It was the end of January 1988. Willie Velasquez and the Southwest Voter Research Institute-Latin America Project (SVRI-LAP) delegation were on route to DC from their week-long fact-finding mission to Costa Rica and Nicaragua.

Velasquez was accompanied by a distinguished group of Latino leaders that included former New Mexico Governor Toney Anaya, former LULAC National President Mario Obledo, Texas State Representative Eddie Cavazos, UTSA Professor Avelardo “Lalo” Valdez, Brownsville Refugee Attorney Linda Yanez, NPR Correspondent Alfredo Cruz, SVRI Executive Director Bob Brischetto and LAP Coordinator Antonio Gonzalez who all went ostensibly to learn about the
“Contadora Peace Process” supported by Venezuela, Panama, Colombia and Mexico and the “Esquipulas Peace Agreement” chiefly advocated by Costa Rica.

In the 1980’s President Reagan’s policy of so called “low intensity war” in Central America had caused a massive influx of refugees into US Latino communities in the southwest as well as Florida, New York, Maryland, and Illinois. Indeed New Mexico Governor Toney Anaya created quite a stir in 1984 when he declared New Mexico a sanctuary state for Central American refugees. Anaya was Co-Chair of Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition at the time.

Willie’s plan was to meet with the 18-member Congressional Hispanic Caucus and persuade them to vote against Congress authorizing more military aid to the Nicaragua mercenaries called Contras who under CIA guidance had waged guerrilla war mostly in northern Nicaragua since 1981. 30,000 Nicaraguans perished during the Contra war.

Willie’s groups’ experiences during their fact-finding mission had convinced them more than ever that Mexican Americans leaders had to take a stand against funding Reagan’s “low intensity war” in Nicaragua. At that time involvement in any foreign policy issue was considered off limits by the big majority of Mexican American organizations, especially groups receiving government, corporate or Cuban-exile funding.
The only flight available from Costa Rica was on American through Miami with an overnight stay, so I booked our group of six (we had lost Professor Lalo Valdez who returned to Mexico City where he was living as a Fulbright scholar, Attorney Linda Yanez who returned to Brownsville, TX, and NPR Correspondent Alfredo Cruz who returned to San Antonio) on the flight and for one night at the Miami Airport Hilton.

When we arrived bone tired past midnight at the airport hotel, I sat the group in the hotel lounge and went to check us in. Except no one was at the front desk, which was completely mirrored. Even in those days Miami was glitzy. I yelled out softly “Hello, anybody here” in English and then in Spanish “Hola, hay alguien aqui?” several times.

After a minute or so I refocused and started looking around and lo and behold on the mirrored front desk were two thick long lines of cocaine. We had obviously interrupted a party. I saw movement in the corner of my eye and a sheepish young Cuban unfurled from a crouch behind the front desk. He gave me a smirk and quickly checked us in. Neither one of us mentioned the coke lines right under our noses. It was Miami the cocaine capital of America in the 1980’s after all.

We flew bright and early the next morning to DC. When we arrived, Willie went to see CHC Chairman Albert Bustamante, who had been his bitter enemy dating back to Willie’s days as a Raza Unida Party (an independent nationalist Mexican American party in the southwest) leader in San Antonio in the 1960’s.
Bustamante was of course a conservative Democrat who hated Raza Unida.

Indeed in 1985 Willie had publicly threatened to run against Bustamante for his support of military aid to the Contras.

Willie was also irked that US Rep Solomon Ortiz of Corpus Christi was supporting the Contras too. It was a personal affront to Willie that all the work of Raza Unida in the 60’s and 70’s and Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (SVREP) in the 70’s and 80’s to empower Mexican American voters and break the strangle hold of reactionary good old boy white farmers

"In 1985 Willie had publicly threatened to run against Bustamante for his support of military aid to the Contras."

ANTONIO GONZALEZ

on elective office in south and west Texas had resulted in electing these two “caranchos” (as he would say) who were supporting US military intervention against one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.

Contra aid surprisingly was a big issue in sleepy San Antonio where SVRI was based. That’s because as a military town (back in the day San Antonio had six military bases most of which were closed in the 1990’s) lots of US-Latin America interventions were staged in San Antonio.
I remember in 1986 after my first trip to Nicaragua and Honduras with the Central America Information Center, my friend Eddie Lopez, who wore an eye patch (and thus was nicknamed Danger Mouse after the cartoon character spy who wore a patch over one eye) and I went to his favorite bar to chat about the trip.

