagan.

The Reagan Administration conducted its own radical experiment of "rolling back" communism, dubbed the Reagan Doctrine. Central America was now to be used as the demonstration case for how to unseat communism in Third World countries. All policy toward the area was subordinated to a grand scheme of East-West competition. The result was the mobilization of a protest movement on the scale of the early anti-Vietnam War movement and congressional-White House squabbling that nearly provoked a constitutional crisis.

The changing world in which the United States will operate in the 1990s and beyond will not permit many more such disastrous experiments. Preeminently powerful countries can make up for short-sighted policies. But the ratio between brains and brawn in our foreign policy will have to shift as our weight in the world declines relative to other powers.

That is why the Roosevelt Center was pleased to be able to participate in the preparation of this Roundtable Discussion on Central America. One part of a new foreign policy that adjusts the ends we seek to the means available to achieve them is the inclusion of all voices of members of our national community in the policymaking process. As a non-partisan institution, the Center endorses no particular solution to our foreign policy dilemmas. But we do wholeheartedly endorse the efforts of Latino leaders to help improve the decision-making process.

Richard Nuccio
Roosevelt Center, Washington D.C.
INTRODUCTION

"Views of Latino Leaders" is the first of a series of Southwest Voter Research Institute (SVRI) policy papers regarding Hispanic involvement in issues of U.S. policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Latin American Project was envisioned by SVRI's founder, Willie Velásquez, as a means of stimulating an informed debate among Hispanic leaders to foster a stronger Latino voice in the shaping of U.S. policy in international affairs. This series is a natural outgrowth of the findings of SVRI Latino voter polls conducted during the general elections in 1984, 1986 and 1988.

Latino voters have consistently expressed opposition to U.S. intervention policies in Central America. In 1984, 2 of 3 Texas Mexicans opposed increasing U.S. aid to El Salvador and any military aid to the Contras in Nicaragua. In 1986, Latinos in Texas and California continued to oppose military aid to the Contras by the same ratio and in 1988 the same result was found among Latinos in Texas, California and New Mexico. On the other hand, nearly half of the Latino voters in Texas and New Mexico and 60% in California favored granting temporary amnesty to Central American refugees.

These data are extremely important as they reflect clear attitudes on the part of the Chicano electorate. These results motivated the late Willie Velásquez to action and provided a partial basis for his conclusion that the Latino political agenda must be broadened to include issues of national and international policy.

The title piece is the edited transcript of a roundtable discussion of a fact-finding delegation of six southwestern Hispanic leaders to Costa Rica and Nicaragua that SVRI organized in January, 1988.

The delegation was headed by Toney Anaya, former Governor of New Mexico, sponsored by the Latin America Project of SVRI and funded by National Community Funds of New York. The discussion took place at the Roosevelt Center in Washington, D.C. upon the delegates return to the U.S. Richard Nuccio of the Roosevelt Center facilitated the discussion and provided the initial edit on the transcript. Delegates Anaya, Velásquez, Mario Obedo, Chairman of the National Rainbow Coalition and Corpus Christi State Representative Eddie Cavazos were present. Comments by delegates Avelardo Valdez, former President of the National Association for Chicano Studies, and Linda Yañez, an immigration attorney from Brownsville were later added.

The Latino leaders delegation visited Nicaragua and Costa Rica from January 27 to February 1, 1988 seeking to survey compliance with the provisions of the Central American Peace Plan and report its findings to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. In addition to the above mentioned delegates, Robert Brischetto, SVRI Executive Director; Antonio González, SVRI Latin America Project Coordinator, and Alfredo Cruz of National Public Radio accompanied the delegation.

While in Nicaragua the Latino leaders met with Vilma Nuñez, Head of the National Human Rights Commission; Xavier Chamorro, Director of El Nuevo Diario; Richard Stollar-Sholk, Economist at CRIES (Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales); John Moderno, U.S. Chargé de Affairs in Managua; Filberto Sarias, Vice President, Social Christian Party; Msgr. Mondragon, Pastor of Calvary Church and Seminary Rector; Jaime Chamorro, Business Manager and Editorial Board Member of La Prensa; Gustavo Toruño, Director of Production, National Farmers Union; Sergio Ramírez, Vice President of Nicaragua; Paul Oquist, National Director of Planning and Organization; Carlos Manuel Morales, Governor of Region 1; the President and members of Ulises Rodríguez Cooperative (near Estelí).

In Costa Rica the delegation met Richard and Dery Dyer, Publisher and Editor of The Tico Times; Edmundo de Suezza, Vicar of the Episcopal Bishop; Francisco Rojas Aravena, Research Coordinator, School for International Relations, National University; Enrique Gomez, CSUCA (Superior Council of Central American Universities) Coordinator of Research Project that studies Equipulas I and Equipulas II; Dean Hinton, U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica; Rodrigo Madrigal Nieto, Minister of Foreign Relations; and Alfonso Robelo, Member, Directorate of the Nicaraguan Resistance.

In addition, the delegates met and talked with scores of workers, housewives, peasants and students in spontaneous discussions designed to get unofficial and unfiltered insights.

