

In April of 1987, I was invited to participate in a fact-finding tour of veterans to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. A feeling came over me that this was something I had to do. My general opinion at the time of the conflict in Central America was that Honduras and Guatemala were democratic countries and that Nicaragua was a communist country.

I personally am opposed to any oppressive government; but I feel that each nation has a right to self-determination. Even if Nicaragua is a communist country, it is not the business of my government to use my money and my name to overthrow someone else's government. We wouldn't want another country to do it to us and we shouldn't do it to another country especially one that wasn't attacking us.

So with these thoughts I went on this fact-finding trip, in order to see what is really being done in my name.

Guatemala

Our first stop was Guatemala. It is a beautiful country, very rich in culture. I noticed that soldiers were everywhere, people were not smiling, people were obviously intimidated and frightened. I learned of the lack of respect for human rights or even human dignity.

I saw American helicopters, but when I spoke to a member of the Guatemalan Congress, he told me that he did not know of their existence. We met with General Rojas who is the Guatemalan Chief of Staff, the supreme commander of the military. When we spoke to General Rojas, he knew about the American helicopters. He said they were on loan from Honduras to help transport troops to the mountains, and that they were piloted and crewed by American soldiers. When I asked General Rojas about the death squads, he said in reference to the people dying, "They are the worst of the worst and they have it coming." I asked him if he was concerned that Guatemala might lose its American foreign aid if that aid was tied to human rights abuses. He said "No, our lawyers will take care of that".

After speaking to government leaders, military leaders, business leaders, religious leaders, human rights activists, labor organizers, an editor, families of the disappeared, the American Ambassador, the US Defense Attache, the US Military Attache, and the Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, it became painfully obvious to me that the military of Guatemala controlled the country. This fact is made even more obvious by the inauguration address of President Vinicio Cerezo, "I remind you that I have received the government but not the power."

I learned that the Guatemalan government and people have no fear or thought of an invasion by Nicaragua; in fact, I was told that there was no historical or factual basis for such an idea.

At the American Embassy, I was told that the people at the Embassy had a better handle on the situation in Guatemala than the Guatemalan government or people.

From the people and the human rights groups, I learned that there is no respect for human rights and that in fact human rights violations have actually grown, not diminished, as reported to the US Congress. The American government is lying to the American public and helping to oppress the people of Guatemala. If a democracy exists in Guatemala, it is not democracy as we think of it here in the U.S.A. Neither the people nor the elected government have any real power. The real power comes out the military's guns, and the military owes its allegiance not to its own government or people but to those who supply the guns, the U.S.A. and Israel.

Honduras

Next we went to Honduras. Again we met with members of the American Embassy, members of human rights organizations, a member of Congress, religious leaders, a doctor, coffee growers, American military personnel both on and off the Palmerola Military Base, refugees, displaced persons, and the leaders of the organizations that take care of the refugees and the displaced persons. I was surprised by the number of different human rights organizations.

I learned that about 80% of the people live in misery. They consider their country an occupied country. They resent the U.S.A. Military and the Contras occupying so much of their land. The Honduran people have been fighting for land reform, but instead of getting land they are losing land. And when they complain about it they are jailed, murdered, or simply disappear. The people speak of what is happening in their country as the Lebanonization of Central America."

One of the questions I asked these people was, "Why does your government allow foreigners to occupy your land?"

They said, "We asked the same question, and the government tells us that our land is not occupied by the Americans and that the Contras don't exist in Honduras. They speak to us as if we are ignorant, but they know we do not have the power to change this situation." I was told, "American chemicals are used on our crops, and these chemicals, because of their danger to humans, are not used in the U.S.A. Are our lives less important or less valuable than Americans' lives?"

Everyone asked us to please stop the war that is coming to Central America. It hurts the people deeply to see the "American machines of death" that are being stockpiled and will spill the blood of their children. So many different people asked us and begged us, "In the name of our children, please help us." It made me cry to see so much suffering and to see so many homeless children/.

I spoke to Nicaraguans at a refugee camp in Honduras. I asked them, "Why did you flee Nicaragua?" They answered, "We are fleeing Communism." I asked, "What is it about communism you are fleeing?" They answered, "They make you go in the military." I asked, "What else is it about communism you are fleeing?" They had no answer, they just shook their heads.

These men told me that they were Contras. I asked, "Why are you in Honduras instead of Nicaragua?" They answered, "We don't want to die and we don't want to kill our brothers. If we are drafted by the Sandinistas, we will have to fight; but if we side with the Contras, it is safer for us here in Honduras, so here we are."

