Willie Velasquez SVRI’s legendary leader had passed away in June 1988 just months after leading Mexican American opposition to President Reagan’s policy of US military aid to the Contras in Nicaragua -which was finally cancelled by Congress in Feb 1988.

Shaken, the Southwest Voter Research Institute (SVRI) put the Latin American Project (LAP) on hold while new President Andy Hernandez struggled to keep his two organizations alive (Hernandez like Willie also ran the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project- SVREP).

Fortunately, the 1988 Presidential elections along with the “Willie Good Will” bump injected much needed cash into the operations. By spring 1989 Andy Hernandez had decided to conscientiously sustain Willie’s Latin America legacy as it was little known. Few knew for example that during 1987-88 Willie had taken trips not only to Nicaragua and Honduras but to Chile with the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and to El Salvador and Honduras with Al Luna, Chairman of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus of the Texas House of Representatives.
The Salvador trip was sponsored by celebrity leftist doctor Charlie Clements. Clements had set up a medical clinic for the FMLN on Guazapa Volcano outside San Salvador that was the subject of the Oscar winning documentary “Witness to War”.

Indeed, Willie was a modern-day Jeffersonian revolutionary who specifically supported a people’s right to revolution. He once told me, “revolutions are society’s great correctors, you must have them when conditions justify.”

SVRI reactivated the LAP and broadened its horizon to include opposition to US support to the Salvadoran dictatorship which had been at war since 1979 with the revolutionary FMLN (Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional -which had formed in 1980 unifying five guerrilla groups).

Funds were raised to mount a second Latino leader’s fact-finding delegation to Central America in August 1989 with another distinguished group comprised of two future Congresspeople School Board Trustee Ciro Rodriguez of south San Antonio, Maricopa County Supervisor Ed Pastor of Phoenix, New Mexico Secretary of State Rebecca Vigil Giron, LA Businessman-activist Mike Hernandez, Professor Gil Cardenas from UT Austin, San Antonio Judge Sherryl Tenayuca (grand-daughter of Emma Tenayuca, iconic leader of the 1938 pecan-shellers strike in San Antonio) and myself.
Going to US client-state El Salvador was more complicated than visiting Sandinista-ruled Nicaragua. It was far more dangerous -75,000 killed and more than a million civilians displaced in the 80’s in a tiny country 2/3’s the size of the Rio Grande Valley of Texas with three times the population!

So, our group went to Mexico City first to meet with FMLN leaders -yes, the Salvadoran guerrillas’ political leadership was based in Mexico City, whereas the guerrilla army and combat officers had camps on El Salvador’s volcanoes and just on the other side of the Honduran border, but meeting with the FMLN in El Salvador was far too risky.

We met with the Political Diplomatic Commission of the FMLN in Coyoacan an historic suburb of Mexico City where the iconic Mexican artist Frida Kahlo once lived. I remember the location well: “El Merendero”, a quaint hole-in-the-wall.

There our group drank café and ate delectable flan with the FMLN representatives. Comical really, these gruff comandantes turned out to be just like us and we really connected with them talking family, justice, revolution...and US intervention. The women in our group especially hit it off with Comandante Ana Guadalupe Martinez, a top leader of the Peoples Revolutionary Army faction of the FMLN.

After Mexico City we flew to San Salvador and began the real meat of the delegation. It was harrowing. On the first day outside the restaurant where we were having lunch the police shot down a man. We didn’t know why. We just heard boom, boom, boom. Supervisor Ed Pastor I think, went to look while the rest of us hunkered down. He came back and said “yeah they killed this guy. already taking his body away.” A few minutes later a small water truck arrived and washed away the blood. By the time we finished eating and went outside the searing midday heat had evaporated the water. The crowds of shoppers and workers continued. It was like nothing had happened.

While in San Salvador we met with Salvadoran government representatives, the US embassy, human rights advocates, and moderate left leader Ruben Zamora of the Popular Social Christian Movement. Together with Guillermo Ungo of the National Revolutionary Movement, Zamora was arguably the most well-known non-guerrilla leftist in the country. It was a miracle the two hadn’t yet been murdered by the death squads like so many other leaders.
The Salvador trip was somber compared to SVRI’s hopeful 1988 trip to Nicaragua. It was risky to go out at night as there really were no zones that weren’t disputed by guerrillas and government, nor menaced by the infamous government-linked death squads.

Though US policy of “low intensity war” had wrecked Nicaragua, the Sandinistas were never in danger of being overthrown by the Contras. Still, the refugee crisis and war took a terrible toll.