Upon their return to the U.S. four of the six delegates traveled to Washington, D.C. to report
to the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and hold a joint press conference on their findings. The
delegation's joint statement, presented by Governor Anaya at a February 2, 1988 national press
conference with U.S. Congressional Representatives Albert Bustamante of San Antonio, Robert
Garcia of New York City, and Esteban Torres and Matthew Martínez of Los Angeles is included here
in Appendix A.

Appendix B contains the article "Willie Velásquez Sets His Sights on Latin American Issues"
by Javier Rodríguez. It is reprinted with permission from The Current, a local San Antonio weekly.
In this article, a December, 1987 interview with the late Willie Velásquez regarding his September
1987 trip with Congressional Representatives Nick Rahall of West Virginia, Jim Olin of Virginia, and
State Representative Al Luna of Houston, Rodríguez was able to draw out Willie's thought on the
delegation and the role of Hispanic leaders regarding our government's polices in Latin America.

Antonio Gonzalez
Latin America Project Coordinator
June 2, 1989
Dedicated
to the late
Willie Velásquez, 1944-1988,
whose unique vision
and commitment
were central
to launching
this project
Views of Latino Leaders:
A Roundtable Discussion on U.S. Policy in Nicaragua
and
the Central America Peace Plan

The following comments of the members of the Southwest Voter Research Institute delegation to Central America have been edited by the staff of the Roosevelt Center for brevity and grouped by the themes which emerged from the roundtable discussion held immediately upon the delegation's return to the U.S. Staff summaries of the delegations views on these themes are separated from the comments of the individual members of the delegation by bold face type.

The Suffering of War
The Latino leaders in the Southwest Voter Research Institute delegation to Central America were strongly affected by the trip; many of their preconceptions were challenged by what they saw. All stressed their sadness at seeing Nicaragua at war and the suffering inflicted on innocent people, particularly children.

Anaya: Lots of poverty and not enough food. Rationing, the long gas lines, the electrical blackouts. They had to start shutting down their electricity three hours a day just to be able to keep the essentials going. Wherever you looked, poverty by anybody's standards, but certainly by the standards [of the United States].

Or the suffering that we saw in the [children's] hospital. The suffering that the country itself is going through, having to turn over half its budget to keep the war going. And again, not able to enjoy the basic necessities of life.

Obledo: It's something you read about, the effects of war, but it's a different thing to see it. One of the most graphic things to me was visiting the hospital where the children, victims of war, were treated. And seeing a child without legs, or without arms, or burned.

One phrase that stuck in all the members' minds was of a child, close to death from war wounds, who, when asked what he most wanted, said, "Paz y juguetes. (Peace and toys)."

Valdez: Everyone it seems has lost their spouse, parents, siblings, or other family member to the revolution or war. The first morning I arrived in Managua I asked directions from a young man of about 22 years. In a conversation that followed he explained to me that he had moved to Managua from some small village outside the city shortly after his wife had been killed by the contras. He was now living with a relative in Managua since living in the countryside was too depressing and dangerous. I was amazed at how casual this information was related to me. As if it was something that everyone in Nicaragua had experienced in one form or another.

Overcoming Adversity
Many supposed that the war and economic conditions would leave the average Nicaraguan depressed, if not defeated. Instead they found a hopeful people, displaying great zeal and convictions about building a better life despite the difficult circumstances.

Cavazos: [What] impressed me was the spirit of the people, their determination. I was amazed at their spirit, at their determination to make this thing work.

We were at the small town of Estelí [a site close to the Honduran border and intense contra activity]. It was a Saturday. A poor community, and [yet] everybody was dressed nicely, not expensively, but clean and neat.

And you would think people in this kind of condition wouldn't care about tomorrow. Wouldn't care about looking nice. They're proud people. I think that they want the chance to run their own lives, their destiny, and they want peace so that they can succeed.

Reflecting what seems to be the common sentiment of all of Central America, those they met in Nicaragua listed peace as their first priority.
ence, with Cuba. You have your block committees, your neighborhood watch, and all of this system. ...[You develop a system of reporting on one another.

And even though you might give the population all these arms, they’re arms to use for defense, not to overthrow a government. Because if someone talks about revolt against a government in that kind of system, it’s immediately reported, so that the government has tight control over that kind of situation. So there’s a quasi-system...of being an open society and, yet,...a closed society....

**Anaya:** I would agree that it’s universally true that most people in power don’t want to give it up. And certainly if you don’t already live in a democracy (where you know you’re going to have to give it up some day), then it’s probably more difficult.

But having power doesn’t necessarily mean you’re going to have to give it up. Thereby, in this case the Sandinistas, it forces them to continue along the line of...improving the living standard of people and improving conditions within the country—improving the climate to where they don’t have to give up power.

If there’s an election every six months or every six years, however they set it up, and they’re able to consistently get reelected, [then] they’re not giving up the power. And certainly one of the ways to get there is to insure that you proceed along the line that you’re going to keep the majority of the people satisfied with your program and your progress. Now...[that’s] certainly an option that the Sandinistas have got to be looking at.