I saw a child drawing a picture. The picture was of a person lying on the ground drawn in ball point pen. The person had holes in his body with blood dripping from the holes which were colored in red crayon. It reminded me of the children's drawings in Southeast Asia.

I asked a member of Congress, "With all the humanitarian aid the U.S.A. gives Honduras, why are all your children starving?" He answered, "The military black markets everything. The officers are rich, the Contra leaders are rich and live well and there is nothing we can do about it."

Palmerola Air Base

We had a briefing by the American military at the Palmerola Air Base. Although we were told that this was a Honduran base, it was obviously American. It brought back memories of how we claimed in Viet Nam that the Vietnamese were in charge and we were just helping. I saw Viet Nam all over again.

They told us that Honduras was a good place for American military exercises because they didn't have to worry about environmental impact studies. They told us that since 1984 four Americans had died in training. We later found out that the real number was ten times that amount.

They briefed us on the Contras. We learned that the military exercises are conducted within seven kilometers of the border of Nicaragua where the Contras are. As a former military person with combat experience including two Purple Hearts, it is obvious to me that these exercises serve as a back-up force to the Contras. The strategy seems to be: strike at Nicaragua and draw the Sandinistas across the border and involve the Americans. Luckily, this has not happened yet.

We went to the city of Coyumagua which is outside of the American base at Palmerola. At the Embassy, they told us that Coyumagua had the best whore houses in Central America and they were there to serve the Americans.

Historically, Coyumagua is in the center of Central America.

When the Spanish Conquistadors conquered Central America they started from Coyumagua. The Honduran people consider it very significant that the North Americans are starting from the same place.

On the streets, I saw dirty, hungry, impoverished street children with blond hair and blue eyes roaming the streets begging. It reminded me of the American-fathered children of Viet Nam.

There is a street called Ten Lemp Alley, where Americans can buy any kind of sex for ten lempora which is \$5 American. From a human rights group, I learned about three boys ages 8, 9, and 10 who had been sexually abused by American GIs who got them drunk, made them perform

sexual acts and then paid them ten lempora. I learned that one of these boys' parents had sent him so he could earn money for food.

Speaking to American GIs in Coyumaga, we learned that they were making at least five incursions a week into Nicaragua to coordinate the Contras; but this was being hidden from the American Congress because the GIs were officially attached to the DEA and this was considered a drug eradication operation. They told me that they were also using defoliation in Honduras and Nicaragua and this was considered a DEA drug eradication operation. Two GIs even told me that smuggling drugs to the U.S.A. to earn money for the Contras was a good plan.

I came away from Honduras broken-hearted with the suffering and helplessness of the Honduran people, especially the children who don't know about politics but suffer because of the callousness and brutality of American foreign policy. Everywhere I went I saw armed soldiers, scared impoverished people, and I felt the helplessness of the people.

Everywhere we went the graffiti on the walls told the story, "Contras go home. Gringos go home. Yankee oppressors go home."

It was easily summed up by a Campesino I spoke to. He said, "Before Ronald Reagan we lived in tranquility; now we live in misery. Please, in the name of our children, tell the American people what you have seen and how much we suffer."

After these two countries, I didn't know if I could emotionally handle going to a communist country. I was so drained; I had cried every day. Getting off the plane and walking into the airport, I was completely taken by surprise and astonished by the cleanliness, the total absence of armed soldiers, the smiling faces, and the air of freedom. This is not what I had expected at all.

I thought to myself, these "commies" are going to try to pull the wool

over my eyes, and I was determined not to allow that to happen. I was going to see through their propaganda and find the truth.

We checked into a hotel and received a briefing from Sexto Ulloa, a

member of the National Assembly. He gave us an outline of what we would be doing, asked us where we wanted to go and what we wanted to see, and told us that we were free to go where we wanted. He told us, "Go out and speak to our people, and find out the truth about life in Nicaragua."

The first place we went was to a military hospital to meet with war veterans and mothers of the martyrs (who are called Gold Star Mothers in the U.S.A.). They thanked us for coming and assured us that they held no animosity towards the American people. They told us that they were Christians, and that they forgave the U.S.A. for what it is doing. The veterans told us how humanely they treated their prisoners. I thought, "What a load of bullshit, communist propaganda." I didn't feel that I was getting answers to my questions, just propaganda. This upset me.

Next, we went to a briefing by General Humberto Ortega, Minister of Defense. He told us of a Contra offensive that had happened two days before and how the Contras were defeated. At the briefing, it was obvious to me that the Contras had done just what we were told would be done when we were in Honduras. Looking at the situation map, it seemed like the Sandinistas could have decimated the Contras; but Ortega told us, "Our purpose is not to murder our brothers, it is just to defend our sovereignty. I thought, "This is not how soldiers act. They don't call the enemy brothers."