We were joined by his friend Ralph an active duty GI. When I spoke about our experiences in the northern Nicaragua town of Ocotal on the Honduran border, Ralph perked up “you were just in Ocotal?” “Yes…why?” I responded, “So was I” Ralph replied.

In fact, Ralph was Special Forces and regularly parachuted from 50,000 feet high (called High Altitude Low Opening—HALO) into northern Nicaragua to plan and direct terrorist attacks with the Contras on the villages. When done with his missions Ralph would be evacuated James Bond style with those slow flying, prop driven planes that scoop up a balloon tethered to the evacuee on the ground, who would then be reeled into the plane.

Moreover, uber popular San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros had catapulted to the national stage in politics based in part on his appointment by President Reagan to the Kissinger Commission on Central America in 1983. Ever the triangulator Mayor Cisneros managed to end up appearing to support Reagan’s anti-Nicaragua policies while submitting a little circulated liberal dissent crafted by liberal UTSA Latin Americanist Dr. John Booth. Cisneros’ performance was good enough to get him Vice Presidential consideration by Dem. Nominee Walter Mondale in 1984 - a first for US Latinos.
A few months earlier in summer 1987 I (on Willie’s behalf) had met and made the peace with US Rep Henry B. Gonzalez, Bustamante’s mentor and former boss precisely over his staunch opposition to Contra Aid. Indeed, SVRI had been circulating Henry B.’s articles and speeches - which were quite good- on the issue, Henry B. was quite pleased that we were using his materials. Stroked his healthy ego I suppose.

I had also been systematically working with Silvia Arreola, Bustamante’s district director in San Antonio. Arreola was a former MALDEFian and friend of SVRI from our immigration reform work in Texas two years earlier. She had smoothed the way for the Bustamante-Velasquez rapprochement with her boss.

Finally, during summer 1987 Willie had deployed me to put some grassroots pressure on Bustamante and Ortiz in their home districts on the sly. Using non-SVRI resources I had sent Jesse Romero –a young organizer who had worked for me as an intern at the Mexican American Legislative Caucus in Austin during the first half of 1987 before I came back to SVRI upon the closing of the legislature in May. Romero had spent two months on a letter writing campaign in San Antonio and Corpus Christi. The real deal Romero generated hundreds of letters opposing Contra Aid to the two Congressmen from Mexican Americans at tienditas and such.
The two met, it was cordial, and Chairman Bustamante confirmed he was organizing a press conference for Velasquez and Governor Anaya the next day “to give voice to the grassroots” on the Central America issue. The nuance was Bustamante did not agree to support us. But to give us a platform. That was good enough for Willie.

Meanwhile Albert Jacquez, Legislative Director for Congressman Esteban Torres of Los Angeles (known as “ET”) and I were frantically organizing turnout for the press conference. “ET” was the most progressive member of the CHC and was very supportive of SVRI’s Central America efforts.

The next day before a packed room of Latino staffers, DC Central America activists and the media SVRI had its press conference with Gov. Anaya and Willie doing the talking. It was a smashing success. “ET” and Congressman Bobby Garcia from New York City came by and gave thunderous supporting remarks as well.

It all looked quite impressive with our group and the Members of Congress backing up Governor Anaya and Willie. Chairman Bustamante was there too as moderator ably handling the press conference.

The next day our group went home. Exhausted.

The next week Congress by a narrow margin voted to cancel military aid to the Contras, closing yet another ugly chapter of US military intervention against sovereign Latin American nations. The majority of the CHC voted against Contra Aid for the first time since 1984. Chairman Albert Bustamante and US Rep Solomon Ortiz both reversed their previous votes and opposed military aid to the Contras.
Note 1: A few years later Bustamante was defeated by Republican newscaster Henry Bonilla due to a bribery scandal. Bustamante was later convicted and did federal prison time. His southwest Texas border district (TX23) has become quite embattled changing hands back and forth repeatedly between Dems and Reps over the years. In 2018 it is once again targeted as one of the key swing districts in the country.

Note 2: Unbeknownst to all of us Willie was already ill at the time. Five months later he passed before his time on June 14, 1988. In 2013 the Texas Legislature declared his birthday May 9 “Texas Recognition Day”. He was 44 years old.

Note 3: In 1997 SVRI changed its name to WCVI -the William C. Velasquez Institute and the Latin America Project-LAP changed its name to InterMestic Initiatives-IMI.

About the author: Antonio Gonzalez is the WCVI and SVREP President since 1994. He joined the organizations in 1984/85.
E-mail: agonzalez@wcvi.org
Twitter: @AGonzalez1217
www.wcvi.org