And the second very quick point I will make is the sharing of power. You have all these political parties and they...feel that they’re growing in strength. And they think that they’re going to have a voice. I think that the only way that they’re not going [to have a voice] is going to be if there’s a...repression that everybody’s going to know about.... So I don’t think there is a tremendous possibility of that.

...[T]hey’re going to have to share the power.... We kept hearing that the people in power today are a coalition. If in fact that’s true, I think they are going to have to extend their coalition. They’re going to have to let others come into it.

**Cavazos:** I think it’s obvious that there’s going to have to be some changes made in the Sandinista government for Nicaragua to survive as a democracy.... The change is going to come by negotiations through the peace plan, by [opposition] party participation, or by revolution.... Ortega is in power now, but his colleagues, his schoolmates...who grew up with him, the Robelos¹, the Chamorros²..., they were colleagues and friends, [but] now they’re starting to disagree with each other on policies....

You have a lot of talent there now. A lot of educated talent that I think would pull the other one down while they try to get up. They’re not all falling in line...and saying, “Okay, we got rid of Somoza, and now we’ve got the Sandinistas and we’re going on into the future....” That’s why I think the system is going to work out where the only way they’re going to survive is if everyone gets a piece of the action.

And I think Ortega is seeing that, and some of [his] people are seeing that. A civil war is not going to accomplish anything except killing their brothers and sisters. Eventually they’re going to sit down as educated men and women and say, “Look, we grew up together, we’ve loved each other, we’ve fought each other, why don’t we work together.” And I think that’s going to happen.

**Velásquez:** Still, it’s a revolutionary thing. And you’re going to have some excesses. You’re going to see their flags all over. You’re going to see a transfer of wealth from one abuser sector to the abused sector.... [You’re] going to have some land owners and some owners of businesses who are very, very scared.

Still, 40% of the GNP is with the public sector. The other 30% is with the private sector, and 30% is with the cooperatives. Well taking all these things into account you have to ask the question. Are they communists? I would say, yes.

Then I would ask a question, [what kind of

---

1. Alfonso Robelo, then a member of the National Resistance and formerly a member of the Sandinista government.
2. A well-known political family including Violeta Chamorro, wife of the opposition leader assassinated by Somoza and also a former member of the Sandinista Government.
communists? They’re Latin communists who believe that there ought to be a private sector, capitalism. They believe that religion ought to be strong. Their President baptizes his children, for example. They’re communists who believe that there ought to be a press that’s open, radio. The people ought to have political rights. That there ought not to be abusers, an abuser class, and that if there is an abuser class, there’s nothing wrong with confiscating their land and distributing it to the working people. And that laws and programs ought to be for the majority of the people as opposed to the elite. And I’d label that communism, Latino style.

Cavazos: [With] all due respect to my colleague..., I totally disagree.... I think [the Sandinistas] are taking advantage of what’s there. And what’s there is communist aid, Russian aid, Cuban aid or whatever. I don’t think that if you had a description of communist...the Sandinistas would fit under that description. They might fade in there every once in a while and fade out, but it’s to their own advantage, that’s why they’re doing this.

Where are they getting their arms? That’s the only place they can get them, or they won’t get them. Where are they getting their gasoline? Ortega...and the Sandinistas are having to run a government by whatever means they can get.... But I don’t think that if you look at the policies and what they’re doing, that what would fall under the description of a communist....

And if the tide was turned and all of a sudden we started dealing with them, they would be as pro-American as the next guy, simply because it’s to their advantage.

Yañez: I do not believe that realistically one can expect United States-style democracy in Nicaragua any time in the foreseeable future or Soviet-style communism either. The Nicaraguan people and perhaps even Ortega, want for Nicaragua what is good for Nicaraguans. What appears to be evolving is a socio-political system that cannot be labeled.

I believe the appropriate question is how can the United States influence this revolutionary and evolutionary process with ultimately the best interests of the Nicaraguan people in mind.

Having visited the Soviet Union, I can unequivocally concur with Governor Anaya that Nicaragua does not rise to the level of closed, structured society currently in place in Russia. In my opinion as an American there is hope for democracy in Nicaragua, but not if the United States continues with its current militaristic foreign policy in the region.

Valdez: Our junket included visits to two independent newspapers. According to both editors, they felt free enough to print just about anything they pleased, short of calling for an armed insurrection. Given that the Nicaraguan government is presently at war with the contras who are threatening to overthrow them, this doesn’t seem unreasonable to me.

Oppositional parties and organizations are allowed to exist in that society and participate in the political discourse. I found the average person on the street willing to discuss politics. And, it was to my amazement, that they often criticized the Sandinistas for particular policies, but never the revolution itself.

The Central American Peace Process and Sandinista Compliance

At the time of the delegation’s visit the issue of continuing military aid to the contras was being hotly debated in Washington. Opponents of continued aid pointed to significant concessions that had been made by the Sandinista government in lifting a state of emergency and opening negotiations with the internal civic and external armed opposition. Supporters of the contras emphasized the limited nature of freedom of press and expression in Nicaragua. Delegation members returned with their own strong impressions relevant to this debate.