Throughout the next week, we met with the U.S. Embassy, a newspaper editor, a mayor, military commanders, top government leaders, an agri-industrialist, religious leaders, a communist party leader, a conservative party leader, doctors and patients at a military hospital, even the prisoners at the main prison where Hasenfus was kept. We went to Benjamin Linder's grave. We spoke with the doctor who did the autopsy on him. We learned how an American humanitarian had been wounded and then murdered.

Not only was I finding out facts, but I was surprised to realize that I

was also starting to grow spiritually. Being an agnostic and being very skeptical of all governments, this new feeling was very strange and unexpected. These changes were being caused by the spirituality of all the people I had met.

We went to the Apanas Military Hospital in Jinotega. At the military hospital, I spoke with 16- and 17-year old soldiers who had become amputees that week. Again, it brought back memories of Viet Nam. I was hurt, embarrassed, and ashamed that my government was responsible for this suffering. It brought tears to my eyes. When I was in the hospital in Viet Nam, I hated all the people who were responsible; but these young soldiers whose lives had been permanently changed smiled at me, shook my hand, and showed me love. That made me feel even more guilty. How could this be? They told me that they were Christians and as such they had learned how to forgive their enemies and how to love them. These people were living Christianity, not acting it. Not being a Christian, it was hard for me to understand where they could get the power to live like this.

When we went to the Tipitapa Prison, I thought, "Now I will see how they really treat their fellow man." Having been in jail in the U.S.A. as a prisoner and as a visitor, I knew what to look for and what to ask.

To start with, we were allowed to go inside the prison with video cameras, tape recorders, and cameras, and we were not searched. We were allowed to ask anyone anything without the presence of guards. I asked, "How long have you been here? What did you do? What was your sentence? Have you ever been beaten, starved, humiliated, or tortured physically or psychologically? How many prisoners have disappeared? Have you ever seen prisoners beaten or killed by guards or other prisoners?" And finally, "If you could change the conditions in this prison to make it better, what would you do?"

All four men I spoke to had been there eight years. They had never been treated inhumanely, not even harassed by the guards. Only three fist fights could be recalled ever and no prisoners have ever died because of guards or other prisoners, no stabbings have occurred, and rapes aren't tolerated. None of these four had any suggestions as to how to make the conditions there better. One of these men spoke perfect English that he learned from the Special Forces while being trained in Panama.

In Nicaragua, the death penalty is unconstitutional. The maximum sentence one can receive is 30 years. To be paroled early, prisoners must learn to read and write and learn a job skill so they can become productive members of society. The families of prisoners are provided housing by the government because they consider the family an important part of the social fabric and their purpose is not to punish the family or to break the family up. The purpose is not retribution, but to take the sin out of the sinner and return him to society a productive citizen. Visiting this prison made me see how archaic, ignorant, and inhumane the prisons in the U.S.A. are. The prisoners and the guards consider themselves brothers. I was awed.

>From the religious leaders, and in fact everyone I spoke to, I began to understand that this was truly a Christian nation, much more so than the U.S.A. For the first time, I was hearing quotes from the Bible that I had heard before but this time they were being interpreted in a way that I found acceptable to me and sensible. They believe that Jesus was a champion of the poor, that he fought for the have-nots and that he was murdered to stop the spread of his ideas. They believe the same thing of Sandino. Their whole revolution is based on the liberating powers of Jesus.

They believe that the duty of the church is not to sit in fancy buildings, wear fancy clothes, and tell people how to live. They believe an injustice to one is an injustice to all. They believe that life is the most precious gift of God and to be able to live a decent human existence is a right of all men. These people are real humanitarians and I've never before met a society so full of love, honesty, and compassion as I met in Nicaragua. This is the most spiritual place I have ever been. They believe that the ideas of Christ are being reborn through the revolution in Nicaragua.

On the political front, I learned that in 1984, there were free democratic elections, that about 87% of the people participated, and that they had a choice between seven political parties. In contrast, here in the U.S.A., Reagan was elected by 27% of the people and we had a choice between two very similar parties. I wonder, "Who really has democracy?"

I learned from the newspapers there is freedom of the press, including letters to the editor that complain of things like food lines, transportation problems, housing problems, land reform problems, and

complaints about bureaucracy. There was a CIA-run newspaper, but it was shut down because it was considered detrimental to the national security to allow the CIA to put out a newspaper in Nicaragua that supported the Contra terrorism.