But El Salvador was much worse.

El Salvador’s military-private sector dictatorship had been in undisputed power since the 1932 massacre of 30,000 peasants. “La matanza” (the killing) as it was called was a government wave of repression in response to an anti-dictatorship rebellion led by the legendary Farabundo Marti.

Hence El Salvador’s modern-day revolutionaries took his name to make the point of continuity with the people’s history.

In fact, Salvador’s dictatorship was truly of the wealthy class compared to Nicaraguan “Somocismo” in which one family ruled for forty years. 14 powerful extended families comprised the private sector side of the dictatorship which alternated power when convenient with the armed forces -which had their own political party (PCN-Partido de Consolidacion Nacional-Party of National Consolidation). Together the 14 families and the armed forces ruled undisputed over a 50-year dictatorship that had greatly enriched both.

Conversely, the FMLN may have been the most effective guerilla group ever. Anyone that has been to El Salvador gets this. Unlike other countries with guerrilla rebellions El Salvador is crowded. Densely populated with far less land, scant jungles and mountains then is usually needed to hide. Yes, hide from the well trained and equipped Salvadoran Army which received billions in the 1980’s from Washington, DC in money, equipment, advisors, etc.

But hide they did...in plain sight. The FMLN was everywhere, all the time. They were the people. Men, women (lots of women), youth all living daily civilian lives, converting to guerrillas and their support networks by night.

It was an impossible situation for the government which assassinated civilians directly or thru murderous paramilitary death squads at a rate of 50-100 per week for the decade! Yet owing to US aid they could not be toppled. And the guerrillas were too smart, strong, and rooted to be vanquished.

One high light was a trip to a Lutheran Church-sponsored refugee camp on an island in Lake Ilopango near San Salvador. We took several fifty-pound bags of dried corn and beans as a show of our solidarity to the refugee committee of elders who spent the afternoon and evening talking with our group about how they had fled from army repression in their home towns and established the island sanctuary, while grinding the corn and making us dinner over an open fire. The handmade tortillas were amazing.
We camped out that night with them. I asked the camp leaders if it was dangerous. They said, “don’t worry if army patrols come by to harass us the dogs will bark.”

Of course, the dogs barked all night.

My decision to have our group spend the night was one of the worst ones I’ve ever made. I had wanted to please the refugees who wanted us to stay as well as our guides from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC-a Quaker activist group).

Between the barking dogs, the incessant mosquitos, and the farm animals who were either in heat or urinating everywhere we all had a miserable night.

We were up early the next morning, anxious to mount our launch and get the heck back to our hotel, pack and continue to Managua, Nicaragua. Mike Hernandez who had gotten food poisoning and missed the refugee camp trip weakly greeted us when we arrived at the hotel. “You were the lucky one” the group yelled at him. “Huh, what happened?” Mike retorted. “We’ll fill you in on the flight. Vamanos de aqui,” (let’s get outta here) we responded.
It was a recipe for stress...and systemic violence.

We all felt on edge. El Salvador was on edge. The social tension was palpable. Soldiers patrolled everywhere. Road blocks were everywhere. Everybody was packing. One couldn’t go out at night. People ran for cover every time a helicopter flew over head or a tinted window Cherokee drove by.

It was a recipe for stress...and systemic violence.

But little did we know that a massive popular insurrection was already being staged by the FMLN. Eleven weeks after we left Salvador the country was up in flames as the FMLN and their masses of supporters came very close to overthrowing the dictatorship US advisors included in “la ofensiva final”, the final offensive.

Indeed, the final offensive saw the FMLN take over much of the capital including the upscale “Colonia Escalon” (where we stayed) for days before being driven back by combined US and Salvadoran forces.

Landing in Nicaragua was a huge relief. Safe except for the outlying rural areas where the EPS -the Sandinista People’s Army was duking it out with the CIA advised, US taxpayer funded Contras. Managua and all major cities and towns seemed firmly with the revolution.

We spent our time visiting with political parties and candidates as Nicaragua was preparing for its upcoming Presidential elections six months later.

Left to right: Nicaraguan Vice President Sergio Ramirez, President Daniel Ortega

Our favorite was of course Vice President Sergio Ramirez, the award-winning novelist and “white hat” of the Sandinistas. Ramirez was a charmer and darling of the international solidarity crowd.

Little did we know that the great social experiment called the Sandinista revolution was to about to come to a screeching halt in Nicaragua’s February 1990 national elections.

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

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