Velásquez: I know some people would maintain here in the United States that the Nicaraguans are dragging their feet. I see one particular institution that says that El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica are far ahead of Nicaragua in implementing the...Esquipulas or Arias Plan accords.

Well, I would put Somoza and the Sandinistas...[and] make two lists and...put down the questions.... [R]eligion? Under relig-
ion, the communists, of course, are supposed to not take too kindly to religion. [But] you have more parishes now than you had under Somoza. You have 30% more priests now than...under Somoza. There were 1,500 Protestant missionaries under Somoza. There’s 2,000 now. It’s [also] a funny communist regime that pays for Catholic schools and Protestant schools....

The question of press and radio.... [T]here are articles that are not at all complimentary to the Sandinistas. They are written and they are not circumscribed in their distribution.... I am not sure that anybody really has a sound argument when they say that the press is circumscribed al estilo comunista (communist style).

Obledo: Several people have gone back under the amnesty provisions. That’s number one. Number two, they’ve done away with the Peoples’ Tribunals.... That’s another specific. Three, the grant of the broadcasting and print licenses. That’s the third.

They lifted the emergency status. But the allegations are that they really haven’t moved fast enough. They haven’t met the timetables. And so the contra people are saying, “Well they’re dragging their feet, and they’re going to wait for the Congress not to vote [for contra aid]. And they’ll drag their feet even more because then they’ll have a new president and Reagan will be gone and the individual with that great obsession with Nicaragua will no longer be there. The focus won’t be on [them], so then [they’ll] start to implement the Marxist-Leninist doctrine and...we will have a Marxist-Leninist [regime] in Nicaragua....”

It’s difficult for me to make some very definitive statements as to what I think the end result is going to be.... This foot dragging has given this administration a good argument...for contra aid. Gives it to them on a platter. And, as far as I know, the Sandinistas haven’t come up with any legitimate excuse for not having met all of these timetables. You can always say the war.

Velásquez: [Compliance has] become a political question. And I say a political question because [the Sandinistas] can...open up the press and the radio,³ they can take steps on political rights and that whole range of steps that were

³While the delegation was in Nicaragua several radio stations were granted permission to reopen and La Cronica, a new newspaper of the opposition Popular Sandinista Party, was granted a publishing license.
specified in the peace plan with the timetables, and yet they gain nothing, because politically one can say [the Sandinistas] are not going far enough and they took these steps only under the duress of the war. Therefore, our process of funding the war is successful and we’re going to continue funding the war because that’s the way we’re going to get peace....

Compare the body count [of death squad murders in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras] to the one in Nicaragua. Even [Alfonso] Robelo says there isn’t such a thing happening in Nicaragua. And Robelo is very tough. Yet that is not proof. It isn’t a question of compliance.

Regardless of what they do, we want them [the Sandinistas] out. That’s the political question.

Cavazos: I think we’re making too big an issue of why the Sandinistas are where they’re at. Whether it was the peace plan or the contra pressure, the point is that you have our government supporting a resistance to make changes in a government. Or that’s what Reagan’s said. We want them to have democracy there.

So you finally have the Sandinistas saying, “Okay, we agree. There’s a peace plan... a plan by Costa Rica’s President [and] the other Latin American presidents.

We’ll sign on that, we’re ready to do this....” [And] Reagan says, “No, we don’t trust you. We’re not going to do it.”

Well, I thought that was the objective of supporting the contras, to get the Sandinista government to make changes in their government.

They [the administration] say, “Well, they’re lying.” If that’s the case, then we’re not looking for changes, we’re looking for a [counter] revolution....

They might be lying, but you’ve got to take the peace plan and make it work like any other settlement. When we settle other wars we sign an agreement that this is going to happen. And sure, you know they could have been lying to us, but then the war continues.

I cannot understand the Reagan administration claiming to support the contras to bring changes in the Sandinista government. The Sandinista government is now saying “Okay,” for whatever reason, whether it be the peace plan or the contra pressure, we agree we’re going to make some changes.”

And we’re saying, “No, we don’t believe you. We’re going to keep on fighting you.” It puzzles me.

Valdez: ...I don’t think either the contra forces or the Reagan administration would be satisfied with any measure of compliance made by the Sandinistas short of handing over the Nicaraguan government to them. Reagan has made a commitment to have the Sandinistas out of government before his administration leaves office.

The details about the Sandinistas adhering to particular points of the Arias Peace Plan are not really important in this debate. In a meeting with Vice President Ramirez, he made this point very succinctly. “No matter how many concessions we make”, he said, “they always want more.” As long as Reagan is in office, I do not foresee any real peace in Nicaragua or in Central America.

The Armed and Unarmed Opposition

Delegation members spoke with a number of opposition figures in and outside Nicaragua, their concerns focused on the nature of the opposition and its vision of a future Nicaraguan society.

Velásquez: ...I’ve learned something. Something terrifying. Particularly with that meeting with [Alfonso] Robelo. And I thought back, I had a number of conversations with contras. Never has any one of them ever mentioned what their vision was for the working people....