As defined by the U.S. State Department, terrorism is "premeditated, politically-motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine state agents. International terrorism involves citizens of more than one country."

Molina, D'Escoto, and Borge

Three people that I met made very strong impressions on me:
Padre Uriel
Molina, Padre Miguel D'Escoto Brockman, and Tomas Borge.

Padre Molina is the director of the Centro Iglesia de los Angeles Valdivieso (Church of St. Mary of Los Angeles). Here are some of the things that he said to me:

- * Historically, no revolution is exported.
- * We have never been free; first, we suffered the brutality of the Spanish and then the brutality of North America. Even though we don't like war, we have the right to defend ourselves. If you say you are against violence, then don't make and export arms.
- * Why can't the Pope be like Gandhi?
- * Capitalism as a system does not solve injustice. Money is used as a system, not as a necessity which it is.
- * If you use violence as a method of change, the rich will always rule the poor and it will be the poor that die.
- * You don't have to go to church to find God; you can find him in your neighbor.
- * Christ was in favor of the poor. If the church is not faithful to the poor, it must be criticized. If the Sandinistas are not faithful to the poor, the people will overthrow them.
- * We should not be against the left simply because it is the left. This is not justice.
- * Mary represents the mothers who have lost their children.
- * The church knows church history but does not understand it.
- * The breaking of the bread is to share with all regardless of who they are, whether they are rich or poor.
- * We must celebrate love of life over hatred.

Padre Miguel D'Escoto Brockman is the Foreign Minister of Nicaragua and he is a Maryknoll priest. He was born in the U.S.A. These are some of the things he said to me:

- * Half of all our visitors come from the U.S.A. and 80% of them are from church and religious groups.
- * Any good American would defend what we defend here in Nicaragua if he knew the truth. If you reflect upon what you have seen in Honduras and Guatemala, then you will know all the people want is peace and justice.
- * Historically, we have always been with our neighbors. We know no hate.
- * Americans are the victims of fear of rejection. They are afraid of what will happen if the system disappears. The U.S.A. claims that what happens in Nicaragua is of vital interest to the U.S.
- * This "back-yard notion" means that we are only entitled to a limited sovereignty. The U.S.A. is mad at us because we want to be friends with all nations. They see this as insolence and they are afraid, "What if everybody starts thinking like this?" The U.S.A. acts as if we are crazy enough to believe that we are equal to them. Why does the giant tremble at the thought of equality?
- * 'Give me liberty or give me death' is OK for the United States but it is not OK for Nicaragua -- why? The U.S.A. punishes us because we refuse to cry uncle, because we don't see the world in terms of good and bad, black and white, east and west. Our crime is that we want to be

friends with everybody.

* Ronald Reagan is totally irrational and we will be relentless

in our

struggle to defend our sovereignty, but we will always remain generous and ready to forgive.

* I have dedicated my life to the poor.

* To respect the rights of others is to respect yourself.

* In spite of all of our difficulties, we have joy from the Christian point of view.

* I would be the foreign minister or the doorman. I want to work for

the spread of non-violence.

* I want to change the way of change.

* It is essential to turn the arms into plow shares and to feed the hungry.

* Non-violence is supernatural; it is divine, it radiates from here.

* What is worse -- to kill or to be murdered?

* Jesus was a pioneer; we have had 2000 years to learn from him.

Tomas Borge is the Minister of Interior, the sole surviving founder of

the FSLN (Sandinista Front for the Liberation of Nicaragua). His mother and wife were raped and murdered by the National Guard and all his children were murdered. Within a matter of days after overthrowing Somoza, he confronted his wife's murderer as Nicaragua's new Minister of Interior. He faced the prisoner and said, "My revenge is to pardon you." When he found out a mob had gathered outside the Red Cross building where National Guardsmen had found refuge, he hurried to the scene before the building could be over-run and he stilled the crowd by saying, "To what end did we carry out this revolution if we are going to repeat what they did?"

These are some of the things he said to me:

* Please talk to the people. It is precious to understand them.

They

support the revolution, but are discontent. The poor have not benefited from the war in material ways such as food, housing, transportation, and education.

* Before the revolution, 200 out of every 1000 children died.

Now 80

out of every 1000 die, but to the people that is 80 too many.

* We are in defense of human rights; but there have been abuses, crimes particularly by those who have suffered. The principal cause is our victimization. Fifty thousand people died fighting against Somoza. They say we are against God, but how many priests have we assassinated? How many priests have we jailed? The answer is none, so now they say that we didn't jail them or kill them because it is a trick.