Never have they said that the working class is going to get a better life. Never did they talk about agrarian reform in terms of getting the campesinos (peasants) some land.... as opposed to the Sandinistas who are incessant about this. [Alfonso] Robelo himself admits if there is no more contra aid, they vanish. That’s what he said. Implying a lot of things.

...[The civic] opposition in Nicaragua... were not shy about saying they are against continued aid to the contras. I have to admit, I didn’t talk to all of them, there’s a bunch of them. I guess in total, with this trip and the last trip, I guess we’ve...
talked to seven or eight of the parties. So one cannot make a blanket statement and say that the parties are all against contra aid, but all the people that we’ve met with in these parties are against contra aid.

That’s evidence of some pluralism, in that you’ve got contras out there and you’ve got [unarmed] opposition, institutional opposition that takes positions that are diametrically opposed. And, of course, each one of those parties wants, and here’s another example of pluralism, each one of those parties wants to rule Nicaragua.

They think they’re the best suited, and they want to win the upcoming election. And they say that they want to win and they’re going to run and they’re going to try to take over.

I clearly get the impression that [the opposition’s] conception of freedom was very high level. I think that they were philosophical about it. They talked about the rights of parties to do those kinds of things that will legitimately give them the opportunity to take control back. And they spend a lot of time on that.

They seem to spend most of their brain time, most of their thinking, most of their effort to flesh out their vision around those parts of the Nicaraguan experience of the last few years that make it impossible for them to assume control, for their party or their supporters to assume control.

And they seem to fault the Sandinistas almost exclusively on classic grounds. On the classic democratic grounds. “[The Sandinistas] don’t give us a chance to put up a radio station.” Even though it’s paid [for] by the United States. Or La Prensa, even though it’s paid [for] by the United States. Or to maintain...arms. “[The Sandinistas] want [the contras] to simply just lay down [their] arms.”

Yes, if the structures [for the opposition to take power] aren’t there, then they complain. If the structures are there, then they say it’s not enough. So freedom really was designed..., their practical definition of freedom [is] to be able, in Nicaragua, to do those things that will allow them to reassume control.

When they talked about the grupo de masa, las organizaciones de masa (mass organizations of peasants and workers) they were actually quite sarcastic about it.

For example, “Under Somoza we were able to export a lot. Now that the workers have title to the land, exports of food have dropped. Under Somoza we were able to do this, now that the workers are participating in things, things aren’t as good.”

So those steps that were taken by the Sandinistas, and designed by the Sandinistas to fulfill their platform of power to...the campesinos (peasants), power to the workers in the factories, were despreciados (disparaged) by the contras.

And actually it was not a philosophically thought out position that they took in this regard. It was just quick answers. They would go back to the classic structures that would allow them free press, ability to organize, ability to want to maintain their weapons, those kind of things.

Obledo: In regards to the [democratic intentions of the opposition]... I just assumed that when they say that they are for democracy that within that would be workers’ rights as we have them in a democracy. And when I hear the word democracy I think of our country. When [Alfonso Robelo] gave us some papers, and I haven’t read them, there was a pamphlet there describing the Nicaraguan resistance, ideals and visions, etc. And there may be within that document some set of principles on workers rights.

...I got the impression that the civilians, and I speak now specifically of [Alfonso Robelo], don’t have any say so within the contra movement. In fact, he was not invited to participate in these last round of cease fire talks.... He was right there. He was not invited. He did not participate. So I just get the feeling that they’re not part of it any more.

Valdez: Then I got the impression that the contras are seen as Somocistas and puppets of the Reagan Administration. The Nicaraguan people hold the contras responsible for much of the suffering being experienced by their country. One farmer outside of Esteli mentioned to us that he didn’t understand why Reagan sends money to arm the contras, when he could be spending that money on the poor in his own country...
Ending the Conflict

The Latino leaders expressed a hope for an early end to the Central American wars, but also noted fears about the ultimate commitment to peace of some parties.

Anaya: [T]wo immediate things...have to be done: one is an end to the war, which means what? What the United States can certainly do immediately is stop aid to the contras.

I think following right on the heels of stopping aid to the contras is working with the other Central American countries — not just Central American countries, but other countries as well — to insure that the proper mechanisms are set up for verification, for insurance that the peace process in fact, moves on. We can then move on to letting the Contadora group process take over at that point in terms of immediate steps to end the war....

I think the long range goal that should not be too far down the road should be a reconstruction of Nicaragua along with Central America.... [W]e can't look at Nicaragua in just the abstract, it's got to be looked at in the context of a region. And we can't overlook what's happening in El Salvador or Honduras.... If, in fact, things are going to be successful in Nicaragua. We can't just say, Nicaragua, here's what's going to happen if we're not also prepared to say, El Salvador, Honduras or whatever, there are some things that are expected of you too.

Obledo: ...[The] Central American situation is a difficult one and there's not an easy answer to it as illustrated by the division here in the Congress. And when one visits and hears all these people, I for one did not come up with any real clear answer to the problem.

You hear both sides, there's convincing arguments on both sides, and the thing one must do is weigh all of these facts and then just make a decision and hopefully it'll be the right decision.

You hear, for instance, regarding the peace plan, that contra aid will destroy the peace plan. That they'll go back to square one. That the discontinuance of the aid will turn Nicaragua into a communist state. An irreversible communist state. Because the Central America governments that are signatories to the peace plan are too weak to enforce it. And they could never enforce it against this threat of terrorism on the part of the Sandinista government and the exportation of terrorism into Honduras, Costa Rica, and everywhere else.

[You know that] Arias himself, and we've heard this from three or four people, has advocated direct military U.S. action in Nicaragua. And when you hear it from more than one source you wonder whether that may not, in fact, have happened.

And then the Sandinistas, I would think, are concerned too because as the economy deteriorates and the gas lines get longer and people get irritated, and the food lines and the empty shelves, etc. Then they've got big, massive problems on their hands internally with the population. And so they've got to do something. Slogans don't feed people. You read all these slogans on the wall and the flags, and the rallies, but you have to keep the population at least fed and clothed.

Yañez: Once the armed conflict ceases, and it cannot be accomplished without cessation of aid to the contras, then [U.S.] economic sanctions must stop in order to allow Nicaragua to rebuild its economy.

The Role of Hispanics in the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy:

The delegation held strong views on the significance of their visit for Central Americans and for their fellow Hispanics in the United State.

Obledo: ...I feel very strongly about...the inclusion of Hispanic Americans...in policy development regarding Latin America. ...[W]hen Latin Americans speak to other Latin Americans it's a lot different than some [U.S.] ambassadors...when they're speaking to Latin Americans. It's just a completely different scenario. And that's why our community has stated and continues to repeat that we're left out of this policy discussion and, in many regards, that's why some of our problems are within this hemisphere.

And I claim and insist that the security and well-being of this country is not so dependent anymore on Europe or the Far East, but within this land mass called America, that's where the
security and the well-being of this country is. And as you know, William Colby said, "The greatest threat to this country is not Russia, but Mexico." And there's been similar statements made by various government officials.

Velásquez: I think that there is an excellent contribution that Latinos in this country can make towards peace. Long term peace. I think we need to introduce some new ideas in this regard.... I think the character of those ideas would be citizen oversight. Citizen participation. Hispanic-American participation and oversight on the question of formation of U.S. policy in Central and South America.

Anaya: [This is] a report on Central America by Hispanic Americans. And that I think is important for a couple of major reasons. One, is that it will demonstrate that Hispanic Americans are, in fact, wanting to have a major role in determining the destiny of this country and its policies overseas.

Secondly, I would hope that it would also provide some encouragement to Hispanic Americans that will be receiving the report, to encourage them to become involved, not only in this debate, but maybe educate them.... Maybe give them some perspective or give the report some credibility, it wouldn't have otherwise, because it comes from Hispanic Americans.

And I would hope that it would pull other Hispanic Americans, not only into this debate, but into debates on other issues into the future.

Obledo: ...[This report will have a Latin imprint on it, which I think makes the world of difference. The people we met with in those countries, the government, others, were simply elated at the fact that a group of Latinos would go on this fact-finding mission within those countries.

And we're expressing an interest in the problems of family members, if you will, who spoke the language and have the same background and the same aspirations. And they see a community that is tied all the way up into North America...with these common interests that we have. I think those dialogues bring a different perspective to foreign relations.

Velásquez: It seems clear to me that the next inevitable step is Hispanic alternatives. Not just to the Nicaragua problem, but Hispanic alternatives to the development of U.S. policy. And I would again say [I'm speaking about] Southwestern Hispanics' input into policy.... I think it's going to require a series of structures, institutes that are going to begin together sensible alternatives. It's going to require a much greater integration of Central America into the political discussion in the Southwest.

One must admit that we made a lot of progress in the numbers of elected officials. In the numbers of the registered [voters], in the numbers that have turned out.... But that's parochial. We are, in fact, a parochial people. We are concerned about, and rightly so, about local problems. We need to understand that with the growth of power there is also the growth of responsibilities. And one big part of the responsibilities is that as we grow in power, we simply must get involved with foreign policy questions.

Cavazos: ...[The] point that Mario [Obledo] was making about the joy of having us come down there because of our ethnic background, our language and so forth can be best illustrated by Mr. Robelo, the contra leader.... We took the position opposite of what he wanted, but he still mentioned the same fact, that "I'm glad you're interested. I'm glad you're here." Even though we were not supporting his side. "Maybe the next group will be on my side."

But I hope that this is the beginning or the continuation of the process. I hope it excites people and encourages other Mexican American, Hispanic Americans...to get involved in foreign policy, especially dealing with Latin America.

Yañez: I first wish to applaud the Southwest Voter Research Institute for having the foresight to put forth a progressive program such as this and my hope is that this is only the beginning. As we as an Hispanic community take ourselves more seriously in foreign policy questions, it should follow that United States foreign policy makers will look to us in their decision making. As a new force in this arena, we need to be especially well informed in order to lend credibility to our voice...
Valdez: The role of Mexican Americans in foreign policy is going to be very important in the future. As Chicanos continue to win more offices in the Congress and Senate in the next few decades, I am convinced they are going to be the leaders on issues relating to Mexico, Central America, and Latin America as a whole.