* I have been to the Soviet Union and to Cuba. Does this make me a

communist? Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan have been to communist countries. Does this make them communists?

* We get aid from communist nations because the U.S.A. doesn't allow us

to get aid from anywhere else; but the aid we get has no conditions -- not even one commitment. Conditions equal control and we do not want to be controlled by outside nations. Only the U.S.A. attached conditions to their aid to us. Because these conditions are unacceptable to us, the U.S.A. is waging war against us. We commit ourselves not to invade the U.S.A. We will allow no nuclear weapons or foreign bases in our country.

* To the U.S.A., small nations are relegated to the positions of satellites.

* Because we are a small nation that wants to be independent and sovereign, friends with everyone, they wage war on us that causes us death, diverts our resources, our plans for development, our plans for health, for homes, and it keeps us from being able to be productive. Our revolution is the result of Christian thought overcoming a brutal dictatorship.

* We hope you will go home and tell the people the truth of what you have seen and heard., We have made errors and achievements.

* It is very important to understand that we are a very affectionate people, and throughout our history we have been subjected to attacks and invasions by the U.S.A. In 1856, many people died fighting William Walker. In 1912, we were invaded by the U.S.A. In 1926, we were invaded by the United States. In all these occupations, young men died.

We have not attacked North America or killed North Americans; but now a North American has died in Nicaragua. His name was Ben Linder, and he was killed by North Americans.

We went to the American Embassy Thursday morning for a demonstration that happens every Thursday morning for one hour. The demonstration is by Americans who live in Nicaragua, and its purpose is to say, "Don't use us as an excuse for invading Nicaragua the way you used Americans as an excuse to invade Grenada; we are happy here."

That afternoon we went to the Embassy for a briefing. As usual, the Embassy fed us a line of bull. For the first time on our trip, the older and more conservative members of our group lost their composure. They raised their voices and lectured the political officer, Del Junker.

They asked him, "What the hell is going on here? We have seen the truth and the truth is not making it back to the United States. Either you are totally ignorant or you're lying, and we don't think you're ignorant, so you better start doing your damn job, and telling the American public the truth because we sure as hell are." We were told our time was up and asked to leave.

As it was getting time to leave and go back to the United States, my

head hurt from all the thinking and information. I reflected back to my first day in Nicaragua, and how skeptical I was at the military hospital. I realized that I was judging these people by my experiences and my standards, and I felt I was wrong to consider the veterans untruthful because they didn't do what I would have done.

It is obvious to me that everyone I met and spoke with was really trying to live the examples of Christ. The spirituality that I found here excited me and was totally unexpected. It changed my view of Nicaragua and of real Christians. I have always believed in equality, justice, fair play, human dignity, and the right to self determination, and that is what the Sandinistas believe in and they call it the way of Christ.

At the three embassies I visited when I spoke to the American representatives off the record, on a one-to-one level, I was told that they were just career public servants who wanted to keep their jobs and so they did what they were told. They said the executive branch is running its own show here in Central America and there is nothing anyone can do about it. (By the way, this was before the Contra-gate hearings.)

In the final analysis, the American government is lying to the American public and the Congress about what is going on in Central America. The governments of Honduras and Guatemala are not real democracies. The people in both of these nations are oppressed and suffering. In their own words, they live a life of misery. These two countries not only have no respect for human rights, they have contempt for human rights. These two governments are supported by the barrels of American guns and the money of American taxpayers, not by the consent of their own people, and the allegiance of these two governments is to those who supply the guns and money, not to their people.

In Nicaragua, the people are free, they have a democratic government; human rights and Christianity are the very foundation of this country. The Contras are American-supported terrorists who have virtually no support inside of Nicaragua. The Communist Party won only 1.3% of the vote in the 1984 elections, and holds no high cabinet positions.

As an American citizen, I believe that for our country to be a true democracy, the public has to know the truth. A public that makes decisions based on propaganda and lies is not a true democracy. I don't believe that the U.S.A. should be the world's police, and it certainly should not be involved in trying to overthrow other people's governments. We would not accept another country trying to do that to us. Our foreign policy should be based on human rights and if we were going to try to overthrow any governments, I would put Guatemala and Honduras at the top of the list.

We are lucky to have been born in the U.S.A., but in reality our souls could have been born into bodies in Central America. It is by the luck of the draw that we were born here, and had we been born in Central America, our children would be starving, our husbands and wives would be being murdered, we would live in misery and suffering, the majority of our children would die before they were ten years old, and we would be praying that someone would help us. These people are suffering because of their geographical location, not because they are bad people. They beg us for our help.