That is, Chicanos are no longer going to be satisfied with just dealing with domestic issues as they have in the past.

Chicanos are learning that there is a natural cultural and political affinity between themselves and Latin American countries.

A lesson many are quickly learning is that there is a connection between misdirected foreign policy in this region and its negative impact on them domestically.

For instance, the present administration’s policy toward the national debt of these countries, as well as its military assistance to governments in these areas, have contributed to large-scale immigration of Mexicans, Central Americans, and other Latinos to this nation.

This in turn, has resulted in a domestic right-wing backlash against Chicanos and other minority groups in the form of the English Only Movement and anti-immigrant legislation that has the potential to discriminate against them. Latinos are learning these lessons and they will make a difference.
APPENDIX A

Statement of SVRI Latin American Project delegates at Congressional Hispanic Caucus press conference, Capitol Hill, February 3, 1988. Delegates present were: Toney Anaya, Eddie Cavazos, Mario Obedo and Willie Velázquez. U.S. Representatives present were: Albert Bustamante (San Antonio), Robert Garcia (New York City) Matthew Martínez and Esteban Torres (Los Angeles).

I want to thank Congressman Bustamante and the other Hispanic Members and leaders for being here today.

As head of an Hispanic leaders delegation just returned from a fact-finding mission to Central America, I would like to make the following observations. Hispanic Americans are making the transition to power in the U.S. In the five southwestern states, for example the Mexican American community is becoming increasingly sophisticated in its approach to the policies of the United States regarding a broad range of issues. For instance, Mexican American voters in Texas and California have for four years consistently demonstrated their opposition to more aid to the contras by a 2 to 1 margin. It is because of growing Hispanic political power and love of country, then, that we feel compelled, indeed obligated, to get more involved in issues of national and foreign policy. We particularly believe that Hispanics can be a bridge of understanding, conflict resolution and goodwill between the United States and Latin America.

With regard to U.S. policy in Central America, we believe that serious mistakes in perception and a lack of credible lines of communication have led the Administration to support, in practice, the destabilization of Central America.

During our week in Nicaragua and Costa Rica we observed overwhelming support for the Central American Peace Plan. And equally overwhelming opposition to the Administration’s policy of supporting the contras. Frankly, after talking with government officials, opposition leaders, members of the clergy and average citizens in Nicaragua and Costa Rica we concluded that the missing element in the search for peace in Central America is the will of our government to genuinely support the Peace Plan.

Nevertheless, more progress towards peace and democracy has been made in Nicaragua in the five months since the Peace Accords were signed than in the last six years of contra aid.

Our findings in Nicaragua and Costa Rica have convinced us that the policy of giving aid to the contras, whether military or non-lethal, must be terminated immediately. We the United States face both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to face up to the facts, listen to the five Central American Presidents, the leadership of the rest of Latin America and the big majority of the American people and end this failed policy. The opportunity is to give, by ending contra aid, an enormous impulse to the peace process in Central America.

We, as Hispanic leaders from the Southwest, believe it is time to accept this challenge and seize the opportunity. In the best traditions of America’s democratic ideals, ending aid to the contras would be an enormous advance for peace and democracy in Nicaragua.

Frankly, if Congress fails this challenge, there is every reason to believe that the Peace Plan will collapse, the various civil wars will intensify, steps towards democracy will stop and all of the Americas will be less secure.

Funding the contras will not ensure that the Sandinistas comply with the Peace Plan. It will, instead, provide an incentive to the contras to keep on fighting. They will know that more money, weapons equipment and intelligence are in the pipeline. Cease fire discussions will reach an insolvable impasse.

Make no mistake, the Sandinistas are not saints. They have not complied with the Peace Accords as quickly or as fully as they should. But voting more aid to the contras will give them every pretext to halt the progress that has been made.

We affirm that the State of Emergency has been lifted, that the popular tribunals have been
abolished, and that vigorous debate and civic opposition exists. A law has been passed endorsing and authorizing plans to hold municipal elections and elections to the proposed Central American Parliament. At last count, 14 legal opposition parties and political associations were active in Nicaragua.

That these political parties exist and are growing was perhaps our most important finding. Simply, the Administration's concept of the Nicaraguan political equation has been dead wrong. Between the Sandinistas and the contras exists an extensive array of political forces. All of these forces would benefit if the U.S. stopped aiding the contras. Both the Sandinistas and the contras would be tested in stiff competition with this array of Social Christians, Liberals, Conservatives, Populista and others.

America's best contribution to the Peace process in Nicaragua and all of Central America should be to give that process an opportunity to succeed.

Let's challenge President Ortega to continue democratizing Nicaragua. Let's allow these opposition parties to have a go at the Sandinistas in free elections.

Such a change in our policy would be applauded throughout Latin America and the world. When all is said and done, the American contribution to resolving the conflicts in Central America ought not to be support for the contras, whose claim to fame seems to be the wanton destruction of 25,000 Nicaraguans and 3.5 billion dollars in economic damage. That's not the democratic way and not the American way.

Thank you.
Toney Anaya, Chair
Southwest Voter Research Institute
Delegation
APPENDIX B

Willie Velásquez Sets His Sights On Latin America

by Javier Rodríguez

Reprinted from Current, March 31-April, 1988

There are, of course, no verdant jungles, no echoing sputter-burst of machine gun fire and no streaks of blood red on olive green fatigue inside the headquarters of the San Antonio voting rights organization well-known for its efforts to cultivate political power among Hispanics and other minority groups north of the U.S.-Mexico border.

But there is a growing political and cultural connection between the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project (SVREP) headquartered in downtown San Antonio and the nations of Central and South America. Willie Velásquez, President of SVREP, is busy these days priming the new Southwest Voter Research Institute—the think-tank offshoot of SVREP—to become a leading conduit for information about Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador and other Latin American nations.

That’s a lot of new turf for Velásquez, a key player in strengthening political muscle for American Hispanics, especially at the local level in dozens of cities and school districts across the United States. Last summer, he visited Chile and weeks later toured parts of Central America, including Nicaragua.

Velásquez, never bashful of expressing his own opinions, is characteristically blunt on the subject of Nicaragua. “It is apparent to me,” he says, pausing as he often does, apparently composing his thought in mid-sentence, “that the U.S. has clearly lost moral suasion [in Nicaragua].”

American support of Contra rebels, he adds, has helped reduce Nicaragua to a husk of a country, and America is already paying a moral price, both at home and abroad. “Our involvement in Nicaragua has lowered civilization out there,” he says. “The United States has made these people out there less civilized. They’ve gone at each other’s throats. We’ve given them guns to go at each other’s throats. We’ve given them incentives to go at each other’s throats. That isn’t what the United States stands for.”

As a result, he says, the United States has used up virtually all the good will it had developed through the years, not only in Nicaragua but also throughout Latin America. Velásquez shares a concern held by others who question basic American policies in Latin America:

“For progressive types who are for social reforms to solve the major problems of Latin America,” he says, “it is very hard for them to now be pro-U.S. If they are pro-U.S., they are being ostracized by their own communities. As a result, United States supporters in Latin America are becoming a bunch of kooks, right-wing nuts, who are like Dr. Strangelove-types and who spell disaster for us. That’s going to be a
legacy that is going to survive the Reagan administration.”

Velásquez’s concern for events in Central America is not new, dating back at least to his college years when he studied international economics and acquired a distaste for American policies in that region. More recently, he has become acquainted with various leaders and thinkers from that area who have visited his offices. But his newest interest, in foreign affairs is a deliberate effort to broaden the scope of his office’s work. He is already an experienced warrior when it comes to dragging local governments into courts in efforts to create single-member districts, and he’s an old hand at launching voter registration drives.

There is a link, however, between Southwest Voter’s previous work and the new Latin American initiative. Velásquez holds that the Sandinista government is a legitimate expression of the Nicaraguan people’s will, that it came to power in a revolution against a 45-year-old family dictatorship and was further strengthened by a 1984 election in which it won 80 percent of the vote in a field including six other political parties and in full view of several hundred foreign election observers.

Velásquez plans to compile an assortment of polling data from American Hispanics on Latin American issues and to establish working ties with Latin Americans to promote fair elections and political freedoms. The fundamental idea is to make voter registration and polling techniques available to people throughout Latin America.

In the United States, among the objectives of his organization are keeping American Hispanic leaders informed and making them more effective and powerful in shaping foreign policy south of the border – thus elevating discussions of Central America above the usual East-West rhetoric.

The first order of business, Velásquez says, is to trigger a rambunctious debate among Hispanic leaders on U.S. policy in Central America. He has a three-year, three-part plan, developed after a week-long tour of Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica in September, 1987.

To begin, he says, SVREP will attempt to involve American Hispanics in Latin American elections as observers. The idea is to foster free political expression in efforts to prevent Central American countries from becoming oppressive puppet states.

He is also making plans to establish a legal defense fund to assist people in Latin America who have spoken out in defense of political freedom and found themselves at odds with their governments.

Finally, he says, he hopes to begin a series of debates about Central America among Hispanic politicians in the United States. He plans to bring Latin American writers and leaders north and to take various delegations of Americans south to Central America to exchange ideas.

Velásquez’ own opinions, he says, will not be added to the stream of statistical data he plans to make available to American lawmakers through his offices.

If he were to add his ideas, it is likely he would draw raised eyebrows and worse from pro-contra political leaders who would quickly attack him as a biased, Communist propaganda propagator. That’s because Velásquez believes the Sandinista government should be left alone to govern Nicaragua, an interesting position for a man who helps to sustain and promote democracy in this country.

At the heart of his opinion on Nicaragua is the sense that the labels “Marxism” and “Communism” mean something rather different to Nicaraguans than they do to Americans or Soviets.

The unsophisticated debate tends to view the world divided into whites and blacks-democratic and communism. In truth, claims Velásquez, politics in Central America are more complex, offering various shades of gray in the ideological spectrum.

For example, he says, the Sandinista government, though backed by the Soviet Union, has allowed other Nicaraguans to speak out against the government and although it confiscated land